

She wrote the song that defined the Sixties – but was erased from history

Bonnie Dobson's ballad *Morning Dew* was covered by every rocker, but it took decades for the folk artist to get her due



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Canadian folk singer Bonnie Dobson, 85, in her north London home Credit: Jeff Gilbert for The Telegraph

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It turns out I've been living around the corner from a music legend for years and I never realised it. Sure, Bonnie Dobson isn't a household name, but she was heavily involved with the 1960s folk scene, playing with [Bob Dylan](#) before he found fame, and winning over audiences with her vibrato voice and fingerpicked guitar. She even wrote one of the most enduring songs of the era, *Morning Dew*.

That haunting lament of nuclear destruction has been covered by every rocker from Robert Plant to Rod Stewart. It's also been the subject of one of the most notorious cases of songwriting theft in music history. Even today, Dobson is fighting for the full rights to her song – 65 years after she wrote it.

Dobson, as vibrant as ever at 85, welcomes me into the kitchen of her north London home, where a corned beef hash is sizzling on the stove, to hear the whole saga. It's the subject of her new book, *Take Me For A Walk In the Morning Dew*, written with rock historian John Einarson.





Although she wasn't a household name, Bonnie Dobson was heavily involved in the 1960s folk scene. Credit: Frank Lennon/Toronto Star via Getty Images

“I just thought it was going to be for the summer,” she says, taking me back to the start of her music career. It all began in 1960 when a chance encounter with a music manager brought her across the border from her native Canada, where she grew up in Toronto, for a string of US dates. Soon, she wound up at Gerde’s Folk City in New York.

“I remember [Bob] Dylan at Gerde’s when he was just starting,” says Dobson, still sporting the bohemian style of that era in an azure paisley shirt and jeans. “He was writing great songs right from the beginning. My good friends Gil and Lori Turner virtually housed him, fed him and clothed him. Whenever I went to their house, Dylan would be in the back room at the typewriter.”

According to Dobson, Dylan’s penchant for original songwriting “was a no-no” in traditional folk circles, with singers preferring to stick to old staples. But after an evening of Cold War conversation, Dobson felt the urge to break the taboo herself.

Drawing on imagery from Stanley Kramer’s apocalyptic film *On the Beach* (1959), she wrote *Morning Dew* while staying in Los Angeles in 1961. The simple lyrics represented a dialogue between the last man and woman on earth. It was, at its core, a nuclear protest song. But it sounded like a traditional ballad from another time.



“I like your song,” Dylan told Dobson after she played it at Gerde’s. Soon, it was picked up by other folk artists, including the Briarwood Singers, Fred Neil and Vince Martin. Then heavier musicians turned it into a rock standard; more than 80 artists have covered it since, including Nazareth, Procol Harum and Duane and Gregg Allman, who recorded a version with their pre-Allman Brothers band, the 31st of February.

Of these myriad interpretations, Dobson’s favourite is the Grateful Dead’s, which featured on their 1967 debut album and was performed live around 300 times by the band. In 2016, US rock band the National released a powerful, atmospheric version, inspired by the Dead. Some covers were less successful: Lulu’s version, released the same year as the Dead’s, incorporates a jaunty marimba motif – a curious contrast to the sombre lyrics.



For Dobson, however, the worst came in 1990. “Devo’s version is really bad, terrible, actually,” she damningly writes in the book. The new-wave band’s bizarre production combines a Donna Summer-style techno

band's bizarre production combines a Donna Summer-style techno backdrop with harpsichord interpolations from Bach. Their version may not work, but it does illustrate just how far Dobson's song was transformed from its folk origins.

Although every rock artist seems to have had a crack at *Morning Dew*, few knew that Dobson wrote it. In fact, for decades she shared the credit (and half the royalties) with a man she had never met: Tim Rose.

“Bonnie left herself open to that by publishing the song in [folk magazine] *Broadside*,” John Einarson explains. In 1962, Dobson allowed the music and lyrics to be printed, with no rights asserted. That provided an opportunity for Rose to add his name to the songwriting credits when he covered the song in 1967. Subsequent artists drew from Rose's version. And so, the fictitious credit spread. “Everybody thought he wrote it,” Dobson recalls. “I was constantly having to explain, ‘Well, actually, no. I did.’”



Bonnie Dobson performing on stage at the Country Music Festival at the Wembley Arena in 1983 Credit: David Redfern/Redferns

On top of that indignity, Dobson was robbed of thousands of dollars in royalties, as the song became a modern standard. Ralph McTell, Lee Hazlewood and Herman's Hermits are just a few others who recorded covers. (When the latter played the song live on BBC radio, it was

introduced as “the Tim Rose classic”).

Despite the injustice, Dobson avoided legal action for decades. “I didn’t know anything about copyright or publishing. It seemed too much of a hassle.” She put her music career on hold, moved to London, and started a family. Then, in the late 1990s, she saw Rose was playing a gig in Putney. She decided to go along. “He closed his set with *Morning Dew*. I just yelled out, ‘How about giving credit to the person who wrote it?’”

Soon after, Dobson connected with a lawyer who also happened to be a Grateful Dead fan. (“I have never met a Deadhead who wasn’t a really nice person,” Dobson smiles.) He helped gain acknowledgement for Dobson as sole songwriter and improved her royalty rate. But even today, she only gets 75 per cent. “My music publisher is working on that,” Dobson says of the remaining quarter. “I have no idea where that money’s going.” (Rose died in 2002 with no immediate next of kin.)

Five essential Bonnie Dobson songs

Where to start if you're not already a fan

The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face (1961)

Written by British folk singer Ewan MacColl for Peggy Seeger, this standard was later covered by everyone from Roberta Flack (who made it a huge hit in 1970) to

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As for regaining public recognition as the songwriter, Dobson is indebted to her north London neighbour Robert Plant. When the Led Zeppelin frontman covered *Morning Dew* in 2002 it still carried the Rose credit. Dobson knocked on his door and explained her story. “I helped her,” Plant later recalled on his podcast, *Digging Deep*. “I was able to make a bit of a fuss, and she was able to regain her position as the sole writer of *Morning Dew*.”

Plant brought her onstage at the Royal Festival Hall in 2013, and they sang the song together. “That was like him saying, ‘She wrote it,’” Dobson says. She believes the gradual shift in public acknowledgement of her as the sole author “really came after that”.

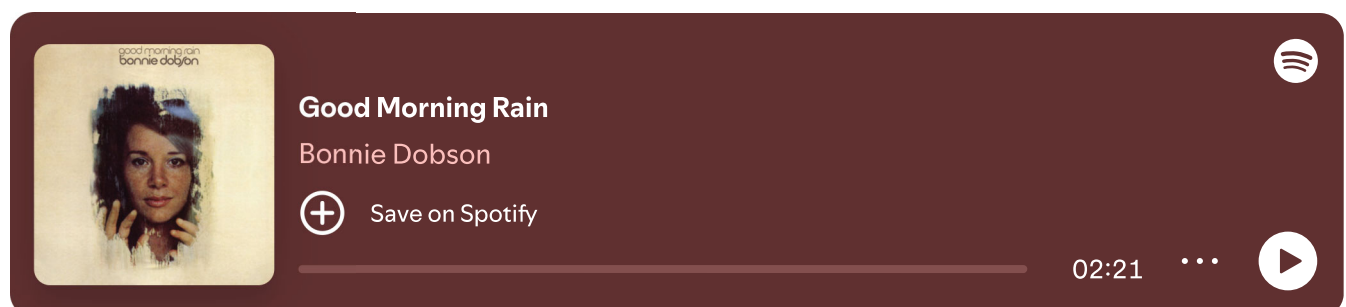




Bonnie Dobson performing *Morning Dew* alongside Robert Plant (far left) at the Royal Festival Hall in 2013 Credit: Bert Jansch Royal Festival Hall

Despite this positive ending, Einarson feels the *Morning Dew* saga has overshadowed the rest of Dobson’s career. “An awful lot of people who know Bonnie’s name don’t know what a good songwriter she became,” he says. He hopes the book might bring more attention to the rest of her catalogue, which includes a dozen albums, ranging from a 1962 live recording at Gerde’s Folk City, to a children’s album, and a 2010 comeback record combining classic songs with fresh material.

Some of that concern is misplaced, though. For a younger generation of listeners, Dobson’s most popular song is not *Morning Dew*, but the title track of her 1970 album, *Good Morning Rain*. The folk-pop tune was recently playlisted by Spotify’s editors, and has since racked up more than two million streams.



Dobson (clearly not up to date on her Spotify metrics) is astounded when I show this news. “Short memory!” she exclaims with a laugh. But the

I share this news. “Shut my mouth!” she exclaims with a laugh. But the success isn’t about to go to her head.

When I ask what achievement she’s most proud of, she replies, “My jam”, before kindly giving me a jar of said preserve (raspberry, if you’re wondering), an apple from her garden and a jazz CD.

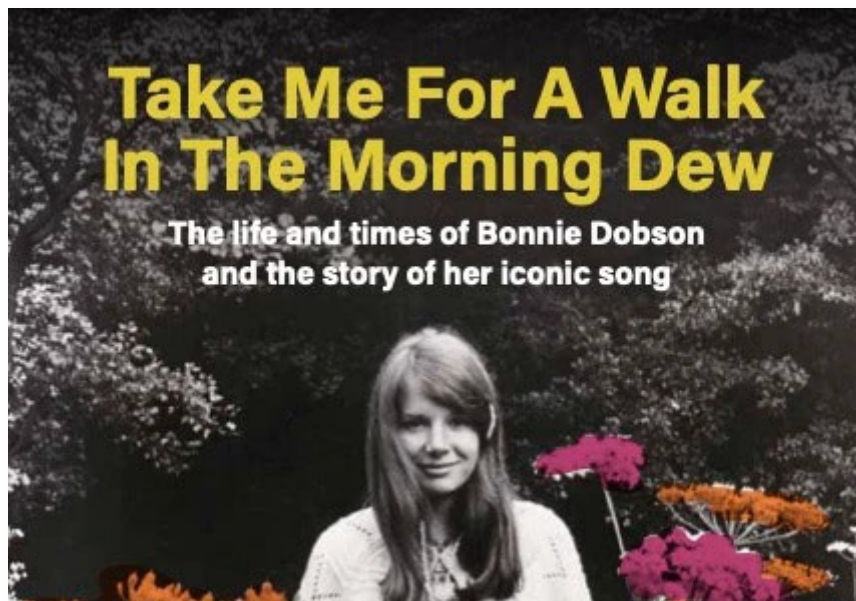
But before I go, there is still time to see her treasured guitar: a 1959 Martin 00-21 (“worth a fortune now”) which she’s had since 1961, and which has followed her from Gerde’s Folk City to London. Dobson used it again last year on her latest album, *Dreams*.



Dobson with her treasured guitar: a 1959 Martin 00-21 which she’s had since 1961 Credit: Jeff Gilbert for The Telegraph

Next week, it will join her onstage as she plays some of those new songs (as well as *Morning Dew*) at the End of the Road Festival in Salisbury. And after that? “We’ll see what happens,” says Dobson. “I never planned on being a singer. Everything has just... happened, you know?”

Take Me For A Walk In the Morning Dew: The Life and Times of Bonnie Dobson and the Story of Her Iconic Song by John Einarson and Bonnie Dobson is published on Sept 10 by Jawbone Press (Outline Press). Bonnie Dobson performs at End of the Road Festival on Sept 6.



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