



All Along the Watchtower

by Bob Dylan

In a Nutshell

The argument over whether [Bob Dylan](#) should be considered a poet has been going on for quite a while. (You can read a good summary of the discussion on [Poets.org](#)). By treating "All Along the Watchtower" as a poem, we're inviting two different questions, each as sticky as strawberry jam. On the one hand, why are we discussing a song by a *rock musician* when there are so many classic poems we haven't even touched yet? "At least get through *Shakespeare* first!" you might say. On the other hand, if we're going to start treating lyrics as poetry, why start with Dylan instead of The Rolling Stones, Chuck Berry, Woody Guthrie, Radiohead, or Nas? You might accuse us of opening Pandora's Box and unleashing musical chaos on the ordered world of poetry.

Our answer is that we're trying to teach poetry here, not make arguments about the value of one writer over another. Dylan is a great person to teach because he's one of the most important and influential artists of the 20th century. In our opinion, he also tends to use more - and more varied - figurative language than most songwriters. If reading our take on this song makes you think a little differently about both poetry and music, so much the better.

Let's turn our attention to Dylan's "All Along the Watchtower," which he released in 1967 with the album [John Wesley Harding](#). (No, [Jimi Hendrix](#) didn't write "All Along the Watchtower." And Jimi's version isn't necessarily the best. But even if you might prefer another version, Bob gets all the credit for the simple and mysterious lyrics.) *John Wesley Harding* saw Dylan return to crisp, unostentatious folk songs after the wild and wooly [Blonde on Blonde](#). The two albums complement each other quite nicely.

"All Along the Watchtower" is a short song, one that doesn't really stand out on the album, not because the song isn't great but because the whole album is a classic. But it stands out today because of the cover by the [Jimi Hendrix Experience](#) for the band's album [Electric Ladyland](#). A "cover," in case you're wondering, is when a musician plays a song that was already recorded by someone else. A good cover usually puts a new spin on the song.

Hendrix's version cuts out the folk and replaces it with screeching rock and roll. Structurally, the main difference is that Hendrix adds a guitar solo after the final lyrics are sung. Dylan describes being "overwhelmed" by Hendrix's version, and he took to playing the song more like Hendrix - complete with a final guitar solo - in concerts. The live version from his *Biograph* Box Set gives an idea how he played around with the song post-Hendrix. "Strange how when I sing it, I always feel it's a tribute to [Hendrix] in some kind of way," he once said in an interview (*Biograph*, booklet).

According to HisBobness.info, the song is Dylan's most frequently performed - even more than "[Like a Rolling Stone](#)." He has played it more than 1,700 times. [Neil Young](#) also did a pretty rocking cover of it for [Bob Dylan's 30th Anniversary Concert Celebration](#).

Why Should I Care?

A lot of people only know the wild, rebellious [Dylan](#) of [Highway 61](#) or the grizzled artist of recent albums like [Time Out of Mind](#) . But [John Wesley Harding](#), on which "All Along the Watchtower" is a standout track, presents a different Dylan: sly, evasive, understated. Listening to this song is like trying to find your way through a washed-out desert at sunset. He's making some harsh criticisms of American society during the [Vietnam era](#), but the music is so mellow and the lyrics so strange it's like he's daring you not to pay attention.

Aside from that, "All Along the Watchtower" is a song that defined the late 1960's, when the calm, disciplined protests of the early decade were degenerating into violence and confusion. No wonder Dylan ends the song with a howling wind. Ironically, the only people you could trust were the jokers and thieves. When [Jimi Hendrix](#) got around to covering this song, it sealed the deal: the guitar solo at the end has come to embody the splitting apart of order into screeching, and possibly liberating, chaos. Hendrix's version has been used in countless movies and television shows, from the [Spike Lee Joint](#) [Clockers](#) to [Forrest Gump](#) to the episode in [The Simpsons](#) when Homer's mother, an ex-hippie terrorist, returns to Springfield. And, if nothing else, it's cool to think that Dylan has performed this song more than any other.