

Ramble On

Just like Jesus Did

By Dan Ofstedal – February 8, 2026 ¹

I pulled in to Nazareth, was feeling 'bout half past dead

I just need someplace where I can lay my head — The Band, “The Weight”

I spent my early years in the middle of the country, in a small town that wasn't even on a state highway. You had to squint to see it on the map.

In the summer, retired farmers sat on benches along Main Street, dropping cigarette butts onto the concrete. The streets didn't go far. They simply ended—at the edge of pastures and cornfields.

We lived in the parsonage next to the church. My parents listened to classical and sacred music on the console stereo. My mother played the piano at home and the organ next door at church. After dinner, we read Bible stories.

J.S. Bach was the background music of my childhood.

My father had a rack of classical records—Tchaikovsky, Mozart, Schubert. But tucked among them were two albums that didn't belong. As soon as I was old enough to place a needle on vinyl, I found them and listened over and over. And they cut quite a groove.

One of them was Peter, Paul and Mary's first album, from 1962. It was filled with motion—leaving, trains, distance.

If you miss the train I'm on

You will know that I am gone

You can hear the whistle blow a hundred miles

— “500 Miles”

And with wandering that felt less like escape than fate:

All through this world I'm bound to ramble

Through storm and wind, through sleet and rain

— “Sorrow”

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The other album was Ramblin', by the New Christy Minstrels, from 1963. Nearly every song assumed a life of motion and seeking.

I've been ramblin'

I've been north, south, east, west

All up and down the line — "Ramblin'"

A travelin' man always longs for a home

'Cause a travelin' man is always alone — "A Travelin' Man"

I don't care when the sun goes down

Where I lay my weary head

Green green valley or rocky road

It's there I'm gonna make my bed — "Green, Green"

This music was nothing like my home life or my small town. And yet it felt strangely familiar. It resounded with something in me.

My father also had a handheld transistor radio with a leather case. Sometimes at night I would fall asleep listening to songs sent from hundreds of miles away—voices arriving from places I'd never been, singing about lives that traveled to a beat unfamiliar to me.

How does it feel,

To be without a home,

Like a complete unknown,

Like a rolling stone? — Bob Dylan, "Like a Rolling Stone"

Yes, there was Dylan, of course—Blowin' in the Wind, Shelter from the Storm—and Simon and Garfunkel:

I'm sittin' in the railroad station,

Got a ticket for my destination...

Every day's an endless stream

Of cigarettes and magazines

And each town looks the same to me

The movies and the factories... —Simon and Garfunkel, "Homeward Bound"

Once, sitting in the back seat while my father drove our Rambler wagon through farmland between church confirmation parties, the radio told me a story:

Trailer for sale or rent

Rooms to let, 50 cents

No phone, no pool, no pets

I ain't got no cigarettes — Roger Miller, “King of the Road”

Uncertainty. Seeking. An openness to whatever lay around the next corner. I wasn't sure what it all meant, but I was paying attention.

And as I got older, into middle school and high school, those songs kept coming. Lobo's “Me and You and a Dog Named Boo” told the story of drifting from town to town. The Allman Brothers sang “Lord, I was born a ramblin' man.” The Eagles would build an entire album around the image of a desperado riding fences.¹

These songs quietly shaped what felt possible—what a life might look like out there.

Only later did I fully recognize why they felt so familiar, and why I played those records over and over. What I didn't know then was that this restlessness had a much older source.

You can argue endlessly about what Jesus' core message was—repentance, social justice, or inner transformation. You can debate his divinity or his politics. But there is one thing you cannot argue: Jesus did not stop moving.

He was born in transit, a displaced person before he was a preacher. As an adult, he was a traveler on the highways of Galilee. He moved from Nazareth, where he was rejected, to Capernaum, where he refused to settle. He lived on the hospitality of strangers, an itinerant radical who stayed just long enough to upend the local status quo before disappearing around the next bend.

When the religious authorities asked him where his “Kingdom” was—looking for a coordinate on a map or a throne in a palace—he gave them a drifter's answer. He told them the Kingdom of God isn't a place you can point to, saying “here it is” or “there it is.” Instead, he told them it was “within you” or “in your midst.” It was portable. It was a kingdom that traveled with the open-hearted.

It makes sense, then, why he told the scribe in Matthew 8:20: “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.” He wasn't just complaining about the lack of a pillow; he was describing a state of being. To follow him was to be open—to embrace the road.

Fast forward nearly two thousand years. The life of Jesus did not completely disappear into doctrine. It traveled—into stories, into songs, and into lives.

The spirituals and gospel songs of enslaved and freed African Americans were steeped in images of movement: crossing Jordan, walking to Canaan, traveling through this world of woe. The Jesus they sang about was not confined to a building. He walked with them on the road.

Blues music emerged directly from that tradition. Robert Johnson sang “Preachin’ Blues (Up Jumped the Devil).” Blind Willie Johnson asked Jesus to make up his dying bed. Faith was no longer something housed in doctrine; it was something carried, often on dusty roads between towns where a Black musician might find work for a night and move on by morning.

And rock music came out of the blues. By the late 1960s, the radio was filled with songs about drifting, leaving, searching, and refusing the settled script: settle down, work hard, don’t ask too many questions. Instead, they offered endless seeking, endless movement, and the freedom to wonder what it all meant.

In retrospect, it isn’t hard to see why these songs resonated so deeply. Jesus’ call—sell what you have, leave your nets, follow me—is not only a moral demand. It is an invitation to real freedom. And that freedom is not abstract. It is embodied. It’s alive—and it walks.

The irony, of course, is that religion has often come to mean something quite different: strict obedience to doctrines Jesus never taught, stability enforced rather than questioned. A means of control.²

But beneath that layer, the older current remained. It surfaced in blues, in folk, in rock—and it reached a kid in a parsonage who didn’t yet know what he was hearing.

I am grateful for the sound of my mother playing a Bach postlude; it is the sacred soundtrack of my life. I am grateful to my father for those two records that didn’t fit in with the others. And I am grateful to the songwriters who gave me permission to look past the town limits.

But I realize now that this permission didn’t originate in a recording studio in 1965. It came from much farther back—from a figure who refused to be pinned down, who broke the Sabbath to keep moving, and who treated the horizon as his only cathedral. He didn’t leave behind a manual; he left his own example for those willing to follow.

I wonder sometimes whether my father ever considered the link between Jesus’ itinerant life and the lyrics of those albums in his rack. Either way, he was giving me a map—a guide to the road less traveled.

I have spent my life drifting—sometimes by choice, sometimes by fate. I see now that the drifting was the point. It was the only way to hear the message echoing down through the centuries, before it was muffled by the walls of the institution.

I’m still that kid in the parsonage, listening on the radio for a voice from a hundred miles away. And as long as I can, I will listen, and—like Jesus—ramble on.

[Read additional essays here.](#)

1 - There are hundreds more songs, including:

Riders on the Storm, by The Doors;

Truckin, by the Grateful Dead;

Carefree Highway, by Gordon Lightfoot;

Born to Run, by Bruce Springsteen;

Running on Empty, by Jackson Browne;

Every Picture Tells a Story, by Rod Stewart;

Midnight Rambler, by the Rolling Stones;

Ramble On, by Led Zeppelin.

2 - [Click here for more about Jesus' rejection of childhood conditioning.](#)

3 - [Click here for more about the authentic Jesus message.](#)