

= Watching the River Flow =

" Watching the River Flow " is a song by Bob Dylan . It was written and recorded during sessions in spring 1971 at Blue Rock Studios in New York City and produced by Leon Russell . The recording was issued as a single on June 3 , 1971 , backed with " Spanish is the Loving Tongue " . It reached the Top 40 in a number of countries and No. 41 in the United States . It was included on Bob Dylan 's Greatest Hits Vol . II , released on November 17 , 1971 , and has appeared on various other Dylan compilation albums . Since 1987 , Dylan has performed the composition often at his concerts . Critics have written that , in this song , Dylan sang about the temptation to withdraw from public life , and the problem of lack of inspiration .

The song has been covered by artists including the Earl Scruggs Revue , Steve Gibbons , Colin James , and Russell himself . In 2011 , musician Ben Waters released a version featuring five past and present members of the Rolling Stones as part of a tribute album for former Rolling Stones pianist Ian Stewart .

= = Writing and recording = =

Between 1967 and 1970 , Dylan recorded and released four albums that incorporated country rock elements : John Wesley Harding , Nashville Skyline , Self Portrait , and New Morning ; all four were produced by Bob Johnston . At some point during the New Morning sessions , Dylan apparently decided that he did not want to work with Johnston anymore . For his next recording session , Dylan asked Leon Russell , who had made a name for himself through his work with Joe Cocker , to help him find a new sound . Russell suggested that Dylan come record with him at Blue Rock Studios in New York City . It was the first time for Dylan to work with an independent producer , as opposed to an in @-@ house Columbia one .

The session took place on March 16 ? 19 , 1971 . Russell assembled a musical backing group that included Carl Radle , Jesse Ed Davis , and Jim Keltner . Dylan recorded a number of covers , among them " That Lucky Old Sun " and " Spanish Harlem " , as well as two originals : " When I Paint My Masterpiece " and " Watching the River Flow " ? the final song put on tape at the session . Russell recalls that when developing the song , the basic track was recorded first , before any words or melody were written . The track was based on in @-@ studio jams done during the session . The music of " Watching the River Flow " has been described by different critics as a " Blues @-@ powered sound " , " featur [ing] some blistering guitar work ... and rollicking piano work from Russell " , and as " an energetic , funky @-@ gospel rocker " . Later during the session , Dylan wrote the lyrics and melody , which took him ten minutes . Biographer Clinton Heylin notes that Dylan borrowed lines from " The Water is Wide " and " Old Man River " for the composition .

Four and a half months after the recording session , on August 1 , Russell backed Dylan on bass during his set at the Concert for Bangladesh , organized by George Harrison . In November 1971 , Russell accompanied Dylan into the studio again to record Dylan 's next single , " George Jackson " . At this session also , Russell played bass . Russell has not recorded with Dylan since , although they did tour together in 2011 .

= = Release = =

" Watching the River Flow " was released as a single on June 3 , 1971 , with " Spanish is the Loving Tongue " as its B @-@ side . (" Spanish is the Loving Tongue " later also appeared on Dylan in 1973 , but this was a different recording .) In the USA , Columbia 's promotion of the single included a full @-@ page advertisement in Billboard magazine with the caption " ' Watching the River Flow . ' A unique new single by Bob Dylan . " The advertisement showed a picture of Dylan holding a camera to his eye .

The song was a Top 40 hit in Canada , the Netherlands (on both of two competing charts) , and the United Kingdom , as well as reaching No. 41 on the U.S. Billboard charts . Billboard writer Paul Grein notes that it was the second consecutive American Dylan single , after 1970 's " Wigwam " , to

miss the Top 40 by one spot . On November 17 , 1971 , " Watching the River Flow " appeared on Bob Dylan 's Greatest Hits Vol . II . It was later included on the compilations Greatest Hits , Vol . 1 ? 3 (2003) , Playlist : The Very Best of Bob Dylan ' 70s (2009) , The Essential Bob Dylan [Limited Tour Edition] (2009) , and Beyond Here Lies Nothin ' : The Collection (2011) .

= = Live performances = =

Dylan first performed the song live on November 21 , 1978 , in El Paso , Texas and again , two days later , in Norman , Oklahoma . He did not play it in concert again until July 19 , 1987 in Eugene , Oregon ; from that point on , he has often included the song in his sets . In total , he has performed the song 500 times .

= = Critical comments = =

Dylan biographer Robert Shelton has written that , in the early 1970s , Dylan was frequently criticized for " selling out " . " Watching the River Flow " , for Shelton , expresses Dylan 's desire just to be an observer , and not a political activist .

Writing about " Watching the River Flow " in 1971 , Greil Marcus discusses the importance of pushing past one 's initial impression of the song . " The first impression is that Bob Dylan is setting up the usual private scene : ' I 'll sit here and watch the river flow . ' Well that 's certainly a boring idea . It 's the implicit message of just about everything James Taylor has written . " Marcus goes on to say that Dylan is exploring " his myth of retirement and withdrawal " , and the problem of retaining his privacy while making public art . For Marcus , the song is about Dylan " growing up without growing away " from both his audience and his own past . Marcus argues that the reason the single was not a hit in the USA was because " the time has passed when people are interested in hearing Bob Dylan say he 'll just sit there and watch the river flow ... even though that 's not quite what he 's saying . " For Marcus , " Watching the River Flow " is a compelling work , but the subtlety of the song may have prevented it from reaching a wide audience .

Literary critic Christopher Ricks , in his book on Dylan , writes that what is striking about this song is how Dylan conveys a restlessness which is at odds with the bucolic notion of enjoying watching the river flow . Ricks notes that the phrasing and the musical arrangements conflict with the lyrics ; the choppy rhythms , and " stropmy stomping " of the backing track , disrupt the theme of contentedly watching the river . He notes that the third and the last verse both begin with the words " People disagreeing " , bringing conflict into the song . For Ricks , " Watching the River Flow " is " tarred with a realism that qualifies and complicates the lure of the lazy " .

Dylan critic Clinton Heylin has placed the writing and release of " Watching the River Flow " in the context of conflicting critical estimates of Dylan 's work in the late 1960s and early 1970s . Heylin writes that in the song " Ballad of Easy Rider " , co @-@ written by Dylan and Roger McGuinn two years earlier , Dylan had claimed that he was content to watch while " The river flows , flows to the sea / Wherever it flows , that 's where I want to be " . In " Watching the River Flow " , Dylan writes that he is restless , wishing he was " back in the city / Instead of this old bank of sand " . In June 1970 , Dylan had released Self Portrait , an album that received very negative reviews ; Dylan 's next album that year , New Morning , was viewed much more favorably by critics , with Ralph Gleason proclaiming " We 've got Dylan back again ! " For Heylin , by beginning " Watching the River Flow " with the question " What 's the matter with me ? / I don 't have much to say " , Dylan sought to subvert critics like Gleason . Heylin writes that both " Watching the River Flow " and " When I Paint My Masterpiece " confront " the same subject matter , a continuing dearth of inspiration , in a refreshingly honest matter . " Pointing to the fact that Dylan made no attempt to record either a single or an album in the following year of 1972 , Heylin believes that " Dylan had now concluded that he must simply sit by that bank of sand " and await the return of his muse .

= = Personnel = =

The musicians who recorded " Watching the River Flow " are :

Bob Dylan ? vocal , guitar , harmonica

Leon Russell ? piano , production

Jesse Ed Davis ? guitar

Don Preston ? guitar

Carl Radle (called Charlie Radle on the session notes) ? bass

Jim Keltner ? drums

= = Covers = =

On April 18 , 2011 , musician Ben Waters released Boogie 4 Stu , a tribute to former Rolling Stones pianist Ian Stewart , which included a recently recorded version of " Watching the River Flow " featuring Rolling Stones Mick Jagger , Keith Richards , Charlie Watts , and Ronnie Wood , as well as former member Bill Wyman . The five Stones recorded their contributions separately , in different studios at different times , but the track constituted the first time since 1992 that Wyman had recorded on the same song as his former bandmates . The choice of the song was based on Ian Stewart 's judgment that " Watching the River Flow " was " the only decent thing Bob Dylan ever did " .

The song has also been covered by numerous other artists , including Joe Cocker , the Earl Scruggs Revue , Colin James , Steve Gibbons , the Heart of Gold Band , Chris Farlowe , Asylum Street Spankers , Gordon Johnson , the Lamont Cranston Band , Seatrain , and Candye Kane . Leon Russell released his own version in 1999 on the compilation Tangled Up in Blues .

= = Charts = =