

Dylan's "Hurricane": A Look Back

"Hurricane" movie invites a new look at Bob Dylan's stirring protest

BY ERIC BOEHLERT January 21, 2000 *The Rolling Stone*

Music historians take note: The critically acclaimed new movie *The Hurricane* not only tells the harrowing tale of Rubin "Hurricane" Carter, the former No. 1 middleweight contender who spent nineteen years in prison for a murder he did not commit, but it also resurrects one of rock's most powerful, and effective, protest songs: Bob Dylan's "Hurricane."

It was Dylan's landmark, 1975 song, and his relentless promotion of Carter's case during the infamous Rolling Thunder Revue tour that same year that helped broadcast the boxer's plight to mainstream America.

Carter's nightmare dates back to the night of June 16, 1967, when three white people were gunned down at the Lafayette Bar and Grill in Paterson, N.J. Moments later, hometown boxer Rubin Carter and his friend John Artis were pulled over by the police, who brought the two men to a nearby hospital to see if one of the dying men could I.D. Carter and Artis as the trigger men. The victim did not.

Within weeks the grand jury investigating the Lafayette murders declined to indict either man. Three months later though, career criminal Alfred Bello, who had been lurking around the Lafayette on the night of June 16, and was looking for leniency from police, told prosecutors he could identify the two black men as the killers. On

May 27, 1967, with no motive offered by prosecutors, Artis and Carter were convicted on three counts of murder and sentenced to life in prison.

Eight years later, Carter sent a copy of his autobiography, *The Sixteenth Round: From Number 1 Contender to #45472*, to Dylan. Within thirty days Dylan came to visit Carter in prison. The singer told a writer at the time, "The first time I saw him, I left knowing one thing ... I realized that the man's philosophy and my philosophy were running down the same road, and you don't meet too many people like that".

Dylan sat down with producer Jacques Levy and the two men quickly penned the classic "Hurricane." Part protest song, part historical document, Dylan's runaway, eight-minute epic reads like a legal brief, as the singer punches holes in the prosecutor's Lafayette killings case, spitting out the lyrics with passion and contempt. After attorneys at Dylan's label, Columbia Records, asked for slight changes in the song to avoid possible lawsuits (Dylan agreed), "Hurricane" was quickly shipped out to radio.

In the fall of 1975, Dylan took his Rolling Thunder Revue, starring Joan Baez, Joni Mitchell, Allen Ginsberg and Roberta Flack, out on the road. (The tour is perhaps best remembered today as the one in which the enigmatic Dylan performed in whiteface make-up.) On Dec. 7, the Revue pulled into Carter's New Jersey prison for a show of support. (According to *Rolling Stone*, only R&B singer Flack received a warm welcome from the inmate population; quiet folkie Mitchell nearly got booed off the stage.) The next night the Revue played to a sold-out Madison Square Garden, where more than a \$100,000 was collected for Carter's legal fund. One month later, Hurricane II, another charity concert for Carter, was held, as Dylan's Revue was joined by Isaac

Hayes, Stevie Wonder, Steven Stills, Carlos Santana, Richie Havens and Rick Danko of the Band at Houston's Astrodome.

Just two months after that show, the New Jersey Supreme Court, prompted by Bello's recantation in the pages of the *New York Times*, unanimously overturned the Lafayette convictions, ruling that the prosecution withheld evidence favorable to the defense, and ordered a new trial for Carter and Artis. Incredibly, in 1976 both men were again convicted, this time when prosecutors were allowed to introduce as a motive the notion that Carter and Artis gunned down the three whites in retaliation for a killing earlier that night in Paterson, wherein a black bar owner had been killed by a white.

It took eight more years before a federal district court judge in Newark, N.J., finally overturned Carter's conviction, insisting, "The extensive record clearly demonstrates that the petitioners' convictions were predicated upon an appeal to racism rather than reason, and concealment rather than disclosure."

Or, as Dylan had sung ten years earlier:

"How can the life of such a man

Be in the palm of some fool's hand?

To see him obviously framed

Couldn't help but make me feel ashamed to live in a land

Where justice is a game."