

**David Crosby and Graham Nash on Bob Dylan
by Raymond Foye**

From the Telegraph No. 44, 1993 (UK)

The following interview took place, especially for the Telegraph, on the Crosby-Nash tour bus, in the course of a four-hour journey across the state of Florida, during the solo acoustic Crosby-Nash tour in January of 1992. As unabashed fans, they spoke eagerly and unguardedly about Dylan, recounting not only anecdotes, but situating Dylan within the artistic milieu from which he emerged...

RF: Do you find that the marginality that you could exist in in the 1950s and early 1960s has largely disappeared?

DC: The cracks are a lot dirtier now. Back then we had a lot of fun. Now if you want to live in the cracks you have to live in a burnt-out building or a squat. Your life is at risk all the time. You're constantly being pursued by the cops. You got the risk of AIDS all the time.

RF: The cops weren't so much of a hassle in those days?

DC: Nah. There wasn't enough of us to hassle. We weren't threatening. We were local color. They thought we were funny.

RF: What did your possessions consist of?

DC: A pillowcase and a guitar.

GN: The pillowcase was for the dope.

RF: In Boswell's life of Johnson, he describes the coffee houses in England in the 18th century and it sounds exactly like the same scene as went down in Greenwich Village.

GN: People wanting to get that buzz. Talk, talk, talk. A way to express ideas.

DC: We talked endlessly.

RF: It's always been a small group of people. Since mass culture was more or less invented in the 1960s, people tend to think that the scene was big. But it was always small.

DC: It was fairly small. You gotta argue the mass thing. A lot of people think it started being mass and not individual from Gutenberg on. But I'd go with what you said.

RF: Do you think Kerouac was mass?

DC: He affected us all.

RF: Do you remember reading *On The Road* for the first time?

DC: Sure. It affected me. So did Ginsberg and Corso.

GN: To think that Neal Cassady had a barbershop on Hollywood Boulevard is pretty far out. Hollywood and Vine. From 1946 to 1948. That book about his childhood, *The First Third*, is very interesting. How he was obviously Neal Cassady from the way he was brought up. His alcoholic father, living in doss houses.

DC: There were other guys that did that that didn't get written about. I remember one named Ale Ekstrom who rode around the country on an old motorcycle, dressed up like a seaman. Played concertina. The first guy I ever heard sing "Crow on the Cradle." Kids would look at Ale and go, "Whoa. I gotta do this!" He lived out of a napsack on this battered old motorcycle with his concertina hanging over his shoulder. He was real. He was dirty! Mylon's another. Mylon took his Harley Davidson and drove across the Sahara. He could fix it so he took it all around the world. He rode it to Tibet. Rode it to Thailand before anyone knew there was a Southeast Asia. There were a lot of people that didn't get written about. The minute the idea of cutting loose from the established plan of things – going to high school, going to college, getting married or going in the army. Those were about your only options... The minute that idea hit a lot of us it was like (whistles), what a concept! Your mother would cry but you had a good time. And you got laid. Which was the main thing. Girls could not resist the idea of somebody who was on the road and loose...

GN: They still can't resist.

DC: We were outlaws, and they couldn't resist.

RF: In the 1950s in England, was there was a similar kind of coffeehouse scene? Probably not as much rebellion in the air as in America...?

GN: No, but there definitely was a beatnik scene. There was a place called the Bodega that I used to go to in the late 1950s that was a coffeehouse. Kids would be playing at being beat.

RF: Was this in Manchester or London?

GN: Manchester.

RF: Where would they have got it from? Blackboard Jungle?

GN: I remember the day I saw Blackboard Jungle. The Teddy boys ripped up the seats and turned the hoses on everyone in the cinema. I remember the feeling right now. Getting my ticket, going down the long set of stairs, through the curtains and into the black, hearing "Rock Around the Clock". I still have my ticket to the Bill Haley show in '58.

RF: So Dylan's influences were pretty much the same: the Beats, and early rock 'n' roll.

DC: When I got to New York a year after I started, 1961, Dylan was playing at Gerde's Folk City and the only folk people that had made a record in recent memory were Peter, Paul and Mary. Dylan hadn't made any. And nobody except Peter, Paul and Mary had made any since The Limelites, Bud & Travis or The Kingston Trio.

RF: What is your first recollection of Dylan?

DC: Gerde's live.

RF: A Hootennanny night or his own set?

DC: His night.

RF: And you were knocked out?

DC: Yep.

RF: But you told me before that you thought he was an asshole.

DC: Of course I thought he was an asshole, he was better than me.

RF: What did you really think?

DC: (Long pause.) He had a glow, like an aura. Everyone in the place was stunned. They'd never seen anything like that in their lives before. He was just fuckin' with 'em. He would get up there and sing these songs and he stir your brain with a spoon. He had these words, they just go all over you and bore their way in and fuck your mind. I was into "pretty" because that's what I could do. I couldn't do what he was doing, I didn't have that raw edge, nowhere near. I never will be anywhere near the poet that he is. I knew it and I was jealous. So I didn't like him.

RF: So you didn't make any attempt to be friendly with him?

DC: Nah, fuck him. I wanted a truck to hit him. (Laughter)

RF: It must've been audacious, this 19 or 20 year-old Jewish kid from the Midwest playing this folk stuff.

DC: The guy was way ahead of everybody. Maybe what should have happened is that he just should have joined The Band. And they would have gone on and been the most powerful music entity that ever happened and stayed that way – but then The Band wouldn't have been The Band, and they were so good the way they were.

GN: But even so, what they did together is pretty fuckin' impressive.

RF: But don't you think Dylan changes too much to have done that? His whole life is about this continual, compulsive change.

DC: Yeah Neil, too, same deal.

RF: Miles Davis, too.

DC: These guys are driven.

RF: Graham, what is your first recollection of Dylan?

GN: Strangely enough, the first Bob Dylan song I ever heard was "Mr Tambourine Man" by The Byrds.

DC: For a lot of people, that's the first they heard of him, that's the first time it got outside of the coffee house scene.

GN: You gotta remember I was 8000 miles away from that scene.

RF: Wasn't John Lennon into Freewheelin'?

GN: Not then.

DC: Most people weren't.

GN: I don't think Lennon was into Dylan until '64

DC: The deal with Dylan was he wasn't real accessible. Most people couldn't get past (does facetious Dylan voice). We took it and made it pretty.

GN: You made it more than pretty.

DC: We put it on the radio.

RF: Did you see Dylan a number of times in New York in the club scene?

DC: Not a whole lot. He came and saw us. In the studio. Listened to what we were doing.

RF: You mean The Byrds?

DC: Yeah.

RF: What about before that?

DC: No.

RF: McGuinn wasn't friendly with him in the folk scene in New York?

DC: No. Dickson was the one who got us together. [Ed. The Byrds manager Jim Dickson.]

GN: How did Dickson find "Mr Tambourine Man"?

DC: He had the demo. He and Albert were friends. He had the demo by Dylan with Ramblin' Jack, which was terrible.

GN: I'd like to hear that...

RF: So Dylan was turned on when he came to the studio and heard that you knew what you were doing with "Mr Tambourine Man"?

DC: Sure. Why not? He knew. Dylan was always smarter than the rest of us.

RF: Were you still feeling competitive with him at that point?

DC: No. By then I'd listened to his records. Finally sat down and listen to what he was doing, and it was so transcendently fucking good that I got past all that initial stuff.

RF: Did you find him easy to get along with?

DC: We were in awe of him. It's easy to get along with someone whose ass you'd kiss in a second.

RF: Did he play on that?

DC: Yeah. You know him. He loves to fuck with people's heads. That's one of his most favorite things to do. You ask him where he lives and he says (Dylan voice) "You're looking at a man who has no home." He'll say anything to get you going.

GN: There was tremendous deference towards Dylan on the part of everyone because he was the best. He was the epitome of it all, there was nobody better and probably still isn't. My first meeting with him, I can't say I was comfortable around him, I don't think Bob makes anybody feel real comfortable. And I'm sure it doesn't come from him, I think it comes only from the myth and persona of who Dylan is. He's such a rare animal that it's your reactions that determine your perceptions of him. Behind those shades, he was probably quite normal. But you just never treat Dylan that way. You don't want to bother him so you're always apprehensive. Or else you're always looking for deeper meaning in every word or movement.

RF: Well, when you encounter Dylan, you're not just encountering the man, but all of your images and projections of the man as well.

GN: What a terrifying mirror!

RF: Did you go to the castle he had in Silver Lake?

DC: That wasn't his castle... It belonged to Thomas Law... the brother of the actor who played the angel in Barbarella [John Phillip Law]. He was in the Woodstock movie.

RF: They shot a lot of Ciao Manhattan there.

DC: There was some kinky shit going down in that castle. Grossman and Howard Alk were there all the time. They were the ones who started The Bear. You ever hear of The Bear? That's the one time I played on the same bill with Dylan. It was a very opulent club in Chicago. Alk and Grossman started it off with me and Dylan and Bessie Griffin and the Gospel Pearls.

RF: You were on the same bill as Dylan?

DC: Well, I was in the little room, he was in the big room.

RF: What kind of songs were you doing then?

DC: Some of mine. Some folk songs.

GN: I had a wonderful experience with Dylan. He came to see David in the Warwick Hotel in New York in 1970. We had a huge penthouse on the 15th floor. Dylan asked us if we had any new songs. I just written "Southbound Train," so I played it, with David singing harmony, the harmonica part and

all. Now, playing any song or doing anything in front of Dylan is totally nerve-racking, especially one you've never performed before. I finished the song, there was a long pause, and Dylan looked at me and said, "Sing it again." And I thought, Wow that's pretty far out, that Dylan would ask me to sing a song twice. I was quite happy with that.

RF: So you heard The Birds "Mr Tambourine Man" on the radio? Did you know them personally then?

GN: No, but we immediately felt that these people were not only doing something good, but they were doing something differently good. The Hollies loved The Byrds. I still think their Younger Than Yesterday album is a tremendously great record. They were obviously different, but not a pop group. Incredibly accessible and bright. I think we lifted a lick from "Mr Tambourine Man" for "Pay You Back with Interest."

RF: A guitar lick?

GN: Not actually a lick, but that dit dit dit. Those high 12 string bits.

DC: Back with The Byrds, when we recorded "Chimes of Freedom," I got chills from that song, and you gotta understand when I first sang "each unharmed gentle soul misplaced inside a jail," I hadn't been in one. It's a different song to me now. It has passion. Or "I Shall Be Released" (sings "any day now... I shall be released"). I wrote that on my fucking prison wall. In my cell. I wrote the whole line.

RF: What were Dylan's feelings towards Gene Clark? At the time you first met, Gene was a more sophisticated songwriter than anybody else in the group.

DC: I think sophisticated is the wrong word. He was talented.

RF: More advanced?

DC: I don't think he was more advanced. He was talented. He had a real interesting sense of changes and he would string a melody through those changes in a fascinating way, and it made for good harmonic opportunities for me. But the only sophisticated person in the group was McGuinn.

RF: So you don't feel that Dylan had any particular attraction to Clark as a songwriter?

DC: Yes, he did. He liked Gene. He liked McGuinn, too. Dylan was smarter than we were, man, he was way smarter. He understood what The Byrds were all about. He understood the whole dynamic. He walked in, took one look and said, "Yeah, I got it. "

RF: How did the Dickson's gig come about?

DC: Dickson.

RF: It's just that you were playing there that night and he invited him?

DC: Dickson was pals with Grossman and they were trying to get both things off the ground. Once we had "Mr Tambourine Man," Grossman knew we were a powerful tool for Dylan. We kicked Dylan up a notch in a way that nobody else had.

RF: You must've made a lot of money for him, too.

DC: That too, which Albert was concerned about, but not anywhere near as concerned as building the legend and getting Dylan out there. We put him on AM radio, which he couldn't do for himself. That was the thing. So Albert would say, "Bob you gotta go play with these kids." Bob would come and play.

RF: Who was he with at the time?

DC: I don't remember. He usually had an entourage.

RF: Is there a tape of the Ciro's gig? One has never surfaced. Does McGuinn have a tape?

DC: Nah.

RF: He just came out of the audience and played harmonica? So it wasn't a great performance?

DC: I don't remember how good it was. I was too excited to be able to tell you. But you couldn't have shaken up the room anymore. Everybody in the place was nuts.

RF: I think people in those days thought that Dylan was, if not, God, he had a direct line with God, and if he had the word, he just wasn't telling us.

GN: Right.

DC: An impression that Dylan has fostered, believe me.

GN: I saw The Byrd's first gig in London, at Blazes.

RF: Was it as bad as they say?

GN: Not for me. I thought it was quite interesting.

DC: Wasn't Blazes just a little place?

GN: Tiny.

DC: That's when everybody came. John, Paul. We were terrified.

GN: Crosby kept smoking dope on stage. It was quite offensive at the time. It was against the norm.

DC: Well, I'm glad we at least managed to do that. The stage was so small that I had to plug into the bass amp. Or McGuinn's amp. There was only room for two amps.

RF: Would you say you were more in awe of Dylan than John Lennon?

DC: No I was more in awe of the Beatles than of anybody in the world. Oh, Chris broke a bass string didn't he?

GN: Yeah, he did that night.

DC: Terror. Utter terror. The Beatles and the Rolling Stones in the audience! Looking at us. Terrible sound system, and we had made an agreement with an amplifier company who made the worst amps in the world. We played badly. We played pretty much uniformly badly everywhere in England. Everybody all excited about us, coming out to see us. Then walking away, saying, What the fuck?! it was a total, ongoing nightmare. We couldn't get off the ground.

GN: You were fighting the entire press, too.

DC: All the press, the amplifiers, the gigs. They would book us two and three gigs a day. We had never even been in another country before.

RF: Did you go with any other members of The Hollies, Graham?

GN: No. The Hollies weren't particularly into going out to see other people.

DC: He was the only one of them with a brain.

RF: David, when you told me that playing music was only about getting girls, isn't it also about being a troubadour and singing songs...

DC: It was mostly about music, man. We just said it was about meeting girls. We wanted to play music because we loved it, because it was the most exciting thing you could do. There's a thing that happens when it gels.

RF: Do you think if you were born 200 or 300 years ago, you'd still be wandering around Europe with a guitar?

DC: (thinks) Yeah...either that or a thief. Some kind of robber. Some kind of outlaw. But who knows?

RF: Don't you think that the phenomenon of the Deadheads today has to do with kids that age just having no way of stepping outside their rigid culture or class or society...

DC: No other outlet that isn't threatening. You're talking about all the kids who wanna say "Hey, I'm different, we're not like you." Who don't want to be down, dirty, satanic, skinhead, slam-dancin... nasty, mean. Kids who want the sunny side of shit and still want to be different. There's only one place left to go. Join the second wave hippie thing. The other thing about the Dead thing is that it legitimizes getting loaded. "Well if you're a hippie, you're supposed to smoke dope. "That's actually the cart before the horse.

RF: Do you think recording with The Band was a real high point for Dylan?

DC: Dylan and The Band was a high point for music, period. Nobody ever understood him better. Nobody was ever looser or funkier or more able to keep up with him. Nobody was ever more conceptually aware of where he was coming from. Nobody ever put a better beat to him than Levon. Nobody laid down a better bass line than Danko, or better guitar licks than Robbie. Nobody ever did his songs as well as they did.

RF: Richard's vocals...

DC: Good God, man. And their own songs, too.

RF: And they were individualistic enough to stand up to him and not get diluted.

DC: You couldn't dilute them with a lake. When it's all said and done, they may have been the greatest.

RF: They're still great.

DC: How Levon can sing that good and play drums at the same time I'll never fuckin' understand. You have should have seen Albert Grossman's face when he played Music from Big Pink for me at Alan Pariser's house.

RF: Who was Pariser?

DC: He was a Hollywood personality. He wound up being one of the managers for Delaney and Bonnie.

GN: He was the guy who always had the best sound system in LA. So whenever you made a record, you would take the acetate to his house, get loaded and listen to it. He was the first guy who played me the basement tapes.

DC: He was also an early weed mover. I was over there getting loaded and Albert comes in with the acetate. He said, "Have you heard about The Band?" "I said, "No, who are they?" "He said, "The Byrds can just go home now." I said, "Bullshit." And he played it and I went "Ooooh!" because it was light years ahead of us. Light years!

GN: They could really play.

RF: They were together for nine years before they made Big Pink. They were incredibly enigmatic. The way they looked, the old clothes they wore...

DC: Their thing wasn't surfacey. They didn't wear granny glasses, and a cape. They were different.

RF: And they had the connection to Dylan.

DC: They had the stamp of approval. But they didn't need it. They were better than everybody. Like I say, in the long run when everybody looks back at who gets the crown, it will be them.

GN: Richard Manuel had a great voice, didn't he?

RF: They all did, and the way they could trade off vocals... They did something which CSN often do, which is to exchange personalities, musically.

DC: It's one of the reasons they were so strong and could really sing harmonies with each other.

RF: And being able to anticipate what the other guy was gonna to do.

DC: Richard and Rick and Levon could sing together like almost nobody on earth. Name any other

case where you could get three voices that tight and that loose at the same time.

RF: Graham, tell me about the photographs you've taken of Dylan.

GN: The photographs of Bob Dylan, and Joni Mitchell and Johnny Cash, were taken in Nashville in 1969. I was living with Joni, and she was invited to do the Johnny Cash television show, which was being taped at the Grand Ole Opry House.

Johnny Cash had been a hero of mine since the Sun records days, and he had assembled an incredible collection of songwriting talent: Dylan was there, Eddy Arnold, Mickey Newbury, Kris Kristofferson, Joni, Doug Kershaw, and the Monkees, who were great fun. How could you not be friendly with the Monkees? They were outgoing people, wanting to make you feel comfortable. In many ways, the Monkees are the bullet I dodged after leaving the Hollies, and I commiserated with them very much about that, because they're fine guys, and they still are. And David Jones came from Manchester, which made me close to him. Joni sang a duet with Johnny. Most everybody did a duet with Johnny on that show, including the Monkees. Johnny Cash and the Monkees, is that a combination or what? So for a week we all wandered around Nashville and stayed at the Ramada Inn together.

One night we all went to dinner at Johnny's house. It was quite a gathering, as you can imagine. After dinner, we all gathered in the lounge, and John said, "You know, it's kind of a tradition here at the Cash house that you sing for your supper. So who's gonna start?" And I looked around at Dylan, and Joni and Kris Kristofferson and Mickey Newberry and no one's moving. I was totally unknown, but I was full of piss and vinegar, because I was in the middle of making the first CSN album, so I go up and I sang "Marrakesh Express," quite successfully. Except at the last chord: "All aboard the train..." I strummed the guitar and I stood up, and in my nervousness, I walked straight into a standing lamp which crashed to the ground. Perfect!

But after that, it was all OK. Dylan ended up singing four or five songs, with Sara there crying, because he hadn't sung in public in such a long time. It was really his re-emergence. It was really an emotional experience

DC: I'm mentioned in a Dylan song.

RF: Which one?

DC: It's on New Morning. (sings) "The man standing next to me, his head was exploding..."

RF: "Day of the Locusts."

GN: Why was your head exploding? As if we didn't know...

DC: I got Dylan incredibly high on some killer weed. I was visiting him and Sara in the village.

RF: On MacDougal Street?

DC: No I think they were staying at John Hammond's house. Sara was trying to get Bob to go to Princeton University, where he was being presented with an honorary doctorate. Bob didn't want to go. I said, "C'mon Bob, it's an honor!" Sara and I both worked on him for a long time. Finally, he agreed.

I had a car outside – a big limousine. That was the first thing he didn't like. We smoked another joint on the way and I noticed Dylan getting really quite paranoid behind it. When we arrived at Princeton, they took us to a little room and Bob was asked to wear a cap and gown. He refused outright. They said, "We won't give you the degree if you don't wear this." Dylan said, "Fine. I didn't ask for it in the first place." I said "Come on, Bob, these people have gone to a lot of trouble..." Finally, we convinced him to wear the cap and gown. I was standing next to him during the ceremony.

GN: Smashed out of your gourd, of course.

DC: Of course. Just like the song says.

RF: Then what happened?

DC: When it was over, we made a very quick exit.

RF: David, how did it come about that you sang on Under the Red Sky?

DC: Bob just called me up. He was working in the studio with Don Was. When I arrived, I introduced him to my wife Jan. He very elegantly kissed her hand, and she turned bright red. He played the first song, I listened and then said, "That's great, Bob." Dylan opened up the studio door and said let's record it. I said, "C'mon Bob, it's me, Dave. 20 years we've known each other..." So he smiled and said OK, and played it a second time, completely different from the first. I knew there was no point in asking to hear it again, so we just went in that studio and recorded it. Naturally, the third time he played the song it was totally different from the first two.

GN: Tom Petty said that after two weeks of rehearsals, they went out on the road and never did one single song they rehearsed.

RF: Does he do this on purpose?

DC: Of course. It's the found art of the moment. Where is the peak? Where is the surprise? He doesn't do that much by accident himself, but he goes looking for situations where accidents will take place. He's looking for the edge of the possible.

END

Copyright 1992 Raymond Foye. All rights reserved.