



Interview by J. BURKETT

**TURNERS FALLS** – Bob Arnold is a world-renowned poet, writer, book publisher, builder, and music lover. He lives in southern Vermont. Check out his website: [lighthousepoetry.com](http://lighthousepoetry.com).

"I'm answering all of these questions with music playing," Bob wrote to me. "I'll make note as to what is playing as I'm answering by noting the artist and song between parentheses." So, "NP" means Now Playing...

**MMM:** What are some of your favorite musics as a youth? Did you play any instruments back then?

**BA:** (NP: Thurston Harris, "Little Bitty Pretty One") To keep things centered, I'll stay mainly on the American side of music. My music youth goes back to the 1950s and 1960s – so you can imagine how I went from nursery rhymes, to an Irish mother humming throughout the house, Ricky Nelson on television each week and an old barbershop friend who told me about Sam Cooke when his song came on the radio. (NP: Sam Cooke, "Good Times")

The radio was always on, and for kids, the transistor radio was it. The radio went everywhere with us. Suddenly President Kennedy was gunned down in 1963, the Beatles arrived in the United States a few months later in 1964, and now I'm looking at a strange tousled-haired guy in black shades by the name of Bob Dylan and he isn't just musical, but literary, and fully inventive. Even playful.

An interview with Dylan will take me to Jack Kerouac and all the Beats, Rimbaud, Blake, and Woody Guthrie. Who needed teachers? (NP: JJ Cale, "Train to Nowhere")

West Coast America captured my attention in music much more than anything happening on the East Coast in rock and roll, which was taking over the airwaves; even Dylan was moving out of folk music with it – when not re-inventing it – his sort of blues rhapsodic rock. Combined with the Vietnam War, Civil Rights, Black Panthers and rebellion.

He was holding me to the East Coast, as was Thoreau and eventually the Band, but out West was that tribal trill of psychedelic wonder, the expansive lust of the old Beat movement grown into the Hippies, the Dead's rumble love beads, the Sierra Range, Robinson Jeffers and

his own poetry music of the Pacific coast. (NP: Portishead, "Roads")

When the Beatles arrived and then the Rolling Stones, in 1964, I couldn't grow my hair longer (yet) because I was in a conservative family, so I picked up playing the drums. My father had a Gene Krupa-style kit – huge bass drum, bottomless tom-tom, chatty snare, small riding cymbal and the hi-hat. He gave me pointers and then I simply listened to Ringo and Charlie Watts incessantly. Later Max Roach, Joe Morello, and big bands. The neighborhood kids formed a garage band with me and we were terrible but joyous which is of course the definition of rock and roll – you get better at it or fade away.

But really the first music for me were tools. I was brought up in a family lumber business, so from age ten to nineteen when I was drafted into the Vietnam War I was in the family of lumber, workers, tools. All lean hardened but generous guys, really. The hammer knock-knock, the handsaw rip, power tool whine, the flat slap of lumber planks. All of this would go into my attraction to the drum, and a few years later decades of work with stone – laying up stone walls, stone caches, stairways, a stone building. Stone is like a drum.

**"The hammer knock-knock, the handsaw rip, power tool whine, the flat slap of lumber planks. All of this would go into my attraction to the drum, and a few years later decades of work with stone."**

Fortunately I paid attention all those teenage years working on carpentry crews so I could make a living when I pushed up into the forest of Vermont to live. (NP: Carter Family, "Wildwood Flower")

**MMM:** What are some musicians you have written about? And your favorite books about music?

**BA:** I have been writing about music with books and cinema since 1971. Almost everyone I'll mention in this interview I have fit into my writing – including your work, Josh – usually short pieces but woven with the whole of these three arts.

There are shelves and shelves

of music books I love, too many to list, but if I think of a few it would be: Woody Guthrie's *Bound For Glory* – the ultimate wanderer, before Jack Kerouac – then Kerouac's *Mexico City Blues* (242 Choruses); *The Blues Line* by Eric Sackheim – blues lyrics were poem!

My composer friend Peter Garland's magnificent book on the music of Jaime de Angulo, *The Music of the Indians of Northern California*; Philip Blackburn's massive study on Harry Partch, *Enclosure*; Alan Lomax, *Folk Songs of North America*, which lines up nicely with Sackheim's book; and Carson Arnold's *If I Blinked Through These Windows* – a teenager's operatic army of music reviews, reveries, correspondence, interviews real and invented, completely selfless, bumping along full-faced into the sun across the frontier. I hope we don't lose that experiment.

(NP: Elmore James, "Fine Little Mama," a great sense of tools and earth-toned in this song.)

**MMM:** Any favorite contemporary musicians/albums? All time faves?

**BA:** Otis Gibbs. His podcast. Priceless. I always like it when a Laura Marling song comes on. Forever Dylan, Coltrane, Monk, Los Lobos. Eilen Jewell's perfect minute-and-a-half song "Bang Bang Bang" gets me dancing, Kendra Smith singing Richard Farina's "Bold Marauder," Devendra Banhart's songs to corn meal and suffering. Gillian Welch. Patti Smith's version of "Babe, I'm Going To Leave You." Tom Jones performing "Burning Hell" with two masterful rugrats on drums and guitar who wouldn't be allowed a mile near his glitzy stage in the old days.

Too many to list. Etta James, "I'd Rather Go Blind" always gets me. Young John Lee Hooker singing "No Shoes" is still contemporary to me.

(NP: Saint-Saëns, "Carnival of the Animals: Aquarium")

**MMM:** Did you buy the Harry Smith anthology back in the day? Any thoughts about Harry? (There is a new release of b-sides of the records, by the way.)

**BA:** Harry Smith's masterpiece anthology was released the year I was born. Dylan was eleven years old. He wouldn't start mining into this goldmine for a few more years, and I wouldn't come to Harry Smith's music first, but last – I was delving into his cinema and even before that his love for Pacific Northwest Indian lore, being born and raised in that fertile region of the Pacific Northwest that would also bring forth Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, also Richard Brautigan. Morris Graves. Robert Sund. All poets, artists, and if read with the ears open: musicians.

Harry Smith died the age I am now, and thank goodness before he died the bigshots gave him a prestigious award. Even a diehard outsider wants to be loved. Harry Smith is what makes a wobbly word like Americana as vast as the prairies. (NP: Lars Hollmer, "Starlep Signs")

**MMM:** Have you been to any shows in the past few years? Or watched any online sets?

**BA:** Been to no shows. I can't remember the last one. Maybe a busker in the shelter of a church doorway with a banjo and a grin. My kind of concert.

But wait! I do remember a fairly recent concert with Arlo Guthrie and his family, and what a sight having all the stage filled with such tribal persuasion. It took me back to 1967 or so when I first saw him play a solo set at Woody's Bar. That may have been the first time I heard "Alice's Restaurant." He was very young and I was younger.

I watch online shows from time to time. I caught the Civil Rights documentary *Freedom On My Mind* the other night on TCM, filled with fight, intimacy, and spirituals.

I enjoyed Billy Joe Shaver being interviewed by Norm Macdonald... Tom Waits performing his "Chicago" with a pickup band including David Hidalgo was tight and true... and any footage with Billie Holiday and Lester Young I'll always watch. Lean quality. (NP: Sidney Bechet, "All of Me")

**"I believe Leon Russell was in the house band, girl dancers everywhere. Teenyboppers stuffed and sparkled the audience, all with free tickets, and my future wife was in the front row..."**

**MMM:** Any period of time you would like to go back to, to see music... or any musician in particular?

**BA:** I can think of three. In your time machine I'd like to go back and hear Kenneth Patchen read his poetry to a jazz accompaniment; I wouldn't mind at all heading back almost forty years and seeing again Townes Van Zandt, an arm's length from him on stage and he sang every song with his eyes closed. Three hours. (NP: Joni Mitchell, "Cactus Tree")

Finally, and mostly, I'd liked to be swept back to 1964, Santa Monica, California and the second set of "The T.A.M.I. Show." The show was two days, deliriously fresh bands like the Stones, Smokey Robinson, The Supremes, Chuck Berry, Marvin Gaye, and a James Brown set I still haven't recovered from and don't want to.

I believe Leon Russell was in the house band, girl dancers everywhere. Teenyboppers stuffed and sparkled the audience, all with free tickets, and my future wife was in the front row, whipping off her jacket and strangling it as the Stones – bad boys up & down – came forth with Bobby Womack's rocket propulsion "It's All Over Now." This was in October 1964.

I wasn't there but believe it or not, and I still don't, nor know how, but a mere two months later in December, at my little northern Berkshire hills town movie theater, the film of "The T.A.M.I. Show" was already showing, and little did I know I was looking at my wife Susan as a 14-year-old. No girls in my hometown acted like her. Let's go back.

(NP: Gram Parsons, "In My Hour of Darkness")

**MMM:** Any thoughts on any of the Ken Burns music series?

**BA:** I like them all, despite the flaws and deadwood here and there. His country music film may be his best music film to date, but again back to the drum, the stone, the

earth – he has to sink deeper down into the groove. His other documentaries can be fascinating.

I wish Nat Hentoff had the Burns contacts – we might have seen some astonishing jazz in that large realm Burns dominates. Regardless, Hentoff was a wonder in the many smaller events he created. Burns should really get down to a film on the Blues, where our wretched history and music meets. (NP: Wooden Shjips, "Ruins")

**MMM:** Any all time favorites? Or Vermont musicians that you would see a lot?

**BA:** I made friends with and published Allan Block, father to Rory Block. Allan was over in New Hampshire and would come to Vermont to play fiddle and spoons. Dudley Laufman is another old friend – storyteller, poet, square dancer, fiddler, real McCoy.

Susan and I went to a small venue where MV&EE held forth up on an upper floor of an old Brattleboro building where the last time I was up there, thirty years earlier, it was a bookstore. I talked to Margaret MacArthur once at a village tag sale. We were both dicking over a vintage foldout stool. Sorry to say I never got to hear her play.

I met and heard Jesse Winchester play one show. He lived in Vermont long enough to write the glorious "Yankee Lady." (NP: Allison Moorer, "Blood")

**MMM:** And you knew Robbie Basho, correct? And corresponded with him? (The new documentary is great, by the way.)

**BA:** I had been searching and finding for years through the late '60s and '70s Robbie Basho's albums in dollar bins. Same place I found Townes Van Zandt, Fahey, Andy Warhol's album cover art.

I wrote Robbie in Berkeley where he lived in the '70s, probably sent him one or two of my poetry books and he graciously returned with copies of his LPs, and his own poetry, always handwritten, like the letters. *Visions of the Country* really caught me at that time – again, an artist channeling the western landscape, and like many of those artists on the West Coast – it was primal, and required a rhythm of heart and soul, the truest intelligence.

This takes us back to Harry Smith, Harry Partch, John Cage (an Angeleno), and even the Mothers and Captain Beefheart. Raw oceans.

After some years of correspondence and exchanges, Robbie and I would meet when he came to play a concert in Shelburne Falls/Buckland, Mass. I was building a house then along a river that ran straight down to those two towns. Early 1980s. Robbie was already in hobbled health. He came as one more troubadour.

The scattering of letters to me from Robbie are now in my archive at the University of Vermont. (NP: Bill Withers, "Ain't No Sunshine")

**MMM:** Do you feel like musicianship in general these days is up to par with the past?

**BA:** I don't think there is any past present or future with music. It's always been with us. Threading and weaving and woven and holes to be filled. Never to leave us. Bird calls. Thanks, Josh.

(NP: Johnny Cash, "Further On (Up the Road)")

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