

# Standing naked: judges in Dylan's lyrics, pt. 2

**Timothy B. Taylor** has served on the San Diego County Superior Court since January 2005. See [www.judgetaylorсандiego.com](http://www.judgetaylorсандiego.com). The views expressed in this article are very definitely his own and not those of the court. The author thanks Hon. Richard Fruin of the Los Angeles County Superior Court for his thoughtful comments on an earlier version of this article.



## Part Two in a Two-Part Series

Bob Dylan's influence on music has been incalculable over the span of his decades-long career. As we saw in Part One on Thursday, we know how Dylan's poetry has fared in the eyes (and maybe the ears) of lawyers and jurists. The reciprocal view, however, has often been less flattering. And while some of Dylan's judicial references are well known (e.g., "Hurricane"),

others are more benign or obscure. Here are but a few.

In "Shake Shake Mama" (2009): "Down by the river Judge Simpson walkin' around/ Nothing shocks me more than that old clown." The connection to the rest of the song remains elusive - an adjective frequently applied to Dylan himself over the years.

In "Nettie Moore" (2006), an unseen bailiff is paraphrased: "The Judge is coming in, everybody rise." In "Brownsville Girl" (1986), after the narrator is surrounded by a posse in a churchyard and brought before a magistrate, he recounts the performance of the "Girl" on the witness stand:

"You went out on a limb to testify for me, you said I was with you/ Then when I saw you break down in front of the judge and cry real tears/ It was the best acting I saw anybody do."

In "Most Likely You Go Your Way and I'll Go Mine" (1966), the judge simply holds a grudge, and most likely Dylan, who wrote the song during an unmatched torrent of mid-1960s creativity, just needed a rhyme. In "Drifter's Escape" (1968), however, most of the action takes place in a courtroom. When the Drifter, having received his sentence, asks the nature of his crime, "the judge, he cast his robe aside/ A tear came to his eye/ 'You fail to understand,' he said/ 'Why must you even try?'/ Outside, the crowd was stirring/ You could hear it from the door/ Inside, the judge was stepping down/ While the jury cried for more."

In "Poor Boy Blues" (1962), several people in authority are asked if they can hear the narrator crying, including: "Mister Judge and Jury/ Cain't you see the shape I'm in?" In "Jim Jones" (1992), which is about a luckless British convict and not the Guyana cult leader, sentencing is once again the point of departure:

"Now the jury found me guilty/ Then says the judge, says he/ 'Oh, for life, Jim Jones, I'm sending you/ Across the stormy sea./ But take a tip before you ship/ To join the iron gang./ Don't get too gay in Botany Bay/ Or else you'll surely hang."

In "Angelina" (1981), the singer "was only following instructions when the judge sent me down the road/ With your subpoena." Only Dylan knows if this is an allusion to his own well-publicized marital breakup and ensuing dissolution proceedings, so movingly recounted in the album many feel is his best ("Blood on the Tracks").

In another departure from the sentencing scenario, in "I Wanna Be Your Lover" (1971), "the judge says, 'Mona can't have no bond.'" But in "Delia" (1993), Dylan is right back to a colloquy between judge and accused:

"Judge says to Curtis, 'What's this noise about?'/ 'All about them rounders, Judge, tryin' to cut me out.'..."

"Curtis said to the judge, 'What might be my fine?'/ Judge says, 'Poor boy, you got ninety-nine.'"

Staying with the sentencing scenario is "Little Sadie" (1970). The defendant admits to murdering Little Sadie in the first degree. The proceedings are apparently speedy:

"The judge and the jury they took their stand./ The judge had the papers in his right hand./ Forty-one days, forty-one nights;/ Forty-one years to wear the ball and the stripes."

An unforgivable breach of judicial ethics is confronted in "Seven Curses" (1963), following the apprehension of a horse thief, Old Reilly. His daughter, hearing of the crime, comes into town "with gold and silver in her hand." When she appears in the courthouse, her problems multiply:

"When the judge he saw Reilly's daughter/ His old eyes deepened in his head/ Sayin', 'Gold will never free your father/ The price, my dear, is you instead.'"

Old Reilly tells her not to do it, but she does:

"The gallows shadows shook the evening/ In the night a hound dog bayed/ In the night the grounds were groanin'/ In the night the price was paid

"The next mornin' she had awoken/ To know that the judge had never spoken/ She saw that hangin' branch a-bendin'/ She saw her father's body broken."

The seven curses of the title are then imposed (and rightfully so) on the judge, one by one. Listen to the song; the curses are much worse than any punishment meted out by the Commission on Judicial Performance.

We meet another rope-inclined judge in "Lily, Rosemary and the Jack of Hearts" (1974), which involves a bank heist "two doors down" from a cabaret:

"The hangin' judge came in unnoticed and was being wined and dined/ The drillin' in the wall kept up but no one seemed to pay it any mind..."

"He went to get the hangin' judge, but the hangin' judge was drunk/ As the leading actor hurried by in the costume of a monk..."

"The next day was hangin' day, the sky was overcast and black/ Big Jim lay covered up, killed by a penknife in the back/ And Rosemary on the gallows, she didn't even blink/ The hangin' judge was sober, he hadn't had a drink."

All of this leaves Lily "thinking about the law." Which, of course, is what judges and lawyers do every day.

impermissible ex parte contact. A man hears that his friend has been sentenced to 99 years for vehicular manslaughter and writes a missive to the judge. He is in chambers "the next afternoon," and is asked to "tell me the facts." Hearing them, the judge is unmoved, telling the narrator that the sentence is passed and cannot be set aside. When the character witness persists, he is asked to leave by the judge, whose "eyes looked funny." Leave he does, making a lonely walk down the corridor having failed to gain clemency for his friend.

What are we to learn from Dylan's often unflattering portrayals of judicial officers? We are in a hard business; conflict is inherently part of the mix; and many of the cases we are called upon to resolve are as enigmatic as some of the lyrics Dylan has written. As the chief justice has observed, we are often called upon to have difficult conversations. Even the best of us are not at our best every single day. Dylan's keen eye for the imperfections in society has led him to be exposed to judges who he portrays as harsh or worse. Sometimes the law is harsh, and we are called upon by our oath to apply it. Many of Dylan's judicial subjects are from history, and happily, the modern work of judging is a much improved version.

The fact that courthouse scenes have appeared so often in Dylan's work serves to remind us that the civilized manner in which we resolve disputes makes our courtrooms the focal point for many interesting stories. We are lucky to be in a profession where we are exposed to so much human drama and emotion on a regular basis. The amazing tales that are sometimes spun from witness stands reveal a range of human qualities and frailties: bravery, greed, passion, pride, prejudice, anger, stubbornness, revenge and loyalty, sometimes all within the same trial. Dylan is a keen observer of all these and more. We are lucky, too, to have had him around to chronicle

our times for the last 50 years. The words you are reading now will not last forever, but Dylan's certainly will.