

house, goes into one of the rooms and sits me down on the couch. He was ready to sing. He sits down opposite me. He's had a few drinks, and he should be downstairs mingling. And I start playing one of my songs. He listens to it, he picks the guitar up; he says nothing. I say, "Well, will you play me 'Hungry for Your Love'?"

He plays it, hands me the guitar. He plays a second song, takes the guitar. "What do you want to hear?" And we pass the guitar, and — I'm not kidding you — for hours we passed the guitar. We ran out of songs after an hour and a half.

The sun was coming up, and I remember his girlfriend at the time came into the room at the end and said, "Come on, we have to go." And he's like, "Right." And he stood up, comes over, pats me on the shoulder and says, "Nice voice. Nice songs. Blah, blah, blah," and walks out. And that was it. That was my encounter. That was all he said: "Nice voice. Nice songs. Blah, blah, blah."

But what was amazing for me — the gift that I'd been given that night — was that I got to watch his hands. I got to watch his neck. I got to watch how he lifted his head into notes. I got to watch how his body leaned into chords.

I got to see Van the way no one probably gets to see him, except maybe his girlfriend or his kids or whoever. I got to see a master up close and to digest every inflection — to use or not use in my own palette all this experience. Do you know what I'm saying? I went to being a proper apprentice that night. The education was profound because it was up close and personal with a master.

MEETING DYLAN

I was busking, and Dylan was in Dublin to do a gig, which, of course, I was going to because I'm a huge fan. He was number one. And he was staying at this hotel, the Westbury Hotel, and I was close down the street, and someone come out and goes, "Bob F***ing Dylan just walked out — got out of the van around the corner!"

I just grabbed my guitar and ran . . . left the money in my case, everything there. I ran around the corner, and Dylan was getting out of a truck. He was hanging out, going into the hotel. And I did this stupid thing; I just took a harmonica out of my pocket and I handed it to him, because I had a harmonica. It was a stupid thing to do, give Bob Dylan a harmonica, but he took it and he was like, "Hey, thanks."


OPPOSITE: By the end of our three-song photo shoot, Hansard and his newfound busking buddy had netted about 50 bucks from the fast-gathering crowd. (Yes, Hansard gave it all to Sleepy Joe.)

And that was it; he was gone. But the weird thing was, maybe a year or two later, I was rehearsing with my band, and Dylan was rehearsing next door with his band in the rehearsal place we were in, because they were beginning a European tour. We finished our rehearsals, the drum and bass player had gone home, and I was running over one last song. And we didn't know he was rehearsing next door, because all we were told was, "There's someone famous next door. Don't annoy them. Stay out of the way." We didn't care; we thought it might have been U2.

But, at one point, Colin, our violin player, just looked at me like someone had died, and we turned around, and standing in our doorway was Bob with his foot up, and he's smoking a cigarette and he just says, "Sounds good." And I walked up to him and I just said, "Bob," and I shook his hand and was totally freaked out.

He shook my hand, and I said, "Bob, meeting you [for me] is what it must have been like when you met Woody." And I think I must have said the right thing, 'cause Bob was like, "Oh, Woody! Man, Woody was amazing!" He said, "I never got to hear Woody play." And Bob Dylan started talking to me about Woody Guthrie! And I knew just enough about Woody — through Dylan — to hold a conversation with him. We talked for a minute and a half about Woody Guthrie, and he took off. And I shook his hand and I ran home. I told my mother I'd shook Bob Dylan's hand. It was unbelievable.

The next morning, a phone call came into the rehearsal space. They gave Bob Dylan's manager my number, and he rang up and he said, "You must have impressed Bob. Do you want to come to London and open for him?"

It was amazing. He was like, "Can you get a flight? If you can get a flight, you can do the gig." That was basically how he put it. We went out to the airport and explained our situation, and they cancelled five people off the flight for us! We walked onstage, and I said, "Yesterday, I was rehearsing with my band in Dublin, and Bob Dylan appeared in the doorway, and we chatted for a few minutes, and here we are." 

For exclusive video footage of Hansard busking in front of Pike Place Market during our photo shoot, just go to the Video tab at www.fretboardjournal.com.