



## Dylan Thomas in America

When the legend becomes fact, print the legend

By Jerry James

*"I've come to America in pursuit of my life-long quest for naked women in wet mackintoshes."*

– Dylan Thomas



*Dylan Thomas (1914-1953)*

*1937 (L) and 1953 (R) — From curly-headed angel to bloated cherub*

Dylan Thomas was broke. He may have been a poet of genius, but fine words butter no parsnips. Nor do they pay the bills. And with the end of WWII, his job writing propaganda for the BBC was drying up. A patron had bought him a home in Laugharne, Wales, but how could he now support his wife Caitlin and their soon-to-be 3 children, as Dylan had promised?

The answer was America. In 1949, the 35-year-old Dylan received an offer from John Malcolm Brinnin, who headed the Poetry Center in New York. Brinnin would set up a tour of the US, sending the most Byronic figure since Byron on the road, there to perform and to profit. It was a good idea, on paper. Dylan was a wonderful reader of poetry, both his own and others. But he was also a short, pudgy, charming drunk, unable to manage either money or women. Caitlin despaired of him—a helpless child in need of a Mum, a master in the craft of the broken promise.

Dylan Thomas would make four trips to America, returning from the last in a coffin. From these trips, his legend would grow: Dylan, the first rock-star poet, a drunken, profligate, unreliable genius. Dylan, the lover, for whom college girls lined up for defloration. Dylan, the drinker, who walked out of the doors of the White Horse Tavern into the mists of a legendary death. Is it any wonder that young Bobby Zimmerman, living in the artistic backwater of Hibbing, MN, chose “Dylan” as his stage name? The problem with legends, of course, is that they are not quite true.

### Trip The First



*John Malcolm Brinnin*

Caitlin didn't want him to go. True, mutual drinking bouts, followed by her beating him with her fists, followed by their falling into bed together, were a feature of the Thomas marriage. And both occasionally fell into a drunken bed with someone else. No matter, that. Caitlin worried more about her big baby finding an American Mum.

Her greatest fear, though, was that as a longtime actor, Dylan would feel the need to perform the Role of Poet, rather than write more poems. But he had a cunning plan—he would secure a position at an American university. Dylan promised.

Dylan arrived in New York on February 21, 1950. He was a smash, reading Auden, Yeats and others, along with his own poems. Then he embarked on a 13-week, 30-reading coast-to-coast tour—alone. People got him onto planes, trains and buses. Other people met him when he got off. Dylan might be sick or drunk, but he did not miss a reading, at \$150 per. (Multiply this by 11 for 2024.)

But Dylan also felt the need to *perform*. In NYC, he grabbed Katherine Ann Porter and lifted her up to the ceiling. He chased Shirley Jackson around her own home. (Hadn't he read "The Lottery?") When a woman asked the meaning of the "Ballad of the Long-legged Bait," he replied, "It's a

description of a gigantic fuck." And everywhere, he drank enormous amounts and picked up equally enormous bar tabs.

His drinking blocked him in San Francisco, a city he loved. He almost got that university position—at Berkeley—but the chancellor, having heard barroom tales, vetoed it.

On May 31, Dylan sailed for home, broke. But he did bring a purse, a gift from Brinnan to Caitlin. When she opened it, she found Brinnin had carefully hidden \$800 inside.

### Trip The Second



*Dylan & Caitlin, Brown's Hotel, Laughterne*

Dylan had sent very little money home during the tour. His hosts usually provided him with lodgings, but he had to pay for his transportation—and for everyone's drinks.

The coeds? Well, there was no social media in 1950, so... But there was Pearl Kazin, an NYC journalist, who had taken over the role of Mum. When Caitlin learned Dylan had been seen escorting Pearl around London, she drew the line. When Dylan next went to America, they would go together. Which they did, on January 20, 1952.

This tour was much like the first, with 40+ readings across the US—except for the doubling down on spending. Caitlin, dazzled by American abundance, bought suitcases full of clothes. The couple spent \$400 in a

single day on clothes and alcohol, while he forgot to pay their son's tuition (Dylan had promised) leading to yet another fight. Caitlin also intentionally insulted as many people as she could, hoping to kill off the prospect of any future tours.

By way of example, in March, they fetched up broke at the home of Dylan's friend, Max Ernst, the surrealist artist, who lived with his wife, Dorothea Tanning, in Sedona, AZ.



*Dorothea Tanning and Max Ernst*

Dylan and Ernst spent most of the visit at a bar in nearby Cottonwood called the Bridgeport Tavern. A Holy Roller church next door had a sign reading, "Where Will YOU Spend Eternity?" The two friends painted their own sign: "At The Bridgeport Tavern" and hung it underneath.

Meanwhile, Tanning was puzzled by Caitlin, who seemed "to do everything to disrupt plans, moments, events." Seemed? She knew exactly what she was doing.

The couple sailed for home, broke, on May 16, but not before Dylan discovered the White Horse Tavern, the closest thing to an English pub he'd found in NYC. Oh, and he'd also made some recordings for a new record label, Caedmon, which would do more for his reputation than he dreamed.

Unfortunately, this wouldn't happen until after he was dead.

### Trip The Third



*Dylan at the White Horse*

Since 1946, Dylan had written only 6 poems. But the release of his *Collected Poems* (UK, 1952; US, 1953) turned that into a footnote. The acclaim sent him on another voyage west—but only for 6 weeks, because of Caitlin's hatred for his life as a public performer. He only wished to go, she said, for "flattery, idleness and infidelity." But he'd be able to keep more money this time, because now the payments were going through his agent, less 50% to pay his debts and taxes, of course. Dylan promised.

On April 21, 1953, Dylan arrived in NYC. Legend says he went directly to the White Horse. If he did, he also spent some time finishing his play, *Under Milk Wood*. After a Boston tryout, where Dylan read all the parts, it was first produced at the Poetry Center on May 14, 1953, recorded live by Caedmon. It was a smash—14 curtain calls. It had been necessary to hold the curtain so that Dylan could finish the play.



*The Original Cast of "Under Milk Wood"*

The success of *Under Milk Wood* was largely due to Elizabeth “Liz” Reitell, Brinnan’s assistant, who had taken upon herself the job of managing not only the show but also Dylan, who at one point lost the script. But he found Reitell, who later said his vulnerability had exposed hers. No one told Caitlin he’d found a new Mum.

Dylan gave 12 readings, all in the east. And Boston University was interested in commissioning an opera from Igor Stravinsky—with a libretto by the man Stravinsky called, “The best living writer, Dylan Thomas.” When the two met in Boston, Dylan was very formal, awestruck. Then Stravinsky suggested a drink. After that, they got along famously. But the opera would never be written.

Dylan flew home on June 3, having first broken his arm in a fall. Reitell’s doctor, Milton Feltenstein, not only set the arm, but also gave him cortisone injections for gout and gastritis while urging him to drink less.

### **Trip The Fourth**



Dylan Thomas flew to the US for the last time on October 19, 1953. He had been miserable back in Wales, and everyone knew it, especially Caitlin. Because of his fiscal failures, she had had two abortions,

and now, he was leaving her again. But he had signed with an agent in the US who guaranteed \$1,000 a week. Dylan promised.

Dylan fulfilled all his commitments in NYC, but comments like, “I’ve seen the gates of hell tonight,” were common.

At 2:00 AM on November 4, he rose from Liz Reitell’s bed and declared he must have a drink. When he returned, about an hour later, he said, “I’ve had 18 straight whiskies. I think that’s the record,” and fell asleep. (That statement doesn’t really hold up, but it’s embedded in the legend.) He awoke in pain. Dr. Feltenstein gave him morphine, a triple dose, for some reason. Dylan was taken to St. Vincent’s Hospital in a coma.

Caitlin was summoned from the UK. Upon arrival, she went berserk, attacking Brinnan, tearing down a crucifix and smashing a statue of the Virgin Mary before being put into a straitjacket, screaming.

Dylan Thomas died on November 9, as a nurse was bathing him—almost as if he were a child and she, his Mum. The cause of his death is still debated. “Dylan died of being Dylan,” said his friend Ruthven Todd.

Caitlin returned to Wales with the body, which was laid to rest in St. Martin’s Church Graveyard, Laugharne, on November 24, 1953. Caitlin (d. 1994) lies beside him. Her name is on the back of the cross.

In death, the estate of Dylan Thomas the Legend provided Caitlin and her children with the income Dylan Thomas the Poet had never been able to provide in life. For once, Dylan had kept a promise.

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