

DYLAN PLAYS VEGAS

By Michael Ventura

July 9, 1999

Drive Lake Mead Boulevard east out of Vegas toward the jagged mountain range. Just before you crest the pass there's a pull-out on the right where you can park and read a plaque that describes what geologists call "The Great Unconformity." It tells how, deep in the earth, *a quarter of a billion years* of the planet's geologic residue is, uh, missing. A massive amount of rock and sediment is simply... gone. No one knows where or why.

The plaque explains how later "mountain-building events" (a pleasant phrase for eons of earthquakes) upended a huge chunk of mountain and desert so we can see and touch what the scientists are talking about. You walk down a gully and there's another plaque showing what to look for: two unremarkable strata of rock in the mountain, an inch or so thick. Place your hand there, on the tiny seam between two reddish layers of rock -- that seam represents where those missing sediments ought to be. Your hand is spanning a quarter billion years. And, due to some further geologic fluke, the only places where you can touch this seam are at the bottom of the Grand Canyon and here, overlooking the most surreal of all cities.

That kind of thing is typical around here.

Drive this desert and see otherworldly shapes everywhere: volcanic formations -- underwater volcanoes, most of them, from when Nevada was ocean. Only 130 miles northwest, about 370 million years ago, a comet two-thirds of a mile wide struck that ocean. The comet's impact shot waves *a thousand feet high* in all directions. This was one of the comets that caused the extinction of the dinosaurs, and it may have been the hugest explosion ever experienced in the continental United States.

By 30,000 years ago -- a long time to us, a short time geographically -- the oceans had receded. Nevada had become a land of enormous lakes and there was lush vegetation in the Las Vegas Valley. Mammoths, camels, saber-toothed tigers, dogs big as bears. Then, only 20,000 years ago, when most of America's topography looked much as it does today, Nevada's giant lakes "drained suddenly." That's what it says in the museum exhibit. Again, no one is sure why. Soon all those critters and plants were gone forever. By 10,000 years ago, southern Nevada looked as it does now: a brutal desert.

In 1905, the railroad sold some lots around its depot and that became Las Vegas, a hot tiny town with an unusually large population of whores -- though most of the area was and is owned and run by Mormons. In the early 1930s, the government built Hoover Dam nearby, and a lake that had drained suddenly 20,000 years ago undrained even more suddenly. Then in 1946, Meyer Lansky and the New York Mafia families commissioned Bugsy Siegel to build a casino, the Flamingo -- and since then it's all neon signs, slot machines, and showgirls. And atomic bombs. About a hundred A- and H-bombs exploded only 70 miles northwest of town between 1951 and 1961 -- the mushroom clouds rose above the Madre Mountains and any window facing west had a grandstand view. The Apocalypse has already happened, over and over, in this desert, while the roulette wheels just kept on spinning.

Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys gigged downtown in the Forties ... in the 1950s, a cinema clown of genius, Buster Keaton, who couldn't get work anymore in films, was saved from penury by doing a stage act in the casinos ... and one of the great

Hollywood symbols of allure, Marlene Dietrich, who could rarely land a decent role anymore, re-created herself with a cabaret act in the casino lounges ... and a little later an unemployable Betty Grable, fattish and past stardom, fighting lung cancer, but still game, led the revue at the Tropicana when her health permitted; it's said that the mobsters who ran the Trop had a soft spot for her, let her work when she could, paid her whether she worked or not, and gave her the chance to die with dignity in a little apartment building just east of the casino on the edge of the wasteland. A vicious, greedy city that could, on occasion, be oddly generous to the gallant and the lost.

And then Sinatra and the Rat Pack, Howard Hughes, Elvis, and now there's a tower, the Stratosphere, as high as the Empire State Building, the tallest thing ever built in a desert ... nearly a million and half people live here, and 35 million more visit every year ... the highest teen suicide rate in the world, and a substantial population of high school kids live alone or room together unsupervised by adults, their parents having crapped out and moved on, while the city bends (or ignores) the laws to let them sign leases and buy cars (again a bow to the gallant and the deserted) ... no one knows where the edge of town is anymore, the place metastasizes so fast that each new map is obsolete by the end of the year, the fastest-growing city in the developed world ... drive the Strip and you see a golden statue of Jesus; a sphinx half again as large as Egypt's; a 45-story black pyramid with a light that shines straight up at night, can be seen for 300 miles from the air, and is said to glare 10 miles into outer space; Merlin in a purple robe waving his wand from atop the Excalibur; a New York skyline that's really one building, and the Statue of Liberty with sad showgirl eyes gazes past Merlin toward a huge golden lion; a five-story Coke bottle; actual-size pirate ships that actually sink into a moat, then rise again; an artificial volcano; an Eiffel Tower that's got to be 30 stories high ... it's as though all the images of Western civilization have gathered in this desert, site of comets and atom bombs, to throw one last party before the Millennium; and neon, neon everywhere ... and on a huge television screen, on a towering sign in front of the MGM Grand, overlooking all this:

The faces of Bob Dylan and Paul Simon, in cinematic black and white, flashing on and off between images of nearly naked showgirls and ...

"Hello, darkness, my old friend ..." In this city the line had a valence it could not have anywhere else. Dylan's rough voice, grating and elemental in its power, blended uncannily well with Paul Simon's, a voice that somehow is just as boyish and clear as it was 35 years ago. Two Jewish troubadours, still uncompromised in their middle age, making a one-night stand in the city most emblematic of the Apocalyptic era that they've serenaded all their lives. "And the people bowed and prayed to the neon gods they made."

Their voices together echoed every male utterance from boyhood to old age, and instead of the usual long fade-out of "Knock-knock-knockin' on Heaven's door" repeated over and over, what they repeated this night was, "Just like so many times before, just like so many times before," and it was their story, our story, and the story of the nightmare from which we cannot wake, the dream called "history." We are the bridge over troubled water.

Simon's set had been festive and poignant, backed by horns and several fine drummers, many people danced in the aisles, and when he finished with "Still Crazy After All These Years" it was less wistful than quietly triumphant. Then he and Dylan sang together acoustically for a few songs. And then Dylan took the stage with a tough rock band (with Charlie Sexton on guitar), and he was neither festive nor poignant. His performance, this night, matched the paradox of his songs: harsh yet generous,

demanding yet forthcoming, secretive yet evocative, intellectual yet passionate, clear yet elusive, as brutally frank as he is reverently gentle. "Poor guy," Hannah said, "a messianic artist who hates crowds." "Take me disappearing," he would sing. And that's how we've always had to take him.

With three exceptions, all his songs on that Vegas night had been written between 1963 and 1968 (plus two from the Seventies, none from the Eighties, one from the Nineties) -- yet they'd lost none of their currency. For instance, Dylan sang an unforgiving "Masters of War," a 1963 song that now evoked images of Kosovo still fresh, images all the more horrific when evoked in this greedy place. He spoke nothing to the audience all night except, "This is a song I wrote about my wife. She's so conceited I call her Mimi. [Me-Me?]" -- and, so saying, he gave a beautifully ragged, heart-rending "Just Like a Woman."

The arena, which usually stages boxing matches and would soon host a wrestling extravaganza, was far from full -- maybe a fifth of the seats were empty. Few were casino tourists. Mostly locals, working folk in a town where the labor pool is unskilled. They were overwhelmingly white, but what was surprising was their ages -- at least as many in their teens and twenties as in their forties and fifties.

In this place of comet impacts, mountain-toppling quakes, and A-bombs; in this place of gangsters and Sinatra and neon; in this place of naked women and an imposing serious man I saw last year, an African-American, who had a red rose tattooed on the center of his forehead; in this place where the gallant are sometimes shown mercy by the greedy; in this single American city that doesn't pretend to be anything it's not -- Dylan's first encore was Buddy Holly's "Not Fade Away," with what for me is the greatest line in rock: "My love is bigger than a Cadillac." And his final song asked the question that never grows old:

"How does it feel to be on your own?"

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