

# Homer, *the slut*



**January 1991**

**Issue Two**

Hello again! Here is the 'difficult' second issue, only one month later than planned! I'm sorry for the delay. I now know why editors tend to leave writing articles to others, there simply are not enough hours in the day. I would like to thank everyone who has sent letters and contributions or given help and advice. I may well also owe thanks to some people who didn't write in! There were no discouraging communications. I found this very heartening as I know, from past experience, that newcomers into a fanzine field can be seen as 'unwelcome upstarts.'

Issue Two has been produced using completely different tools from Issue One. Due to this, and the difficulties of working from various locations, there are evident mistakes in the layout. I apologise for this, but I'm afraid that it is an unfortunate by-product of experimenting with various techniques. I trust that Issue Three will show an improvement. By Issue Four I shall have decided upon, and standardised on, a production system.

As to contents: **FOCUS ON** has survived but please note the comments at the conclusion. **SOME OTHER KINDS OF SONGS** received a lot of support - so I immediately dropped it! I have, though, lined up contributions for the future. **Under The Red Sky** dominates this issue. Alex Hill has reviewed the album, I've given my initial reactions to it in **BITS & BOBS** and looked at it from another viewpoint in the second part of my article on **MODES OF NONSENSE VERSE**. More thoughts on contents of future issues will crop up throughout this issue, as ever your comments would be much appreciated.

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<b>FOCUS ON: Desolation Row</b>	collated by Andrew Muir
<b>LETTERS</b>	by You and Me
<b>MODES OF NONSENSE VERSE</b>	Andrew Muir
<b>RED EYED UNDER THE RED SKY</b>	Alex Hill
<b>BITS &amp; BOBS</b>	Andrew Muir and Pia Parviainen
<b>ADS</b>	by You and Me
<b>CARTOONS</b> (Mark's work also appears in <b>ISIS</b> and <b>Freewheelin'</b> , a privately circulated magazine.)	Mark Carter

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Andrew Muir

**Jim Brady**

Although it is obvious that Dylan is exempt from some of the standard criteria by which poetry is judged, he is guilty of an indiscipline which - from the point of view of literature - seriously mars his work.....Desolation Row is another example; here Dylan uses his images of incongruity very successfully,

And in comes Romeo, he's moaning,  
 "You belong to me I believe"  
 And someone says "you're in the  
 wrong place my friend,  
 you better leave."

That succeeds as a comment on American Society; sadly (and economically) Dylan explains how out of place that depth of feeling is, and the reader<sup>1</sup> is made to feel how shocking it is that America has no place for such a character. In the same song however, Dylan applies the device with the figure of Einstein, but self-indulgently allows himself to lapse into delineating a number of surrealistic incongruities which are interesting, amusing and linguistically skilful but ultimately meaningless:

Einstein, disguised as Robin Hood  
 With his memories in a trunk  
 Passed this way an hour ago  
 With his friend a jealous monk  
 He looked so immaculately frightful  
 As he bummed a cigarette  
 Then he went off sniffing drainpipes  
 And reciting the Alphabet  
 Now you would not think to look at him  
 But he was famous long ago,  
 For playing the electric violin  
 On Desolation Row.

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The unevenness of **Desolation Row** has already been noted; much of its imagery is gratuitous and some of it exhibits a juvenile sense of paranoia, "the cyanide hole" and the "heart-attack machine" constitute such overstatement that their intended sinistrality becomes laughable.

Elsewhere though the images do succeed; the out of place Romeo, the absolutely appropriate Cain and Abel, "the blind commissioner" and finally Ophelia, secretly flirting with sanity,

And though her eyes are fixed upon  
 Noah's great rainbow  
 she spent her time peeking  
 Into Desolation Row.

Perspective, as that suggests, is all important and the recognition of reality is a rare thing here; those who do "think

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<sup>1</sup> Ouch! - The problems of the Lit Crit approach !

about" Desolation Row are punished and delusion rules;

Now at midnight all the agents  
and the superhuman crew  
Come out and round up everyone  
That knows more than they do.

"The Titanic sails at dawn" is of course another reference to the delusions of America's Mr Jones's and in the same verse (which unaccountably puts Ezra Pound and Eliot on the doomed ship) Dylan borrows the false whimsy of Eliot's Prufrock to re-inforce this stress on the sane, realistic perspective,

....Calypso singers laugh at them  
And fishermen hold flowers  
Between the windows of the sea  
Where lovely mermaids flow  
And nobody has to think too much  
About Desolation row.

This penultimate verse is a useful concluding point since its ideal of unselfconscious perfection recalls the song which began this discussion. At this point, however, Dylan's dissatisfaction with that state seems more marked; the instinctiveness of these people is something which does not belong to the world of Desolation Row and their ideal rings just as false as Prufrock's daydream. Man's position then, is that he must comprehend reality as fully as possible; without however, falling into the 'Titanic' - like delusions of empiricism.

Part of this is the acknowledgement of our own disastrous creations, and the final verse defiantly faces American Life; the Artist accepts that he is part responsible but asserts at the same time that such acceptance may lead the individual to remake and transcend that reality:

Yes, I received your letter yesterday  
(About the time the doorknob broke)  
When you asked me how I was doing  
Was that some kind of joke ?  
All these people that you mention  
Yes I know them, they're quite lame  
I had to re-arrange their faces  
And give them all another name  
Right now I can't read too good  
Don't send me no more letters no  
Not unless you mail them  
From Desolation Row.

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**David Pichaske**

Queen Jane Approximately and Desolation Row both reflect Dylan's personal enervation, are both very personal songs.

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## John Herdman

There is however one song from the astonishingly creative period from 1965-66 which embraces **Bringing It All Back Home**, **Highway 61 Revisited** and **Blonde on Blonde**, in which these themes are interlaced and controlled by an overall vision which is close to that of Dylan's apocalyptic mood, and that is **Desolation Row**.

This song has already been admirably examined by Michael Gray, but there are perhaps some additional points to be made about the two verses which particularly enforce the vision we have been discussing. (**Apocalyptic**) The third verse follows an introduction which establishes the atmosphere of dislocation, blind turmoil and potential violence which prevails in Desolation Row, with this:

Now the moon is almost hidden  
 The stars are beginning to hide  
 The fortune telling lady  
 Has even taken all her things inside  
 All except for Cain and Abel  
 And the hunchback of Notre Dame  
 Everybody is making love  
 Or else expecting rain.....

The first two lines indicate, of course, the time when the heavenly bodies will be blotted out; and the ominousness is underlined by the use of the active mood in "to hide". As well as contributing to the exquisite balance of the verse, the turn of phrase suggests that the stars themselves are moved to horror by what is to come; and the suggestion is reinforced by the fortunetelling lady who "has even taken all her things inside" - her occupation is gone, for all individual fortunes, it seems, are to be annihilated in a cosmic disaster. Dylan's flat, unmelodic enunciation of the words "things inside" here contributes wonderfully to the effect of menace. Meanwhile the mood which dominates in the Row is one of heedless frivolity, of sticking the head in the sand, here represented in the line "Everybody is making love" - surely not so much a reference to the sexual act as a prophetic glance forward to the essentially sentimental cult of uncritical gentleness - "make love, not war" - which was soon to surface and which proved, indeed, to be evanescent and ineffectual. The rain which the more clear-sighted are expecting and which is already causing the carnival sky to cloud over is, presumably the "hard rain" of which Dylan had already sung; and any redemptive vision seems hollow and unreal, as for Ophelia in the next verse, who in spite of having her eyes "fixed upon/Noah's great rainbow" cannot prevent herself from constantly "peeking" into the immediate reality of Desolation Row.

Michael Gray has already shown how "the most striking evocation of impending catastrophe" is achieved by the one line in the penultimate verse:

The Titanic sails at dawn.

It remains to add only how the disturbance we feel at the

heedless blindness which prevails aboard the great sinking ship is heightened by the reference to the childish behaviour of two great poets: "Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot/Fighting in the captain's tower". This might be a crack at the futility of modern poetry, but it could also suggest that even the most conscious are not immune from the tendency to turn a blind eye to impending disaster, preferring to fix their gaze on what they see:

Between the windows of the sea  
Where lovely mermaids flow  
And nobody has to think too much  
About Desolation Row.

Dylan, on the contrary, appears to welcome the approaching wreck:

Praise be to Nero's Neptune  
The Titanic sails at dawn.

Though "Nero's Neptune" sounds like the ship's evil angel, that invocation may, of course, be understood as being uttered by those who have placed their ultimate faith in the ill-fated vessel; it all depends on whether the words are taken as being spoken with or without hindsight. The ambiguity is probably intentional, an expression of a characteristic irony. Nero, at any rate, certainly has a specific significance here: he it was who fiddled while Rome burned. (It would be fascinating to know whether this reference to Nero, so satisfyingly right in its context, was inserted by conscious intent or thrown up by a subliminal association in the way demonstrated for Coleridge in Livingstone Lowes in **The Road To Xanadu**. It is worth mentioning that Dylan has made a special point of speaking up for the intuitive nature of genius. He takes issue with a statement reputedly made by the interviewer, Jonathan Cott: "A genius can't be a genius on instinct alone." "Well, I disagree," says Dylan. "I believe that instinct is what makes a genius a genius." In critical analysis it must be borne in mind that something may be "intended" without being intended consciously.)

**Desolation Row**, however, is exceptional among the songs of its era in its summation of the earlier apocalyptic mood.

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 ...(**Idiot Wind**) is a kind of **Desolation Row** of the spirit: whereas the earlier song deals with the interaction of society and self, the stress in **Idiot Wind** is more on the personal....  
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... Lethal unawareness, in the face of the clearest signs warning of imminent catastrophe, is the theme of the song (**Black Diamond Bay**). In this respect it has close affinities with **Desolation Row**, even though it imparts its message in the form of a story where the earlier work used the mosaic method, building up its meaning through a series of discrete image-clusters. Both, however, conclude with a last verse in the form of a coda, delivered in the first person, which comments on what has gone before (in the case of **Desolation Row** obliquely) and allows us to see it from a fresh perspective. Whereas in **Desolation Row**, however, Dylan appears to speak in his own voice, or as close to it as he ever comes in a song, in **Black Diamond Bay** the coda is put in the mouth of a persona whose unawareness mirrors and outdoes that of the characters in the tale....

## Philip Larkin

I poached Bob Dylan's **Highway 61 Revisited** out of curiosity and found myself well rewarded. Dylan's cawing, derisive voice is probably well suited to his material - I say probably, because much of it was unintelligible to me - and his guitar adapts itself to rock (**Highway 61**) and ballad (**Queen Jane**) admirably. There is a marathon **Desolation Row** which has an enchanting tune and mysterious, possibly half-baked words.

## Frank Kernode

..(in Dylan's second phase....) The recommendation, insofar as there is one, is against 'lifelessness', the sort of self-betrayal against which he warns Ramona, and for some kind of recognition that after you've escaped from the meaninglessness of appearance into unglamorous reality - down the manhole, or into Desolation Row - innocence and authenticity lie only in responding truly to the casual challenges of precisely the kind of mystery represented by the incoherence and irrationality of Dylan's own texts.....

The necessary public participation is a factor in his rapid changes of style.....there is a new factor, instantly response from a public which is not interested in old styles of verbal precision, doesn't care much if the words are inaudible or obscure, seeks the gut before the mental response. In this situation there is no interpretive feedback, no check on sense; liberated from linguistic responsibility the poet cultivates his own mystery, does his own thing only.

Dylan can rely on the crispness, accuracy and immediacy of the musical performance to cover semantic blur.....**Subterranean Homesick Blues**....is full of allusions to which every man brings his own key. The most ambitious example of these procedures is **Desolation Row**. this strange narrative begins:

They're selling postcards of the hanging  
They're painting the passports brown.

We're in a surrealist town with a circus, a beauty parlour for sailors, a restless riot squad. Behind all this stands the unattractive but apparently stable Desolation Row. From it may be seen a procession of figures, all behaving uncharacteristically: Cinderella, Romeo, the Good Samaritan, Ophelia, 'Einstein, disguised as Robin Hood' and, having abandoned the electric violin, on the bum; a Doctor Filth, the Phantom Of The Opera in disguise, Casanova; finally, T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound in a seascape with mermaids. All this is a deliberate cultural jumble - history seen flat, without depth, culture heroes of all kinds known only by their names, their attributes lost by intergenerational erosion - all of them so much unreality against the background of desolation Row, the flat and dusty truth, the myth before the myth began. That this is the plot Dylan makes clear in a last verse which rejects a correspondent for trying out culture figures on him:

I had to rearrange their faces  
And give them all another name

Send me no more such letters, he adds: send me no more letters  
at all,

Not unless you mail them  
From Desolation Row.

Here the general deviance, the lack of stereoscopy in the  
cultural reference, gives the poem its whole force.

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### Wilfrid Mellers

The dark threat inherent in melody, harmony and driving pulse (IN BALLAD OF A THIN MAN) is poles removed from the self righteous arrogance of some of the early protest songs. The same could be said of **Desolation Row** in comparison with an early monologue like **Talkin' World War II Blues**. In a sense it is a political piece, cataloguing at some length the ills of modern civilisation, its hypocrisies and self-deceits. But these ills cannot be righted by a particular course of action. We are all involved in them, as we are all to some degree the Mr Jones whom Dylan's deeper voice seems momentarily to threaten. Our involvement is the more anguished because the desolation that faces us is not merely our failings and perversities but also the nuclear holocaust that may bring a Day of Judgement in its wake. From this man-made horror the moon and stars are not merely hidden because dust-shrouded, but are themselves cowering, 'beginning to hide'. The 'fortune-telling lady' has packed up shop because no single individual human creature has a life or fortune left to tell; only 'Cain and Abel and the Hunchback of Nortre Dame' find some perverse gratification in the situation. Ophelia has a fleeting glimpse of Noah's rainbow, but the rest of the world is mindlessly making love or, in several senses, 'expecting rain'. 'Praise be to Nero's Neptune, the Titanic sails at dawn, caws Dylan with grim jubilation, encapsulating in this brilliant image the possibility that only through disaster, as Nero fiddles while New York-London-whenever burns, can there be any hope for mankind redeemed, even though individual men and women may have been obliterated. The bass is animatedly melodic, even perky.

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### PAUL HODSON

In **Desolation Row** the blind commissioner comes, the good samaritan goes and the riot squad are restless. Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot fight. The Phantom of the Opera shouts to skinny girls. Meanwhile Cinderella seems so easy, the lovely mermaids flow, and Ophelia's sin is her lifelessness. Strong verbs describe men doing things alone and together and to women; weak verbs describe women who are smooth or contained. In this and many of Dylan's other songs, men and women seem to be quite different types of person....



## ADAM LIVELY

.....When I came to hear music of his other than **Desire**, it was those songs with an exotic flavour and an apocalyptic theme that attracted me most.

**Desolation Row** was my anthem. It combined the details of a Fellinesque festival with a sense of impending and actual chaos in a way that seemed to me to distil the essence of **Black Diamond Bay**. And in **Desolation Row**, with its romantic, lyrical guitar lines riding the chords, the two elements were woven together - frozen - in a beautiful tapestry.

There is a particular, exotic Dylan landscape that both of these songs inhabit. It is a small place - forgotten, gone seed - by the sea. (The sea has an important and special place in Dylan's songs.) It is somewhere on the coast of Central or South America - indeed, it could be place out of a novel by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, or the seedy Peruvian port of Mario Vargas Llosa's **Who Killed Paolomino Molero ?** the bars are filled with sailors, gypsies and whores. The sky is filled with stars. There is bad feeling between the raffish waterfront crew and the town's more upright citizens (those who send the agents to come out and round up everyone who knows more than they do; those who rise / With the sleep still in their eyes...../The hour when the ship comes in.)

But this picture has its surreal, incongruous elements too. There's a medieval castle, with its princes on the watchtower and fairy-tale crew.

But the most important thing about this place of the imagination is that it's at the end of the world. Not just physically, in that it's across all the oceans we can think of, but in a deeper sense it is, like **Desolation Row** itself, a repository for all the world's accumulated hopes, fears, nightmares and dreams. It is the ultimate testing ground of human experience.

Don't send me no more letters no  
Not unless you mail them  
From **Desolation Row**.

I wanted to send Dylan letters and I liked to think that, even if just once or twice, I'd been down along **Desolation Row**.

And beyond this end of the world, beyond this point where all the conventional categories are thrown into the melting pot of chaos, is Dylan's voice itself. It is a unique and instantly recognizable voice - personal in that sense -but at the same time strangely distant, even objective. **Prophecy** uses precisely this tone. It seems to stand beyond all experience, singing back to those who still struggle through the world.

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 Paul Nelson

**Desolation Row**, a song over eleven minutes long (who else but Dylan could hold attention to a single performance for so long a timespan?), is clearly a major statement. Once again we are in a dark Felliniesque world of clowns and grotesques, but Dylan makes it clear that the tragic man is not the clown per se, but the clown who thinks he is something better. Accept the universal truth, Dylan says, accept chaos and advance from there. We are childfools and Don't send me no more letters, no, not unless you mail them / From **Desolation Row**.

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## Robert Shelton

...Among them was a major new work, **Desolation Road**<sup>1</sup>, a long work filled with the incongruities of black humour and macabre imagery.

The song, another of Mr. Dylan's musical Rohrshachs capable of widely varied interpretation, ranged freely from Cinderella to T.S. Eliot to Einstein disguised as Robin Hood. It can best be characterised as a 'folk song of the absurd'.

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In a near-sequel to **Hard Rain**, Dylan describes your neighbourhood after that rain. Both thunder with prophecy: Unless we renounce materialism, this will be our future. Dylan articulates the rock visions of contemporary apocalypse. **Desolation Row** belongs beside Eliot's **The Waste Land** and Ginsberg's **Howl** as one of the strongest expressions of apocalypse. Eugene Stelzig maintains, however, that "Eliot's disillusionment is resigned; Dylan's is charged with rebellion...." The scenery is a dreamed mental landscape. Dylan's description combines the grotesque, the existential, and the dream powerfully. **Desolation Row** is a grotesque Mardi Gras where heroes and villains of our mytho-history range side by side. They are laughable but our smiles freeze. The writer who questioned society for two years now sees answers, but doesn't like what he sees. Everything is cock-eyed, topsy-turvy; all is lost; all is ludicrous; the only truth lies along **Desolation Row**. As bizarre as his cast is, they are real people. To maintain their veil of secrecy, the faces have been rearranged and the names changed - shades of Cubism. There is no point in checking the travelling papers of Cinderella, the Good Samaritan, Ophelia, Einstein, Doctor Filth. Follow the gargoyles as they head down **Desolation Row**. Along the way, we encounter Dylan's condemnation of the modern assembly line: mad human Robots out of Chaplin's **Modern Times**. Then, almost as an

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<sup>1</sup> Other live reviews from this time also misquote titles and lines, whether a comment on the acoustics or Dylan's delivery I'll let you decide.

aside, Dylan makes a shambles of simpleminded political commitment. What difference does it make which side you're on if you're sailing on the Titanic? Irony and sarcasm are street lamps along **Desolation Row**, keeping away total, despairing darkness. Gallows humour for a mass hanging.

The slow musical matrix heightens the song's biblical roll. Repetition, like Old Testament cantillating, underscores the warning. a masterful, romantic guitar above and behind the vocal line softens the repetition somewhat, but it is repeated until it provides only underlining, not relief. this image of the world is far removed from marches toward social progress. One of the curses of poetic vision is seeing too clearly the difference between how things are and how they ought to be.

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#### ALAN RINZLER

The last cut on this album, **Desolation Row**, is a kind of flip side to **Highway 61**. Instead of the up-beat, pop-culture highway of life, this song portrays the interior journey; it's about Dylan's intimate reactions to all the external stimuli of his life: with humour and anguish and a very Jewish sense of paradox, of horror as well as the ecstasy of it all. In this all out Dada *tour de force*, Dylan cleverly makes (*mixes* ?) his metaphors and symbols, eclectically drawing on mystic references to the Bible, literature, pop culture, and politics. He chides Einstein, Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot - wryly, affectionately, competitively, as if to bring down gods and false angels such as himself. It's all an act, he seems to be saying; don't take it too seriously, folks. Once in a while you the words to this song seem a slave to rhyme. Do they have obscure potential significance or do they just fit? What does it all mean? Who knows - it's a sound, a phrase, a line that sounded right.

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#### Michael Gross

**Desolation Row** was the clearest evocation of ..(his).. world yet. Dylan was talking of life on the barest level....."Lady and I" begins the tale , and as they walk through his horror show world, one is reminded of Nelson Algren's **Walk on the Wild Side**, and the junkie nightmare prose of William Burroughs. Something is wrong on **Desolation Row**. The lights are going out. The street gets dark in preparation for a carnival, and soon the parade begins led, quite early, by Albert Einstein, "immaculately frightful," bumming cigarettes and sniffing drainpipes. Dr. Filth leads a pennywhistle parade. Casanova is being killed, his power taken away by praise. At midnight, the agents of the factory round up everyone who knows too much and ties them to heart attack machines. Insurance men bring kerosene. Nobody escapes unscathed.

**Anthony Scaduto**

Most of the remaining songs on the first three albums of the series (guess which three) are Dylan's explorations of his struggle to break free, to use the force of his will to reach a greater meaning in his life. **Desolation Row**, for example, Dylan's epic portrait of a crazed society, must be seen as more than simply an indictment of the souring of America, more than political ideology. Most of those inhabiting **Desolation Row** are imprisoned - Cain and Abel, the hunchback of Notre Dame, and even the Good Samaritan who is busy getting dressed for a carnival - all have been turned into symbols by intellectual system-makers to blind us to the men they had been. A typical woman on the Row wears an iron vest, perhaps to encase the heart and the soul; her "sin is her lifelessness." But among the zombies, there are several people filled with life, totally free: mermaids and calypso singers and fishermen - men and women of the spirit who laugh at it all, and who "don't have to think too much" about the absurdity they see all about them.

In his work Dylan makes it clear he knows that it is cowardice to live by an abstraction that society calls order and mortality. Chaos must be confronted. True salvation can come only after a descent into chaos, an inner wrenching that will alter his individual character and change the flow and direction of his life. Only then will Dylan be able to answer the questions: "Who am I?" and "What shall I do with my life?"

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**David Downing**

For the conscious ideologues Dylan had the same contempt. Einstein may have been a big-shot scientist, but down on **Desolation Row**, amidst the reality of chaos, his intellect is so irrelevant that he has to re-learn the alphabet...

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...For when all was said and done the world was controlled by maniacs, who man **Desolation Row's** 'heart attack machines' down on Maggie's Farm. Behind them, threading their way through Dylan's carnival like the CIA through world politics, the forces of law and order tried their best to make escape an impossibility.

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**It's All Over Now**, **Baby Blue** and **Farewell Angelina**, both ostensibly love requiems, could just as well have been written to America or the world. The first is studded with images of impending doom - 'the carpet too, is moving under you'; the second with similar images - 'just a table standing empty by the edge of the sea' - and a chorus that portrays a sky steadily darkening above the growing unconscious madness. **Desolation Row** was the culmination, an overtly drawn collage of the apocalypse. From the opening line - 'they're selling postcards of the

hanging' - through ten verses Dylan recites a society out of control, mostly blind to the portents of its doom. The curtains have been nailed, the fortune-telling lady has shut up shop, but the Good Samaritan is still preparing for the carnival, and the agents are still rounding up anyone who dares to dissent.. For some it matters little, like Ophelia whose life is so lifeless that death could only be romantic. In any case all are aboard the Titanic, as it sails off blissfully each dawn for its rendezvous with an iceberg.

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### Tim Dowley and Barry Dunnage

Michael Gray has argued that the nature of Dylan's anger has changed from political optimism to political pessimism, notably in *Desolation Row*. With *Gates Of Eden*, Dylan had been outside the gates, but *Desolation Row* is where he is trapped, or at least, where he is resigned to being, as there seems little choice. There is no hope in this song, no solutions to be worked for:

**The Titanic sails at dawn....  
Everybody's making love or else expecting rain**

The hints of imminent disaster are still the results of man's own stupidity, rather than of any judgement from God:

**And the good Samaritan, he's dressing  
He's getting ready for the show  
He's going to the carnival tonight  
On Desolation Row**

The good Samaritan is seen as only patching up wounds. There is a possible glimmer of hope towards the end of the song, but Dylan shows a dogged refusal to compromise or to ignore the situation. Anthony Scaduto has commented,

In his work Dylan makes it clear he knows that it is cowardice to live by an abstraction that society calls order and mortality. Chaos must be confronted. True salvation can come only after a descent into chaos, an inner wrenching that will alter his individual character and change the flow and direction of his life. Only then will Dylan be able to answer the questions: "Who am I?" and "What shall I do with my life?"

He concludes with images of freedom: calypso singers and lovely mermaids, who maintain a measure of immunity by not thinking too much. Dylan has planted himself in there somewhere. But it is the search for truth that actually brings the hope to this song. Wasn't it William Blake who said that the voice of honest indignation was the voice of God?

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Homer, the slut

## Aidan Day

The vagabond who's rapping at your door  
Is standing in the clothes that you once wore.  
Strike another match, go start anew  
And it's all over now, Baby Blue.

Like the empty-handed painter whose street-surrealism unsettles the domestic composure of Baby Blue's sheets, the vagabond is a relation not only of Tambourine Man, of ragged clown, or of Isis herself, but of the 'mystery tramp' of 'Like a Rolling Stone', characterized by the 'vacuum of his eyes'. And as with 'Like a Rolling Stone', 'Mr. Tambourine Man', or 'Isis', there is something disconcerting about the usurpation of the known in 'It's All Over Now, Baby Blue'. But again, as with such lyrics, 'It's All Over Now, Baby Blue' tends to emphasize the creative and positive potential of abandonment to spaces of unmapped, unwritten possibility.

The same emphasis is not always to be found in Dylan's lyrics. Not in 'Desolation Row' (H61), for instance. The first nine of the ten stanzas of this work orchestrate a series of variations on the theme of the modern world as waste land. It is, in the eighth stanza, a benighted world, where power presides through a sinister indirection and whose presiding powers are directed by ignorance. Its working routines deal in death ('heart-attack machine') and its hierarchy ('castles') in both specious brotherhood ('insurance men') and branding intimidation ('kerosene'):

Now at midnight all the agents  
And the superhuman crew  
Come out and round up everyone  
That knows more than they do  
Then they bring them to the factory  
Where the heart attack machine  
Is strapped across their shoulders  
And then the kerosene  
Is brought down from the castles  
By insurance men . . .

In pursuit of its theme 'Desolation Row' recontextualizes – within a modern urban scene – a variety of figures from Western literature, folklore and history. It is via Shakespeare, for example, that in the fourth stanza we hear of the spiritual sterility – amounting to a kind of dementia – induced by the values and practices of secular, mechanistic civilization:

Now Ophelia, she's 'neath the window  
For her I feel so afraid  
On her twenty-second birthday  
She already is an old maid  
To her, death is quite romantic  
She wears an iron vest  
Her profession's her religion  
Her sin is her lifelessness

But the lyric's casting of the inhabitants of the modern world in terms of well-known Western figures and types does not guarantee an affirmation of cultural continuity. At the end of the second stanza, it is not only that Cinderella's disinheritance and drudgery are re-imagined within the violence of the contemporary city. One of the issues raised is whether, in being so relocated, she is dispossessed of – orphaned from – the happy fairy-tale outcome of her original story:

the only sound that's left  
After the ambulances go  
Is Cinderella sweeping up  
On Desolation Row

Comparably, in the fifth stanza, Einstein is displaced from a familiar legend of his life's work. In this stanza the oppression of modern Western culture lies not so much in its capacity to exclude as in its will to include: in its anaesthetizing accommodation of contrasts. A monk here is jealous of Einstein yet fraternizes with him as a friend. The vitality of the disjunction between a traditional religious world view, with its conception of absolutes, and an insurgent scientific, relativistic ideology, is denied. Einstein and his false brother the monk participate in a cultural symbiosis which debases even the distinction between love and hate. Removed from his place in a legend of radical theoretical difference Einstein can only pretend to be an outlaw, condemned to the harmless iteration of an approved non-conformity:

Einstein, disguised as Robin Hood  
With his memories in a trunk  
Passed this way an hour ago  
With his friend, a jealous monk  
He looked so immaculately frightful  
As he bummed a cigarette  
Then he went off sniffing drampipes  
And reciting the alphabet

In the seventh stanza, 'The Phantom of the Opera' appears in 'A perfect image of a priest', a conjunction which sharply images a spiritually disfigured society. The same stanza goes on to witness a disfiguring of the story of Casanova. Here again a threat is contained by assimilation. In the culture of 'Desolation Row' sexual promiscuity is licensed in order that its subversive power be spent:

They're spoonfeeding Casanova  
To get him to feel more assured  
Then they'll kill him with self-confidence  
After poisoning him with words

To lose the self through being spoonfed with self. The destructive power of a culture in which anything goes, in which all fables of self are generously tolerated, is captured in the dislocations of story perpetrated in the lyric. Cut off from the integrity of their familiar stories, such characters as Casanova are cut off from their own identities. 'Desolation Row' deals in images of the enclosure of discrete parts of the body. Ophelia 'wears an iron vest'. But there is not only an imagery of mechanical disjunction and entrapment; of being, as it were, locked within a fragmented self. There is also a motif of being locked out of the self. Einstein stands outside his own mind as he stands outside his own recognizable narrative: 'Einstein, disguised as Robin Hood / With his memories in a trunk'.

A crucial image of the devaluation of fables of identity within the wasted and wasting culture of 'Desolation Row' occurs in the lyric's third stanza. In this verse an unreliableness at the root of official appearance is suggested by a Good Samaritan who is distinguished by an attention to his own costume rather than by his concern, as in the Gospel story, for another who has been 'stripped . . . of his raiment':<sup>6</sup>

the Good Samaritan, he's dressing  
He's getting ready for the show  
He's going to the carnival tonight  
On Desolation Row

What is important here, and throughout the lyric, is that the forces of alienation are indistinguishable from the forces of carnival. It is, specifically, a carnivalesque disorder which saturates approved pattern in 'Desolation Row'. And what is most

striking is that that disorder does not bear, as so often in Dylan, a creative aspect. It is itself the source of the negativity which constitutes the waste land. The darkness of unreason which overwhelms all structures and forms in 'Desolation Row' defines no redemptive possibility but only an obscure malignity. The lyric's opening lines present, through a series of absurdist vignettes, a culture's profound confusion of terms:

They're selling postcards of the hanging  
They're painting the passports brown  
The beauty parlor is filled with sailors  
The circus is in town

In the succeeding lines, the circus comes to image a principle of perversion entering social forms but exceeding and mocking any formulation of social authority and control:

Here comes the blind commissioner  
They've got him in a trance  
One hand is tied to the tight-rope walker  
The other is in his pants

The troubled energies of 'Desolation Row' threaten to annihilate the culture they negatively inspire. As one commentator has noted, 'Desolation Row' confronts us 'with recurring hints of imminent disaster'.<sup>7</sup> The tension instinct in the commissioner's delusory holding of balance is confirmed in the image of latent violence – an image reversing official readings of the relationship between order and disorder – offered in the concluding lines of the first stanza:

And the riot squad they're restless  
They need somewhere to go  
As Lady and I look out tonight  
From Desolation Row

There is an insinuation of the coming end of all fortunes as, in the third stanza, the firmament itself retires and the teller of fortunes withdraws from business:

Now the moon is almost hidden  
The stars are beginning to hide  
The fortunetelling lady  
Has even taken all her things inside

Ominous hints of the penalty of the fall – the allusion in the third stanza to Cain and Abel, who are left on the street after the fortunetelling lady has retreated, or to Ophelia's gazing upon 'Noah's great Rainbow' in the fourth stanza – heighten the correlation sustained throughout the lyric between the gathering madness of the carnival and the inexorable onset of evening and darkness.

But it is the opening lines of the penultimate stanza that provide the most notable single 'evocation of impending catastrophe':<sup>8</sup>

Praise be to Nero's Neptune  
The Titanic sails at dawn

This modern Western culture is imaged as a ship of fools about to go down. Two images of dangerous unreason are conflated here. In the first place this culture is likened to the Titanic as the ship of fools who continued to play and dance even as they were sinking. Secondly, the Neptune that belonged to the careless passengers on the Titanic belongs also to Nero, who fiddled while Rome burned. The end of an unregenerate culture is about to

come in an apocalyptic conflux – realizing the potential of kerosene as an inflammable liquid – of fire and water.

Yet the bleakest element of 'Desolation Row' is that the lyric floats the possibility of a detached, saving perspective on disturbance only to overturn that possibility. Desolation Row itself is, at one level in the lyric, a name for the space where chaos happens and where people are deserted. At the same time, however, the Row stands in the lyric for an outlook that perceives the incoherence. Thus it is that 'Lady and I' in the first stanza look out on a mad world 'From Desolation Row'. In this sense the Row, as a perspective of the mind, might constitute some kind of refuge from insanity. In the eighth stanza, indeed, the powers of oppression seek to prevent escape not *from* but *to* Desolation Row:

insurance men who go  
Check to see that nobody is escaping  
To Desolation Row

As a position of the mind the Row and its insights are evaded by a culture that is rooted in an absurd that bears no regenerative potential. In the penultimate stanza it is an absurdity that already spells, were it but known, an annihilation by flood, a watery death such as has been intimated since the ironic reference to rain in the third stanza ('Everybody is making love / Or else expecting rain'), or since the reference in the fourth verse to Ophelia and the assumed story of her death by water:

The Titanic sails at dawn  
And everybody's shouting  
'Which side are you on?'  
And Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot  
Fighting in the captain's tower  
While calypso singers laugh at them  
And fishermen hold flowers  
Between the windows of the sea  
Where lovely mermaids flow  
And nobody has to think too much  
About Desolation Row

In the very last stanza the voice of the lyric alters stance and speaks as if addressing a personal acquaintance who is failing to grasp the crippled ('lame') and crippling nature of the carnival. The image of the unopenable door in the second line suggests that there is no passage back to careless involvement in the carnival once certain insights have been gained:

Yes, I received your letter yesterday  
(About the time the doorknob broke)

All these people that you mention  
Yes, I know them, they're quite lame  
I had to rearrange their faces  
And give them all another name  
Right now I can't read too good  
Don't send me no more letters no  
Not unless you mail them  
From Desolation Row

But occupancy of Desolation Row as a position from which the chaos can be viewed does not emancipate the viewer from horror. The rearrangement of faces and names mentioned in the last stanza describes metafictionally the poetic procedures – the tamperings with character and story – of the preceding nine stanzas themselves. Those tamperings constitute a rewriting of the received forms of stories in an attempt to demonstrate the



essential incoherence of the culture that lives by such stories. The speaker in the last stanza insists on an inability to read the received narratives and asserts that only rewritten versions – versions scripted, like those of this lyric, from desolation's perspective – are acceptable. But the desolating double-bind explored by this lyric is that the rearrangement – the felt necessity to rewrite – can itself stand as a manifestation of the ill pervading the culture rather than a revolutionary act which transcends that ill. The act of fracturing and redistributing – disturbing the surface patterns of approved culture – is indistinguishable in the lyric from the inherent disorder which the act of disturbance sets out to expose. 'These fragments I have shored against my ruins' observes a voice towards the end of T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*. The poetic practices of 'Desolation Row' owe a debt to the work of such as T. S. Eliot. Yet even as the lyric pursues that inheritance it is conscious too of the possible fruitlessness of assuming that ruin may be fought with or healed by ruin. The modernist experiment in disruption emerges in this Dylan lyric as another manifestation of a world shattered inside and out: a manifestation which has no separate status from and no renovative purchase on that world:

Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot  
Fighting in the captain's tower  
While calypso singers laugh at them . . .

'Desolation Row' embraces the Pyrrhicism of its own victory in refusing the illusion of order. The refuge on one side of the door with the broken knob is not free of the disturbed and disturbing valencies which characterize the other side of the door. It may define an insight that is lacking on the blind side but destruction threatens alike those who are carelessly or carefully driven by the energies of the carnival. The problem is subtly anticipated in the fourth stanza. Here Ophelia is described as looking, in conformity with authorized fables of potential redemption, for a sign of deliverance from death by water. She fixes hopes upon the sign that in Genesis (9:13-17) indicates both the abatement of the flood sent to purge human kind and the beginning of a new Covenant between God and humanity. But whatever the convention that directs her so to look, she is drawn nevertheless to an alternative wisdom that is associated with the perspective from Desolation Row:

Her sin is her lifelessness  
And though her eyes are fixed upon  
Noah's great rainbow  
She spends her time peeking  
Into Desolation Row

The articulation of a wisdom that does not inoculate against the danger of which the wisdom speaks constitutes a whole other side to Dylan's lyrical treatment of potencies that lie beyond common sense. It is an articulation that is often intimate with the apocalyptic tenor of many Dylan lyrics. As early as the 1963 'A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall' (*The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*) the knowledge that the rain will fall does not simply exempt the visionary from submergence:

I'm a-goin back out 'fore the rain starts a-fallin',  
I'll walk to the depths of the deepest black forest,  
Where the people are many and their hands are all empty,  
Where the pellets of poison are flooding their waters,

And I'll tell it and think it and speak it and breath it,  
And reflect it from the mountain so all souls can see it,  
Then I'll stand on the ocean until I start sinkin' . . .

Comparably, 'Desolation Row' identifies no ground to survive the deluge. If Noah's rainbow is hardly believed in, the dawn which the lyric does look forward to is a false one: 'The Titanic sails at dawn'. Desolation Row, either as the space where chaos happens or as the perspective from which the chaos is grasped, is a desolate place. And it is that place – not some newly covenanted order – that the lyric itself comes to rest in. Unlike the modernist voices of many of Dylan's lyrics the modernist voice of 'Desolation Row' speaks of a crippled condition as a cripple.

The negativity of the energies at play in 'Desolation Row' and the speaker's own implication in that negativity find a parallel – within a narrower focus – in another of Dylan's lyrics to examine the nature of the imaginative principle informing artistic creation. In 'She Belongs to Me' (*BABH*) the darker aspect of daemonic energy – hinted at but not dwelt upon in lyrics such as 'Mr. Tambourine Man' or 'Eternal Circle' – comes markedly to the fore. The first stanza of 'She Belongs to Me' emphasizes the autonomy of the imagination – figured as anima – and sketches its capacity to invert and transvalue the divisions and oppositions upon which the rational self and its world are predicated:

She's got everything she needs,  
She's an artist, she don't look back.  
She can take the dark out of the nighttime  
And paint the daytime black.

The third verse stresses the transcendent scope of imaginative resource, its lack of filiation and its transgressive power:

She never stumbles,  
She's got no place to fall.  
She's nobody's child  
The Law can't touch her at all.



## Michael Gray

Thus too the change by the time of *Desolation Row*—which gives classic illustration of the distinction between accusation and analysis. *Desolation Row* is a brilliant political analysis of American society. And from the most cursory glance at it, the connection between the pessimism and the seriousness of intention is apparent.

Dylan chooses to offer his narration from inside *Desolation Row* itself, and so he can communicate one part of his gloom in a personalized way:

When you asked me how I was doing  
Was that some kind of joke?

The intention of the whole, however, is not to repeat the theme of, say, *North Country Blues*, which was basically the chronicle of a community's suffering in the face of encroaching penury. In *Desolation Row* Dylan is dealing with contemporary America in terms of its infection of human values. He is no longer treating a particular side-effect of capitalism as a sort of overlying weight which affronts the pockets of golden-hearted miners and the conscience of liberals. Dylan is recognizing a pervasive America, one that trades in human vanity and offers insinuation as well as polarizing challenges: challenges against which the old liberal blueprints are worse than useless. Dylan no longer expects solutions to arise out of reforms or legislation or any equally bland leftie alternative. And there is no point rallying around the new home-comforts of *We Shall Overcome*. There is no broad solution. The most Dylan expects is some major effort towards developing, *individually*, an unwarped perspective:

Right now I can't read too good  
Don't send me no more letters, no:  
Not unless you mail them from *Desolation Row*.

Excepting its final verse, the song is Dylan's necessarily tentative expression of such a perspective for himself.

He emphasizes the complexity of the subject-matter, in the first place, by a sustained reversal of norms within the song: the beauty-parlour is filled with big hairy U.S. Marines and it is the riot squad that needs putting down. Casanova, the sophisticate, is being spoon-fed; Romeo is moaning.

If nothing else on first hearings, the song is a striking and a sinister parade—and we come to see the chaos with clarity, come to see in the parade a barrage of folk-heroes in careful disarray: participants, victims and agents of a disordered, sick society.

The other general characteristic of the song is associated with the "sinister" element: the song confronts us with recurring hints of imminent disaster.

For analysts of America committed to Big Bang Revolution, such hints are taken, of course, as signs of promise; but Dylan declines to go along with this approach (which, in order to simplify the "solution", must warp the truth about the problems to be solved—must posit them as equally simple). In *Desolation Row* the imminent disasters are past and present as well as future. The verses pile up and pile up, the sinister intimations pile up with them, and there is no suggestion (no "hope", in other words) that the crescendo will ever be curtailed.

If it wasn't for the last verse, with its different function, the song could be circular: which is to re-assert that the parade could pass not once, or even several times, but endlessly: timelessly. The very lengthiness of the song enforces this impression, as it is meant to, and so does the long and rather formless instrumental section which comes between the penultimate verse and the last. A variant effect, though a closely connected one, of this instrumental section is to take the last verse away from the circular plane of the rest and set it aside. Only on the page does it "follow on" from the other verses; in reality it is off to one side, a satellite, alone but with a special focus which can be brought to bear on the rest at any point. When people consequently say that *Desolation Row* has two endings, they could more usefully say instead that it doesn't have an ending at all.<sup>1</sup>

But though the climactic holocaust never quite comes, Dylan's intimations of disaster build up towards one. They come with ever-increasing intensity and there is, of course, in any case, a cumulative effect. At the beginning, the commissioner—who is blind—is tied by one hand to the tightrope walker; the riot squad is bound to burst out somewhere; furtively, the ambulances move in and depart. Then we get these lines:

Now the moon is almost hidden  
The stars are beginning to hide  
The fortune-telling lady  
Has taken all her things inside . . .

With these lines, Dylan carries us further into the darkness, as he correlates the blanching of the moon and stars with the ominousness of the astrologer packing up and gravely going home after glimpsing the future. The correlation has a neatness and power which, as much as anything else in the song, shows Dylan's success with a new economy of language.

The lines that follow on from those just quoted have a neatness of not quite the same kind:

All except for Cain and Abel  
An' the hunchback of Notre Dame  
Everybody is makin' love  
Or else expecting rain

and by this point in the song, we've had enough opportunity to note what a curious amalgam it is—part surrealism, part impressionistic metaphor, part allegory and part riddle: an anti-logic nightmare.

The most striking evocation of impending catastrophe is, however, achieved very simply—in the one arresting line

The Titanic sails at dawn.

That summarizes, with all the conciseness a well-played allusion can offer, the tone and colouring of the whole song. For all its simplicity—perhaps because of it—the analogy as it is urged does not take away from the complexity of the overall vision. Dylan merely provides a good guide-line by taking the *Titanic* to represent contemporary America: for the *Titanic* was the ship of the future, the "proof" of man's civilization and progress, the unsinkable ship which, on her maiden voyage, sank. And, according to the best stories (and Dylan relies on their currency—a fine case of poetic licence) when the ship began to sink the passengers refused to believe that it was happening. The palm-court orchestra kept playing and the people in the ballroom danced obliviously on.<sup>2</sup>

The different kinds of oblivion and denial in America—the various ways in which the dancing continues—are presented with an incisiveness maintained throughout the song. The focus on all this escalating malaise is kept very strictly under control.

The cumulative effect mentioned earlier is, in this sense, fully allowed for. The swelling up of evil as we are given it never becomes histrionic: yet it operates powerfully as it grows through from the postcards of hangings, via the cyanide holes, and on past the factory

Where the heart-attack machine  
Is strapped across their shoulders  
And then the kerosene . . .

The first two verses of the song are actually very general: introductory in a conventional way: "Here is the parade." It is when he gets to the third verse that Dylan begins to focus on specific components of the overall chaos and disease.

Appropriately enough, he fixes first on the modern liberal conscience:

The Good Samaritan he's dressing,  
He's getting ready for the show  
He's going to the carnival tonight on  
*Desolation Row*.

By the time we meet this Good Samaritan preparing for his visit to the carnival, the moon has already hidden and the stars are retreating. The darkness is closing in, and it is not the kind of darkness that should encourage dressing for dinner. Like everybody's making love, it is an inappropriate response. The wrong gesture at the wrong time. It is part of the lethal unawareness against which Dylan is concerned to speak out.

In their own ways, the other verses all argue the same case—and the shift of perspective in the final verse just emphasizes and reiterates the same point. It's a world of commissioners; we're all blind.

In the verse quoted above, the argument applies—in so far as poetic language can be paraphrased down into particulars, which it mostly can't—in that the liberal conscience marries an indiscriminate humanitarianism to an equally effete set of fashionable reforming aims, never achieves sufficient vision to begin to transform society and thus gets nowhere. The Good Samaritan is blown from aim to aim and from idea to idea by the prevailing outrages and ailments of a society in flux. Dylan is urging instead the primary need to recognize and assert essential human values which must ultimately be re-established. The one place where the possession, or rediscovery, of the necessary detachment and honesty of response is possible is, of course, on *Desolation Row*. It is worse than useless to go there in carnival mood.

Such blindness, manifest in other ways, comes under attack most urgently towards the end of the song, and in the eighth and ninth verses is given a kind of cause-and-effect examination.

If the seventh verse can be said to berate the bourgeoisie ("Across the street they've nailed the curtains"; "They are spoon-feeding Casanova . . . poisoning him with words") the eighth verse indicts the American education system which that bourgeoisie has established. A system organized to enforce and perpetuate ignorance, Dylan portrays it as an essentially nightmarish machinery for bringing into line the potential enemies of the state—which is to say, of the *status quo*—the independent thinkers:

(Now) at midnight all the agents  
And the superhuman crew  
Come out an' round up everyone  
That knows more than they do.

How eloquent that is. That "crew", in the context, asserts, in association with the opening phrase "At midnight . . .", the telling connotative suggestion of collective vandalism, political purges and press-gangs.

Those lines insist, equally acutely, on an overriding presence of violence; it is evoked in the first two lines of that verse, and so we are forewarned of the "heart-attack machine" and the *kerasene*; and we find impressed upon us too the near-impossibility of escape.

To register *that*, of course, is to note that Dylan has slid us away from particulars again, and back towards the general features of society's ills. It isn't, after all, a song for Huey; it's a song for all of us.

The remainder of that eighth verse takes advantage of this return to generality at the same time as planting in us a strong consciousness of violence; and so Dylan urges upon us anew a sense of the powerlessness of the individual . . .

. . . brought down from the castles  
By insurance men who go  
Check to see that nobody is escaping  
To *Desolation Row*.

The allusion, clinched by that "castles", to Kafka's visions, makes this pessimism unequivocally clear. Dylan has not merely argued, but has created for us, the powerlessness just mentioned. It is not a polemic but a vision that he leaves us with, and which insists that all *any* individual can do is hold to some integrity of personal perspective. And such a perspective is, in the end, exactly what "*Desolation Row*" offers.

I noted earlier that *Desolation Row* showed a strange mixture of language. It might be added here that this mixture, which has every appearance of carelessness, actually works better than one could easily imagine of a more scrupulous technique. Towards the end of Chapter Three I argued that, like T. S. Eliot, Dylan has challenged the validity of traditional distinctions between poetic "seriousness" and levity; it strikes me as equally true that Dylan has challenged with equal authority the traditional conceptions of "serious" (which is to say scrupulous) technique.

Not only *Desolation Row* offers this challenge: it is also thrown up by many another of the songs that date from 1965, and which all display a similar chaos of language—an amalgam to some degree of blues vernacular, impressionism, allegory and more.



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Collections from which many of the above have been quoted :

<b>The Dylan Companion</b>	Ed. Thompson &	Macmillan
<b>In Search Of Bob Dylan</b>	Ed. John Bauldie	Black Spring Press
<b>A Retrospective <u>UK &amp; US</u></b>	Ed. Craig Macgregor	Angus & Robertson
<b>this wasn't written in tin pan alley</b>	Ed. Dave Percival	X-acity

**Ellen Willis**

**Desolation Row** was Dylan's final tribute to the götterdämmerung strain in modern literature - an eleven minute freak show whose cast of losers, goons and ghosts wandered around in a miasma of sexual repression and latent violence underscored by the electronic beat...

Einstein, disguised as Robin Hood  
 With his memories in a trunk  
 Passed this way an hour ago  
 with his fiend a jealous monk  
 He looked so immaculately frightful  
 As he bummed a cigarette  
 Then he went off sniffing drainpipes  
 And reciting the Alphabet

**Jon Landau**

**Desolation Row** must be counted a logical extension of the **It's Alright, Ma** mode and is a fantastic achievement. Those two songs taken together, in fact, give us a fantastically real picture of the good old USA, 1968. This Dylan is infinitely more political than the earlier one and in a much more real way.

**Steven Goldberg**

**Desolation Row**, is a denunciation of intellectual word mongering as a road to salvation. It is this song's cornucopia of imagery that is primarily responsible for what is, I believe, the common misconception that Dylan is a symbolist. Words are already symbols; to fore Dylan's phrases of rough-hewn delicacy further into the stultifying context of symbolism is to render them totally incapable of bridging the gap between word and essence.

It is only when one realises he as been out on the street that the faith which precedes salvation becomes necessary and possible. The journey home to peace can begin only in the cobwebbed room of suicidal meaninglessness that is **Desolation Row**.

**Nick De Somogyi**

The bleak carnival of **Desolation Row**, composed at the same time as **Tarantula**, parades a similar host of names as an index to the "lifelessness" of a culture in collapse ("*The Titanic sails at dawn*"). There seems to be a temporary alliance between the text and performance contributive to the imminent end, whereby the Samaritan's getting "ready for the show" for which "they've nailed the curtains" across the street, at the same time as

They're spoonfeeding Casanova  
 To get him to feel more assured  
 Then they'll kill him with self-confidence  
 After poisoning him with words

...And **Desolation Row** does exemplify a tension between the freedom of the song and the closure of words: the poets T.S.Eliot and Ezra Pound are "fighting" on board the Titanic, laughed at by "calypso singers": the "learned values of established culture" result in combat. Letters and words, then, are potentially hurtful, potentially lethal in fact, as the catalogue of desolation comes to a conclusion:

Yes, I received your letter yesterday  
 (About the time the doorknob broke)  
 When you asked me how I was doing  
 Was that some kind of joke?  
 All those people that you mention  
 Yes, I know them, they're quite lame  
 I had to rearrange their faces  
 And give them all another name.  
 Right now I can't read too good  
 Don't send me no more letters no  
 Not unless you mail them from  
 Desolation Row

One of the names Dylan cites in this song is that of, Hamlet's girlfriend.

Now , she's 'neath the window  
 For her I feel so afraid  
 On her twenty-second birthday  
 She already is an old maid

One of the poignances of Ophelia's life is her steady decline into madness, occasioned by Hamlet's distraction and her father's death. If she is 22 in the play, she is an "old maid" since her death by drowning ensures she won't reach 23. Before she drowns, however, she enters "playing on a lute, and her hair down singing":

They bore him bare fac'd on the Bier  
 Hey non nony, nony, nony, hey nony  
 And on his grave raines many a tear,  
 Fare you well my Dove

What she sings are fragments of old ballads ("Hey non nony...."), old pretexts to outface the pains of tragedy and reason. And though she tries to get her audience to join in the refrain ("You must sing down a down"), her brother exclaims, bound by the rigidities of text, that she represents "a document in madness". One reason why Dylan so constantly refers to **Hamlet** (and this example from **Desolation Row** displays the artistic intelligence of his allusions) is perhaps that this play above all throws into question the values of the printed word: it is this play, after all, which contains the following exchange:

What do you read my Lord?  
 Words, words, words.

**New Society**

His songs are a hallucinated parade, where John the Baptist and Galileo rub shoulders, where Jack the Ripper meets Delilah, where a lady called Melinda is the goddess of gloom, where Cain and Abel and the Good Samaritan pass, where Pound and Eliot are involved in a ludicrous fight, and where Einstein, looking "immaculately frightful," is disguised as Robin Hood. You wouldn't think to look at him, Dylan muses, that once upon a time he was famous for playing the electric violin. There is a Dr. Filth and an Insanity Factory. There are heart-attack machines. Inside the museums, Infinity goes up on trial. The Titanic sails at dawn. The location is always the same, whether it is called Tombstone, or Juarez, or Highway 61. Sometimes it is simply a room. It is Desolation Row, a drifting allegory, it is Dylan's mind. As he says, he has faded into his own parade, he is on a trip.

=====

**Bob Dylan**

I don't know if you've seen me before or not. I think I was here sometime in 1964. Anyway I was singing songs back then. One was called **Desolation Row**. Huh? You're clapping now, but you weren't clapping then. It was, What's he singing about? They didn't understand what I was singing about. I don't think I did either. Hahahahaha. However, I understand now pretty much what I'm singing about. So it must have taken a while for **Desolation Row**, **Maggie's Farm**, **Subterranean Homesick Blues** and all that stuff to catch on, because it wasn't accepted very well at the time. I've always been prepared for adversity. I was always prepared back then, and now I'm even more prepared....



**FOCUS ON: A Conclusion****1. It Ain't Me Babe.**

This is not what I envisaged by a conclusion. I was hoping to publish a variety of views. Unfortunately only Steve Hussey wrote with a view to **It Ain't Me Babe** and this section (see letters). Whether this was a rejection of the idea of focusing on one song or not I'm not sure, of the votes I've canvassed so far it is 2-1 in favour. (Yes, I've only asked 3 people!).

Dave Percival's admirable book, **The Concert Charts** demonstrates just how durable a live song this is. (At the end of 1975, it was the song Dylan had played most often in concert.

I made a fascinating compilation tape of versions that showed that each of last issue's interpretations could be brought to the fore, depending on how Dylan performs it. I'm still not sure what the Isle Of Wight version conveys, though.

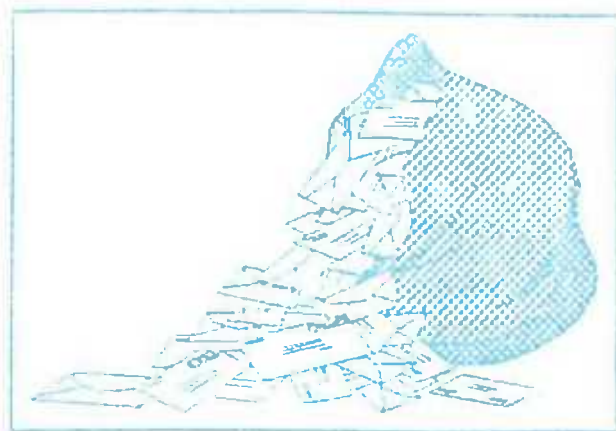
**2. Desolation Row.**

I'll press ahead with this in the next issue. I'll do a piece on the lyric differences between the album version, the outtake and the lyrics in **Writings And Drawings**.

Please write in with your views on the song, the views expressed herein or any live versions you've particularly liked\disliked etc.

If you think that **FOCUS ON** should be dropped or changed please write in or grab me at Hammersmith. Steve Hussey suggested that the section should focus on obscure (in a critical sense) songs; and that I ask you to write in on a specified song for the forthcoming issue.



SWEETGIFTOF THEGAB

### Steve Hussey:

*First, congratulations on the first issue of Homer, the slut, a job on the whole well done. Thanks for the mention in Bits & Bobs. I found this section of the mag lively and informative and more like RTS should be.*

*Putting the two Saved articles together was a good idea and worked well. When the album was released I was only 13 and not into Dylan, so when I finally came to Saved in 1983 the furore surrounding this part of the man's career had largely subsided. I think, therefore, my judgement was purely on what the thing sounded like; and, of course, I fell in love with it. I share none of Dylan's religious beliefs but that only makes the album more intriguing. **A Satisfied Mind, Saved, Pressing On and Saving Grace** have remained great favourites while the live version of **What Can I Do for You** at the Fox Warfield 16/11/79 is just amazing.*

*I enjoyed the piece about Lou Reed's album, which I think is a great record. It is important that people do listen to more than just Dylan and also not just artists who are of the same generation as Dylan, so perhaps we could have some mention of new and exciting bands such as The Pixies, The Stone Roses, The Inspiral Carpets, etc.*

*The only part of the issue I didn't enjoy was the section on **It Ain't Me Babe** mostly. I think, because the song has never done that much for me. So perhaps with another song it might work.*

*As for UTRS, well, the best I can say is that it's light-weight, some of the tracks contain piss-poor lyrics, but some are O.K. I put it somewhere below **Empire Burlesque** and above **Knocked Out Loaded**. I think Dylan's album output is never going to be of a consistent quality, it's the live performances that we should all look forward to.*

Having spoken to Steve since he sent this letter, I can tell you that he now thinks more highly of UTRS - like so many others he has overcome an initial distaste.

If I'm going to keep the **Some Other Kinds Of Songs** section going, I can only agree that contemporary acts should be featured. Although I have the Pixies and Stone Roses LPs, I don't have the time, given Dylan's non stop activity, to get into them; so Steve has more or less talked himself into an article on the Pixies for us. (Remember who got you your tickets, Steve !!!)

### Ian Roberts:

*Thanks a lot for Issue One. I quite liked the format, enjoyed, (and read) the content, thoroughly approved of the **Some Other Kind Of Songs** feature and was suitably amused but mystified by the title of it all. I've passed it on to another three subscribers that I know, so hopefully you'll be able to expand your circulation in this part of the woods. All the best for the future*

*P.S. new album's good ennit ?*

**Yes !**

**IRS ON LIRS:**

*Straight from the news stands of September 1990. More revelatory than St. John the Divine; more visionary than Nostradamus; more ecological than David Icke! Dylan, in snake-skin shoes, warming his hands on the scorched earth where something had wiggled past and had vomited fire. Children being baked in a pie, being eaten and reborn into a world where 10,000 men are on the move; where the wolf is looking down and a Dana stands in the town square with his hand out stretched. Look around you - don't it make you feel embarrassed? If you write this album off then you automatically forfeit your place in the queue for the lifeboats!*

**Deborah Simms**

*Thank you for Homer, the slut.....I must admit when you asked for my name and address & explained what you were doing I was a bit sceptical-but congratulations you've done a good job!*

*Do you know of any Dylan groups/clubs in London? If not, do you know of anyone who might be interested in setting one up or joining one? I would be interested to meet "like minded" people or at least people who won't walk away when I start talking about Dylan.*

*Anyway....I look forward to your musings on Under The Red Sky = nursery rhymes for the soul?*

Well, all my London readers (yes, both of you!) what say you to a London club? See ADS page at the back.

**Tim Dunn**

*Thanks very much for #1 of Homer, the slut. A very pleasant surprise and not at all what I expected to be in the envelope...enjoyed #1, hope #2 is a success.!*

**Mark Carter:**

*Many thanks for the free copy of your mag. Nice to see someone else having a go. Your first issue showed quite a bit of promise, here's hoping you get the support you'll undoubtedly need to keep it going...Mark then goes on to write about Oh Mercy in reply to my picking up on him calling it 'Dylan's best' (a letter/article that will appear in issue three).....Red Sky doesn't come close, but it's a bloody good album for totally different reasons, reasons that I'm still coming to terms with. At least Under The Red Sky and Born In Time prove that he can still pen a beautiful melody when he wants.*

*As for what Desolation Row is about. Well, it's about 11 minutes isn't it?*

**WHITHER HOMER ?****Dave Dingle**

*I'd be interested to know where you see Homer going. I note that it is at this stage free, but that was how ISIS started...There has been talk for some time recently about a magazine to cover the middle ground between the very academic approach of The Telegraph and the very newsy ISIS....*

**Mel Gamble**

*Thanks for sending 1st issue of Homer, the slut. Didn't know what to expect, but it wasn't that.*

*There's been plenty of discussion as to whether the existing Dylan publications fill all needs, maybe you can find a niche. I hope so....*

The concerns raised in these two letters have been raised by others verbally. Dave more or less points out the niche I was aiming for - somewhere inbetween *The Telegraph* and *Isis*. I want *Homer* to be a friendly magazine but with serious 'academic' articles. The niche has, however, become a little blurred. I thought *Isis* 34 was the best issue so far and, at the same time, indicated a slight change of direction. There were more in depth articles than normal, also they are proposing a reader's letters page; which, as I pointed out in issue one, I am very keen on for *Homer*. It may seem also that my *Bits & Bobs* section duplicates some of *Isis*. This is not the intention and is only happening just now as an unavoidable consequence of Dylan's non stop activity. *The Telegraph*, of course, continues to publish lengthy analytic articles; however, since they also are heavily into interviews, I feel there is no great danger of overlap there. All in all, I think that there is plenty of room for *Homer*. I realise I haven't mentioned *Look Back* or the privately circulated publications here, but as far as I am concerned 'the more the merrier'. As for charging, this may become a necessity. It would certainly give me greater control over production times! For example, I'm toying with the idea of a speedy third issue as a European Tour Special but I don't know if that is feasible. Any thoughts on all this would be much appreciated.

### David Palmer:

*Many thanks for your letter and copy of Homer, the slut..I must say I greatly enjoyed the magazine. a very good first issue, much more informal than Isis or The Telegraph can be. I hope you manage to produce a few more issues. You asked about Under The Red Sky - well, I'm still sitting on the fence. I don't find it a masterpiece, but it's certainly not a minor work. However, I find the vocal disappointing at times! I'm afraid I still tend to be an Oh Mercy fan...I hope all is well and maybe I will see you at Hammersmith in February.*

### Steve King:

*Thank you for the copy of Homer, the slut #1. It was interesting, and good for a first issue...I'm not sure what you mean by a 'London club'. If you mean something of a similar nature to the meetings that take place in Newcastle and Birmingham; with people getting together to discuss Dylan, maybe swap a few tapes etc. then I would be interested. But, as you know, London is a big, sprawling mass.*

*It was nice to meet you too. I'm sure we'll meet again at the concerts.*

I suspect that this is exactly what Debbie was after. (See *Ads*). I agree that the sheer size of London poses a problem but, hopefully, not an insurmountable one. Perhaps we can all talk about it at Hammersmith?

### Graham Wilkinson:

*I have just seen a copy of issue one of Homer, the slut and would be most grateful if you could send me a copy of my own. It would be interesting to discover how you arrived at the title. I certainly do recognise the many hours of work that you must have put into producing the magazine....congratulations on Issue One, which I will look forward to reading properly*

### Alan MacDonald:

*I have recently received the first issue of Homer, the slut and wish to thank you for sending it. (You can also thank whoever gave you my address). I really enjoyed it and would be delighted to receive the next issue...I appreciate a lot of work must go into compiling information for such ventures and I have enclosed a couple of things which may be of interest to you for the Bits & Bobs section.....Anyway keep up the good work and best wishes for a successful and long running fanzine.*

Thanks for two very interesting 'Bits & Bobs', Alan. They shall be appearing in issue three.

### Alex Hill:

*Questions on issue 1, why Homer, the slut? Where is Michael Moorcock in the list of authors? Can we have in the next issue more humour? Know any good cartoonists?*

*A few general comments, Great Stuff, I am sure Dylanologists, or even the apologists, will love it. The sinning and singing on Saved may be wonderful, but that is about all. It didn't have the sharply sideways look at life one expects from Dylan. Probably we expect too much. But where was the*

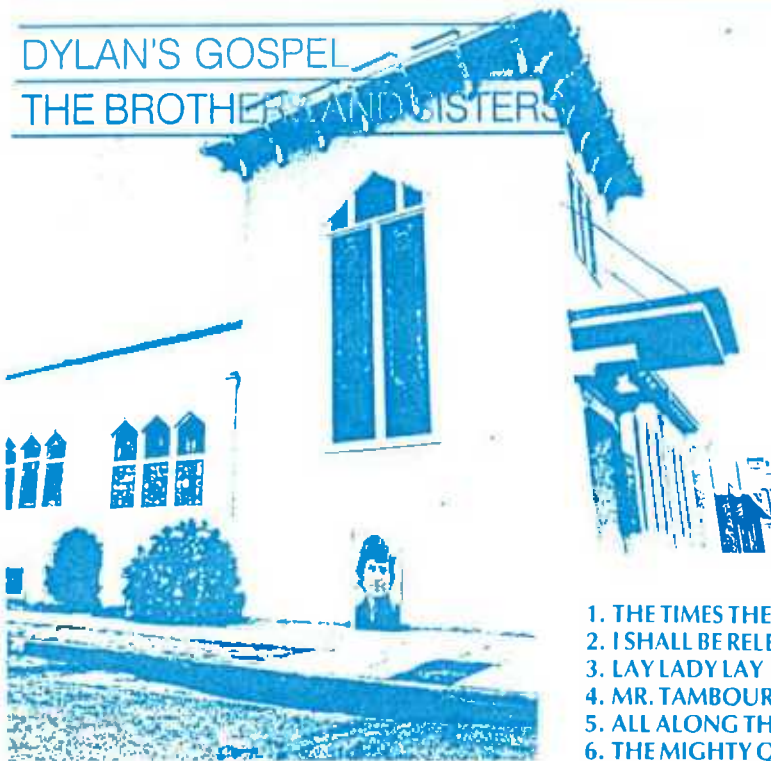
*biting sarcasm? Where was the duality? The Schrodinger's Cat view of the world: "...in your father's house, there are many mansions\Each one with a fireproof floor" (Purely personal opinion, I thought you did a great job in supporting your hypothesis that it was better than it first appeared.) And so it goes.*

Your ending prompts an answer to your first question - why no Vonnegut either? Or, for that matter. Other great Russian writers, to say nothing of Germans, French etc. or indeed Martin Miller or Dave Wingrove. Space restriction. I didn't know any good cartoonists prior to sending out issue one. Thankfully Mark Carter was on my mailing list and he has graciously contributed some cartoons. As to humour, the black variety can be found in most of the reviews of **Under The Red Sky** in **Bits & Bobs**.

My promise in issue one to 'print all and every' letter proved a trifle rash. Some people have written to me and asked for the letters not to be published. In addition I have assumed that some others were not intended for publication for one reason or another. From now on I will publish unless requested not to.

Thanks also to the following for writing:

Dave Percival; Chris Cooper, John Lindley, Graham Ashton, David Palmer, Richard Lewis and anyone I may have forgotten.



1. THE TIMES THEY ARE A CHANGING .....2:43
2. I SHALL BE RELEASED .....4:18
3. LAY LADY LAY .....3:38
4. MR. TAMBOURINE MAN .....4:03
5. ALL ALONG THE WATCHTOWER .....3:30
6. THE MIGHTY QUINN .....3:30
7. CHIMES OF FREEDOM .....4:30
8. I'LL BE YOUR BABY TONIGHT .....2:21
9. MY BACK PAGES .....5:11
10. JUST LIKE A WOMAN .....3:01

All songs written by Bob Dylan. Produced and directed by Lou Adler - Arranged and conducted by Gene Page - Vocal assistance by Billy Page - Recorded at Sound Recorders with Armin Steiner - Design and photography by Tom Wilkes and Barry Feinstein.

Bass: Jerry O. Scheft - Drums: Gene Pello - Piano: Gene Page - Organ: Evelyn Freeman - Percussion: Joe H. Vaerga.

THE BROTHERS: Joseph Green - Andrew Herd - Jesse Kirkland - Chester Pipkin - Billy Storm - Ed Wallace - Fred Willis - Don Wyatt.

THE SISTERS: Shirley Allen - Sherrell Atwood - Ginger Blake - Hazel Carmichael - Merry Clayton - Marjorie Cranford - Oma Drake - Georgetta Finchess - Brenda Fitz - Patrice Hollaway - Gwen Johnson - Ruby S. Johnson - Gloria Jones - Clydie King - Sherlie Matthews - Barbara Perrault - Julia A. Tillman - Lolietha White - Carolyn Willis - Edna Wright.

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MODES OF NONSENSE VERSE  
In The Songs Of Bob Dylan

This article came about when, looking for a copy of the poem *Nottamun Town*, I picked up *The Chatto Book Of Nonsense*<sup>1</sup>. The lines I was trying to remember were the following:

*Met the King and Queen and a company of men  
A-walkin' behind and a-riding before.  
A stark naked drummer came walking along  
With his hands in his bosom a-beating his drum.*

*Sat down on a hot and cold frozen stone,  
Ten thousand stood round me yet I was alone.<sup>1</sup>  
Took my heart in my hand to keep my head warm  
Ten thousand got drowned that never were born.*

This seems to me to be the world of *Under The Red Sky*, and not simply because of the felicitous coincidence of the number 10,000. The mystery, the depth of feeling/meaning in folk nonsense poetry, the paradoxical sequentiality of the non-sequiturs, the oral/biblical/folk nursery rhyme world; these were what I was after. The number set me off on a trail of Dylan associations. The use of such numbers, (nice sound, nice round number, an impressive number) is common enough. Hearing *10,000 Men* on the Dylan album reminded of these lines and reminded me also that I'd first read *Nottamun Town* because I read that Dylan took the tune for *Masters Of War* from *Nottamun Town*. (I've never heard it sung, so I'll have to leave that to one of you lot to confirm for me.) I went to the library near work and the first volume of nonsense poetry I chose was *The Chatto Book Of Nonsense*, edited by Hugh Haunton. Mr. Haunton ends the introduction to his selections with the following:

*But of all modern American poets, it is perhaps Bob Dylan who makes the most memorable use of nonsense in his vernacular-oracular songs, especially such junkyard do-it-yourself mythological poems as *Ballad Of A Thin Man* and *Desolation Row*.<sup>2</sup>*

Serendipity indeed !

On the other hand the coincidences and connections are not so far fetched. Dylan's affiliations with the folk/oral traditions are well known and documented. It is not surprising that he should produce lyrics which set me off thinking of *Nottamun Town*. It is also not surprising that Dylan should appear in an anthology of nonsense poetry, I only hope Mr Haunton has heard the new L.P. and is doing a new edition soon. In fact at this point I think we can begin to see that the "coincidence" is more of a chain of influences. I believe Dylan has utilised "nonsense verse" at various points throughout his career, and I propose to highlight these in this article. The songs Mr. Haunton refers to above, are of a different strand to those of *Under The Red Sky*, a different mode of nonsense verse. The field of nonsense verse is far larger than one might at first suppose, consider this definition from the introduction :

*Nonsense poetry is less a genre than a possibility, a dimension, a boundary which poetry touches more frequently than we usually imagine. It may take the form of nursery-rhyme, utopian protest, riddle, parody, fable, automatic writing, madsong, limerick futurist experiment, learned joke, satire or jeu d'esprit, but at its heart lies a playful formal inventiveness and delight in transgression, a protest against the arbitrariness of order and an affirmation of the pleasure principle applied to language.<sup>3</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> Like the "lonely crowd" of *I Shall Be Released*.

With such a wide ranging 'net' Mr Haunton can easily justify the inclusion of **Apple Suckling Tree**, **Ballad Of A Thin Man** and **Desolation Row**. However, for my purposes I'd like to examine the different modes of nonsense that Dylan utilises. For example, I think it fairly obvious that the last two mentioned above inhabit a different milieu to the first. There is a very modern (i.e. post World War One) fascination with the nonsensical, something at which Dylan is a master in exploiting. I am going to look at Dylan's use of the nonsensical verse in two ways, firstly I'd like to look at his use of it in a 20th Century manner and then, in particular relation to **Under The Red Sky**, in a more traditional way.

### Part One : Beyond Words To Reality

Dylan's liking of the works of Rimbaud is well known and to quote again from Mr. Haunton's introduction:

*....Such receptivity to the nonsensical has been a hallmark of much modern culture, with our premium on making it new, and our attraction towards making it stranger and stranger. Rimbaud claimed to have a key to the 'parade sauvage', and the late nineteenth-century Symbolisme of Mallarmé and Rimbaud created a new mystique around French poetic language in its search for the unknown by 'le dérèglement de tous les sens'- .....<sup>4</sup>*

Add to this the great art movements of surrealism, impressionism *et al*, following on from the philosophical and psychological works of Freud and Jung and you have a very 20th Century feel to certain artistic uses of the nonsensical. This certainly had a direct effect on Dylan's work in the sixties as did, whether directly or indirectly, Sartre's and Camus' theories of existentialism and of the absurd which have generated a peculiarly post World War Two outlook on life and which is at the hub of the nonsense verses for which Mr. Haunton has included **Ballad Of A Thin Man** and **Desolation Row**.

### **SYMBOLISM: Tore down à la Rimbaud**

*Language as exact communication seems possible only against the background of a common world, to whose reliable features the uses of words can be related by firm conventions. in the realms of morals and theology, and even political philosophy, a greater sophistication about the function of words seemed to lead to a weakening of that sense of a common world. 'Good' was no longer thought to name an objective quality, nor 'democracy' an identifiable form of government.....<sup>5</sup>*

**WOMAN REPORTER:** "Would you say that you cared about people particularly?"

**BOB DYLAN:** "Well, yeah, but..but,you know, I mean, we all have our own definitions of all those words; you know,'care' and 'people' and..."

**WOMAN REPORTER:** "Well, we surely...I mean we all know what people are.

**BOB DYLAN:** "Well...eh, do we?"<sup>6</sup>

The perceived position of modern poetry being wilfully obscurantist was engendered by the symbolists' attempts to portray the world as they saw it. A world that was full of rich impressions but had no order. How does one convey this through the medium of language? One has to use an ordered referential system to communicate the *non-ordered*, sensory impressions of a meaningless (without defined purpose) existence.

One way was to overburden the language of the poem until the referential nature of the language broke under the strain. The 'sense' was buried under an avalanche of images and impressions:

*Libre, fumant, monté de brumes violettes,  
Moi qui trouais le ciel rougeoyant comme un mur  
Qui porte, confiture exquise aux bonns poètes,  
Des lichens de soliel et des morves d'azur;*

*Qui courais, taché de lunules électriques  
Planche folle, escorté des hippocampes noirs,  
Quand les juillets faisaient crouler à coup de triques  
Le cieux ultramarins aux ardents entonnoirs;<sup>12</sup>*

When Dylan is overburdening the language in his verse, he has the incalculable advantage of his music; of his "melody" that can "ease you and cool you and cease the pain of your useless and pointless knowledge". Thus, when the language is overburdened:

*The kings of Tyrus with their convict list  
Are waiting in line for their geranium kiss,  
And you wouldn't know it would happen like this,  
But who among them really wants just to kiss you?  
With your childhood flames on you midnight rug,  
And your Spanish manners and your mother's drugs,  
And your cowboy mouth and your curfew plugs,  
Who among them do you think could resist you?*

We can experience emotionally Dylan's 'message' of love, of lust, of wonder, of a tinge of jealousy and rapture by immersing ourselves in the sounds of the melody and his voice, letting the connotations the words evoke flow. Even with the presence of music, the balance can be an extraordinarily delicate thing: some songs rely on the music more than others, some more on the lyrics. In the best they are inseparable.

Take **Visions Of Johanna**, still one of Dylan's most towering achievements. the melody, the voice and the lyrics all 'perfect'; all contributing equally to the whole. The lyrics here - unusually - would stand as major poetry in their own right. but how much fuller the work is when heard. And, incredibly, we have more than one version that reaches these elevated artistic heights. The contemporaneous lyric changes that we know of are of the standard of the album track. Likewise the performances on the alternate takes and live performances of that time enrich and enlarge the work of art that is **Visions Of Johanna**. How crucial each aspect is to the whole can be heard from the version on the **On The Road** tape from Denver February 6th (pm). Although it is impossible, try for a moment and imagine that this was the only version that you'd ever heard - wouldn't you life be poorer? And where would you rank it in Dylan's output? However, awoken from that nightmare; we have glorious performances (it is the word) of **Visions**. Think now of the **Blonde On Blonde** version and compare it with **Sad Eyed Lady Of The Lowlands**. Which do you prefer ? For me, it is **Visions**; and the reason is the lyrics. I love **Sad Eyed Lady** but not as much as **Visions**; they both have staggering melodies, sublime vocal performances and, to a degree, share a similar lyrical approach. However, **Visions** has more precision of referential meaning and for me this makes it a superior experience. I like language to have a certain degree of referential meaning though I trust I'm not blind to the reasons why sometimes symbolists push it further in their struggle with the use of language, with the very nature of language itself.

<sup>2</sup> free, smoking,risen from violet fogs, I who bored through the wall of the reddening sky which bears a sweetmeat good poets find delicious: lichens of sunlight [mixed] with azure snot;  
who ran, speckled with lunula of electricity, a crazy plank with black sea horses for escort, when Julys were crushing with cudgel blows skies of ultramarine into burning funnels;

**Surrealism: A fake beard plastered on her brow**

*Surrealism was born after the 1914 war, under the godmotherly influence of Tristan Tzara's Dadaism, a destructive hate movement, anti-social, anti-literary, anarchical. It developed, under the leadership of André Breton, into a curious revolutionary enterprise. Literature had begun to encroach upon life. The Surrealists set to work to reverse the process. They professed themselves indifferent to art and morality; they were animated by a profound hatred of their society, and an abounding belief in the liberating value of an untrammelled exploration of the unconscious. Poetry was a voyage into dream, language itself simply a medium for automatic utterance, a net for trawling in the depths of the mind, and so extending the bounds of the real; an end which could equally well be reached by other means: collages, the fabrication of unnerving objects, or the impact of shocking or pointless acts.....*

The Surrealists had a very antagonistic view of language. Rimbaud had been their trailblazer: they immersed themselves in the richness of language, abandoning reason to sensory overload. In addition, Rimbaud, at a shockingly young age, stopped writing completely. Life was for living, art a sham. Hence the split in the Surrealists: those who wrote and those who made performances of their lives (usually in association with revolutionary left wing politics.) Those who did write approached the language they employed almost as an enemy; twisting the images to startling effect, attempting in words to achieve in language the shockingly incongruous images that some of the great painters were creating.

Mid-Sixties' Dylan, having spurned direct political action, displays many of the signs of a writer grappling with just the same problems of the Symbolists and Surrealists - 'how do I portray what I see and feel in this ordered language?'. Hence the Rimbaudesque effects and hence too the surrealist images:

*Just a table standing empty  
By the edge of the sea  
Farewell Angelina  
The sky is trembling  
And I must leave.*

*The machine guns are roaring  
The puppets heave rocks  
The fiends nail time bombs  
To the hands of the clock..*

---

*Take me on a trip among your magic swirlin' ship,  
My senses have been stripped, my hands can't feel to grip,  
My toes too numb to step, wait only for my boot heels  
To be wanderin'.  
I'm ready to go anywhere, I'm ready for to fade  
Into my own parade, cast your dancing spell my way,  
I promise to go under it.*

---

*Upon the beach where hound dogs bay  
At ships with tattooed sails  
Heading for the Gates of Eden.*

Admittedly I have chosen examples to fit the definition of surrealism given above, but they do come from three successive songs in Lyrics 1962-1985; showing just how deeply Dylan was utilising this style of expression at that time.



**Existentialism: It's life and life only**

There will be some of you reading this who believe I have to bring Sartre into everything! Well, unashamedly, here he comes. The connection, between Sartre and nonsense verse, that I wish to highlight here is the existential notion of the absurd, especially the moment when one realises that life has no order, no underlying structure. Sartre called this experience nausea, the moment when we see that the arbitrary framework upon which we conducted our daily lives has no solid basis. (To divert from writers thought of as existentialists, I can name Conrad's **Lucky Jim** as a prime example of an artistic expression of this moment. It is all pervasive in literature since Nietzsche said 'God is dead'.)

Once we have realised there is no point to existence but it is still all we've got, we cannot just withdraw from it - barring suicide - and we are driven by a need to find a justification in it. At this point Sartre would say that we are faced with our 'dreadful human freedom', recognising that we are totally free to choose what we think and do. Surely something akin to this is happening in *It's Alright, Ma*:

*You lose yourself, you reappear  
 You suddenly find you got nothing to fear  
 Alone you stand with nobody near  
 When a trembling distant voice unclear  
 Startles your sleeping ears to hear  
 That somebody thinks  
 They really found you  
 A question in your nerves is lit  
 Yet you know there is no answer fit to satisfy  
 Insure you not to quit  
 To keep it in your mind and not fergit  
 That it is not he or she or them or it  
 That you belong to*

Dylan, like other Romantic artists, believes that Man has a spiritual nature. (Whether or not he sees this in purely religious terms or not varies through his career.) Above this absurd, physical world - this *fallen* world - is the eternal world of the Imagination. For much of the great mid-sixties work, though, we are shown people who evade looking beyond the surface world,<sup>3</sup> people who are caught not able or willing to confront their 'dreadful freedom; not crawling out their windows or leaving their stepping stones behind.

Looking back on this time from the - overtly biblical - standpoint of *All Along The Watchtower*, Dylan sings:

*'There must be some way out of here', said the joker to the thief,  
 'There's too much confusion, I can't get no relief.  
 Businessmen they drink my wine, plowmen dig my earth  
 None of them along the line know what any of it was worth.'*

Enough theory! How does all this help to appreciate where Bob is coming from? Mr Haunton includes three songs in his collection, namely: **Apple Suckling Tree**, **Desolation Row** and **Ballad Of A Thin Man**. The first I'll look at in Part Two, the second you've got more than enough of already in this issue, so lets look at\listen to **Ballad Of A Thin Man** :

<sup>3</sup> The absurdity of daily surface reality is shown nowhere more pointedly, or delightfully, than in *Clothes Line Saga*.

BALLAD OF A THIN MAN

*You walk into the room  
With your pencil in your hand  
You see somebody naked  
And you say, 'Who is that man?'  
You try so hard  
But you don't understand  
Just what you'll say  
When you get home*

*You've been with the professors  
And they've all liked your looks  
With great lawyers you have  
Discussed lepers and crooks  
You've been through all of  
F. Scott Fitzgerald's books  
You're very well read  
It's well known*

*Because something is happening here  
But you don't know what it is  
Do you, Mister Jones?*

*Because something is happening here  
But you don't know what it is  
Do you, Mister Jones?*

*You raise up your hand  
And you ask, 'Is this where it is?'  
And somebody points to you and says  
'It's his'  
And you say, 'What's mine?'  
And somebody else says, 'Where what is?'  
And you say, 'Oh my God  
Am I here all alone?'*

*Well, the sword swallower, he comes up to you  
And then he kneels  
He crosses himself  
And then he clicks his high heels  
And without further notice  
He asks you how it feels  
And he says, 'Here is your throat back  
Thanks for the loan'*

*Because something is happening here  
But you don't know what it is  
Do you, Mister Jones?*

*Because something is happening here  
But you don't know what it is  
Do you, Mister Jones?*

*You hand in your ticket  
And you go watch the geek  
Who immediately walks up to you  
When he hears you speak  
And says, 'How does it feel  
To be such a freak?'  
And you say, 'Impossible'  
As he hands you a bone*

*Now you see this one-eyed midget  
Shouting the word 'NOW'  
And you say, 'For what reason?'  
And he says, 'How?'  
And you say, 'What does this mean?'  
And he screams back, 'You're a cow  
Give me some milk  
or else go home'*

*Because something is happening here  
But you don't know what it is  
Do you, Mister Jones?*

*Because something is happening here  
But you don't know what it is  
Do you, Mister Jones?*

*You have many contacts  
Among the lumberjacks  
To get you facts  
When someone attacks your imagination  
But nobody has any respect  
Anyway they already expect you  
To just give a check  
To tax-deductible charity organizations*

*Well, you walk into the room  
Like a camel and then you frown  
You put your eyes in your pocket  
And your nose on the ground  
There ought to be a law  
Against you comin' around  
You should be made  
To wear earphones*

*Because something is happening here  
But you don't know what it is  
Do you, Mister Jones?*

**Ballad Of A Thin Man** is a song that I grew so accustomed to over the years that it lost its force. It seemed to have grown stale for Dylan too, until relatively recently when he breathed fresh life into the old stalwart. Mr Haunton's inclusion of it in his anthology of nonsense verse is unsurprising given his introductory definition.

The song is, on its simplest level, a vicious put down - as Dylan has demonstrated on stage by dedicating it to a reporter who has annoyed him - but it has greater depths and resonances. Dylan, using plain everyday language, adroitly employs more than one of the modes of nonsense verse I have addressed. For convenience I have reprinted the words to the entire song on the facing page. (From **Lyrics 1962-1985**)

Stanza one immediately sets the scene: Mister Jones is in a bewildering situation. He is equipped with a pencil to attempt to collect facts ("useless and pointless knowledge"). A journalist-type, he is making no attempt to experience the situation, he just wants to know what to report back home. There are homosexual overtones in the pencil and the naked man; perhaps implying that it is 'abnormal' sexual practices that Mister Jones can't understand however 'hard he tries'.

The chorus at this juncture merely sums up the position already outlined; we are, perhaps, curious as to the specificity of the "something" that is happening, but no more. By the end of the song we have been made aware that the "something" involves self-realisation and if we reflect back on the first verse we perceive the phrase "you try so hard" as being bitterly ironic: Mister Jones doesn't, in fact, try at all. He resolutely remains a collector of empirical evidence, refusing to even aspire to experience what is going on.

Stanza Two shows us the breakdown in language discussed above in action. The questions posed here are reduced from meaning into a jumble of non-sequiturs. This is because Mister Jones's question, "Is this where it is?" is not asked so that he can empathise with - or properly understand - what is happening, but because he wants to write it down. ("this is where it is at and I was there"). This looks forward to the masterful debunking of the three kings on the sleeve of **John Wesley Harding**. Throughout the song Mister Jones asks questions that are profound, but because of the way he approaches life they become ironically trivial or meaningless. There are other reverberations to be found in the language of this stanza. Mister Jones raising his hand evokes school, or perhaps, particularly for Dylan at this time, a reporter in a press conference. Mister Jones's "Oh my God, am I here all alone?" could be just a trite phrase, almost devoid of meaning; on the other hand it could suggest that he is on the brink of an existential crisis, or Mister Jones's God - by the context and by what unfolds in the song - is a false one.

Stanza three brings in carnival images. These belong to yet another mode of nonsense verse and are something that Dylan has returned to often in his work. Here they are used to great effect. Mister Jones is now quite explicitly faced with a crisis of identity - who is the geek and who is the freak? Mister Jones's values are being inverted, for him language and reality are breaking down. The geek comes across as being perfectly at ease.

Stanzas four and five are not separated by a chorus. This is because Dylan is utilising two main modes of nonsense verse: firstly, there is the depiction of the world as Mister Jones is seeing it - a world that makes no sense, a world where language and reality have broken down irretrievably. Secondly, there are specific, satiric attacks on Mister Jones and his approach to life. These attacks are concentrated in stanzas four and five.

Stanza four assails his total lack of imagination and empathy. Again we find Mister Jones attempting to collect facts, making the use of "imagination" staggeringly ironic. How scornful, too, is that "contacts among the lumberjacks". ("Some of my best friends are working class, you know.") His 'charity' is revealed as a tax-evasion ploy, he just does what is expected of him and, as we find out in the song, will forever be unable to do anything else.

Stanza five really rams it home. The hint of homosexuality is lightly touched on by the phrase "liked your looks", but its main point is to imply there was nothing deeper for the professors to admire. There is a tremendous concentration of language in this verse, note the scornful denigration of "been with" here; and, later "You've been through all of F. Scott Fitzgerald's books". He hasn't read, far less understood or empathised with Fitzgerald's work, he has just "been through" them so that everyone will say he is well read. I'm absolutely sure Mr Jones has a 'Complete Works Of Shakespeare' on his shelf.<sup>3</sup> As with literature, whatever 'knowledge' of sickness & crime Mr Jones claims is dismissed scornfully. One can also contrast Mr Jones's connection with lepers with that of Jesus and reflect ruefully on his "Oh my God..." in stanza two.

The chorus now comes as dreadful indictment of Mr Jones. We perceive that it is his fault that he doesn't understand what is happening. The seemingly 'meaningless' reality we have seen through his eyes is maybe not so meaningless after all, how could we expect Mr Jones to see what is "really real" ?

Stanza six brings the latent homosexual imagery to a head. Mr Jones is really out of his depth here, we can almost feel his fear and bewilderment. We are back in the carnival, a place of inverted values for Mr Jones but by now we know not to trust him, and perhaps feel the sword swallower has the correct perception on reality. He even asks us "how it feels" just as Dylan does in *Like A Rolling Stone* -which opens the album *Ballad Of A Thin Man* is from. Mr Jones is related to "Miss Lonely", "Baby Blue" and the woman in *Can You Please Crawl Out Of Your Window?*, but unlike his female relatives he appears to have no chance of "striking another match", he is trapped behind his pencil.

Stanza seven keeps us at the carnival and takes us back to breakdown in language. Again Mr Jones is searching for surface 'meanings' and 'reasons'. The one eyed midget tries vainly to communicate and then dismisses him - in an absurd image- as the domesticated animal he has been shown to be. Suddenly we are seeing Mr Jones fully revealed as the nonsensical creature of the song.

Stanza eight - the final stanza - completes this process. With a flash of surrealist wit, and the only complicated image in the song, Dylan shows Mr Jones from the vantage point of reality as an absurd bloodhound character. Blind to experience, with his "eyes in his pocket", he continues his search for facts, convinced that his view of the world is normal. The singer, speaking from a more enlightened perception of reality, wants him stopped - wants the flow of "useless and pointless knowledge" cut off.

The final chorus tells us not only that Mr Jones doesn't understand what is going on but that he never will. There is no resolution to this song; Mr Jones sees the world outside of gathered facts as nonsense and from the vantage point of this world Mr Jones and his search for facts is totally absurd. Never the twain shall communicate, nonsense abounds.



<sup>3</sup> have read this interpreted as an attack on Fitzgerald by Dylan. I cannot see the slightest justification for this in the song and believe it must have been prompted by contemporaneous remarks re the relative virtues of 'pop' songs and established art forms. In any case, Dylan's work seems at times to pay respect to Fitzgerald as in *Up To Me*.

**Part Two : Beyond Reality To Fable**  
**Nonsense Verse and Under The Red Sky**

There are many other modes of nonsense verse, perhaps the most obvious being purely comic. Dylan showed himself to be a master of this early in his career, especially in his early talkin' blues. Examples abound, and I'm sure we all have our favourites - here's one of mine:

*Well, I woke up this morning  
 There's frogs inside my socks  
 Your mama, she's a hidin'  
 Inside the icebox  
 Your daddy walks in wearin'  
 A Napoleon Bonaparte mask  
 Then you ask why I don't live here  
 Honey, do you have to ask?*

*Well, I go to pet your monkey  
 I get a face full of claws  
 I ask who's in the fireplace  
 And you tell me Santa Claus  
 The milkman comes in  
 He's wearing a derby hat  
 Then you ask me why I don't live here  
 Honey, how come you have to ask me that?*

The main mode of nonsense verse used in **Under The Red Sky** is that of children's nursery rhymes. Dylan marries this to a sense of folk; particularly that sense of folk he has spoken of harbouring mystery and myth. Dylan has created a similar effect in earlier songs. Consider Mr Haunton's other selection, **Apple Suckling Tree**, in whichever version you wish. This is clearly nonsense verse of a very different mode to those examined above. (Indeed the songs known collectively as **The Basement Tapes** - from where **Apple Suckling Tree** originates - contain perhaps the widest and richest concentration of all Dylan's nonsense modes.)

About the only thing for sure in this song is that the lovers will be happily alone under the tree. You can certainly pick up on allusions to various old folk and children's songs, and perhaps, just perhaps, the tree refers to the Garden Of Eden. None of this will be picked up on with the slightest degree of certainty, but it remains an absolutely delightful song. If the lack of specificity bothers you, you're probably one of those bothered by **Under The Red Sky**. This, I believe, is the terrain of **Under The Red Sky**: children's nonsense verse and nursery rhymes with their disjointed cause and effects, weird lists and recurrence of numbers, underpinned by tales from the oral tradition including the Bible. The last verse of **Apple Suckling Tree** from Lyrics could surely fit straight into **Under The Red Sky**:

*Now, who's on the table, who's to tell me?  
 Oh Yeah!  
 Who's on the table, who's to tell me?  
 Oh Yeah!  
 Who should I tell, oh, who should I tell?  
 The forty-nine of you like bats out of hell  
 Oh underneath that old apple suckling tree*

The harsh criticisms of **Under The Red Sky** have, I believe, been caused by a variety of factors. Firstly, as Paul Williams has rightly observed:

*This is the recurring problem for Dylan's audience regarding his new work (new albums, new tours): we have trouble hearing it. Dylan is so inventive and so primitive, he operates so far outside anyone else's concept of singing, writing and performing, that learning the language of one set of Dylan performances does not necessarily aid us in learning or acclimatizing to the language of another set. Indeed, it can be the primary obstacle in our listening: our attention is not innocent but expectant, and it's waiting (as it turns out) in all the wrong places.*

In this case many people seemed to be waiting for 'Oh Mercy Part 2'. Hopefully this article can play a small part in helping us 'hear the language' of **Under The Red Sky**.

Secondly, the lack of specificity is infuriating to those who approach a song as though it was a crossword puzzle. There is no remedy for this, but then there wasn't where Sad Eyed Lady Of The Lowlands was concerned either. Again, Mr Williams has got it right, there are 'different sets of Dylan performances'; sometimes you can summarise what a song is about, sometimes  $X = Y$ , but not this time.

Thirdly some people simply dislike the songs: the production or the voice or whatever. Some have dismissed the albums after only a few listens, which is a shame especially if they are contemptuous in their dismissal. Others have persevered but still don't like it; which, of course, is fine, they've 'learnt the language' but don't want to hear it again.

I've grouped together some of the themes and influences I see contributing to the 'language set' of this particular Dylan 'performance'. Some are perennial Dylan favourites, some are new, some are borrowed and nearly all are blue. I'd like to comment on these and then go on to look at a couple of the songs on the album.

**Nursery Rhymes:** This is the element that has caused the most dissent and division. So what's it all about? Why did I, and those good people from ISIS go scurrying along to our libraries in search of nursery rhymes? Were we, like the three wise kings, in need of a key? No, we weren't, because we all know it doesn't work like that if you *care* for the work of art in the first place. The album had invaded my heart and usurped my soul on its own. It had interested me in its connections with nursery rhymes, it made me curious about Dylan's reasons for manipulating this mode of verse. It's like the Springsteen references in Tweeter or the Bogart quotes throughout Empire Burlesque, Dylan uses references to other spheres as a backdrop to his songs, giving a reflection that can be deepening, wry, comic or enlightening. In the case of **Under The Red Sky** it goes even deeper, the very structure of some of the songs refers back to is based upon, childrens' nonsense verse.

This doesn't mean - as has been claimed - that Dylan is being 'lazy', far from it. As Mr Haunton has written:

*One of the first patterns that emerges when we look at nonsense poems of this sort is that patterns emerge. To make nonsense, you have to do more than gabble or scrabble. If anything, nonsense is more shapely, more brazenly formalised and patterned than other kinds of language - not the reverse, as is often assumed. Indeed it might be argued that, far from being a very special case of poetry, nonsense represents what makes poetry itself a special case. I suspect there is a pleasure in nonsense at the core of all poetry, a pleasure ultimately rooted in the child's free play with sounds, words, rhythms and patterns of repetition - experiments with meaning which are made in defiance of the obligation to make sense.<sup>4</sup>*

Before we look at some actual 'lifts' from nursery rhymes, it may be worth reflecting on what using this mode of nonsense verse as a bedrock for his album opens up for Dylan. What makes nursery rhymes tick?

*...children's rhymes may serve as chapters of consequences...and miniature ABC's of linguistic order. They deal regularly with the basic constituents of language and number as well as the regular ins and outs and ups and downs of childhood.....*

*Nonsensical and nursery rhymes are particularly drawn to serial order of one kind or another; number as in Green grow the rushes-o; names such as London churches in Oranges and Lemons; days of the week, as in Solomon Grundy;.....*

*...Inconsequence is of huge consequence in the world of children's rhymes, with their double fascination with sequentiality and non sequiturs.<sup>5</sup>*

The last paragraph there could apply to most of the songs on **Under The Red Sky**; the first two to certain songs, in particular 2X2. Why though would Dylan want to communicate to us like this? I think the answer to that may lie in the very gravity of what he is conveying, the world of **Under The Red Sky** is a grim one. The 'bleak wasteland' that Gavin Martin wrote of in regard to **Oh Mercy** is more pertinent to this album. We are talking here of a blasted world and, not surprisingly, Armageddon seems just around the corner. Nonsense verse allows Dylan to deal with these concerns, hardly novel in his work, in a new, challenging and entertaining way:

*As the haunting work of Eastern European writers like the Czech Miroslav Holub and the Romanian Martin Sorescu remind us, nonsense may be a liberating way of dealing with the intolerable, or at least handling the impermissible.*

.....

*To call something nonsensical is normally a way of putting it down. Yet despite this, or maybe because of it, reading a piece of inspired nonsense is curiously rather tonic. It sets us up. It makes desolation row more bearable.<sup>6</sup>*

ISIS 34 has uncovered that "American jump", as mentioned in **Cat's In the Well**, is a children's game.<sup>4</sup> It also points out the relevance of the King Lear passage quoted below as referring to a children's game.

Earlier Dylan: There are all manner of musical echoes of earlier Dylan in this album. Whether this is by design or unintentional - perhaps all those Never Ending tour performances having an affect - I don't know, but there are a few verbal echoes too. The lines:

*Scale that wall and smoke that vine  
Feed that horse and saddle up the drum*

have got up and left **The Basement Tapes'** milieu of **Please, Mrs Henry**; as has the delicious pun of "God knows it's outta sight". The repeated questions, beginning "How Many...", in the bridges of 2X2 brings **Blowin' In The Wind** to mind. The description of the wolf in **Cat's In The Well**: "He got his big bushy tail dragging all over the ground.", is the language of **Man Gave Names To All The Animals**. (As you'd expect it to be).

Dylan's voice here often reminds me of his early folk days when he affected an old, cracked, world-wise voice. (Only now he doesn't have to affect it!) This voice has been present on the tour and, I believe, was first heard -sometimes splendidly!!! - on **Down In The Groove**.

**King Lear**: Much of **Under The Red Sky** seems to me to share a common bond with Shakespeare's great play. This is not the first time I've felt this with Dylan's work: both **Tears Of Rage** and **Shelter From The Storm**, for example, exhibited linguistic and imagistic parallels. (So much so with the latter that I first heard "futile horn" as "feudal horn".) It could be a direct influence or it could just betray a similar oral heritage and the language of the King James's Bible. Mr Haunton gives pride of place in his collection to the scene with the fool on the blasted heath, and points out in his introduction that:

<sup>4</sup> I found this slightly disappointing, as I had been envisaging a soul mate to "the Georgia Crawl" !

...the scene from *Lear* has as vivid a place in the history of nonsense as in that of madness. The dialogue is shot through with queer, garbled oracular language, and shifts back and forth between reason and madness, pathos and absurdity. It's not only the most vivid representation of the fool in literature, but in its vision of violent social upheaval and broken authority suggests that through the language of madness and adopted madness the characters make touch with truths and feelings outside the pale of their normal language. What they say in their terrible crisis makes sense all right, but it takes a route that zigzags giddily across the border with nonsense...

Much of this could as easily refer to **Under The Red Sky**. There is also - again perhaps a coincidence, or an indirect influence due to Dylan's recorded admiration of Shakespeare's language - the following exchange in Act IV Scene iv:

*Lear....Handy, Dandy Prickly, prandy...*

*Lear: "What, art mad? A man may see how this world goes without eyes. Look with thine ears: see how yond justice rails upon yond simple thief.<sup>5</sup> Hark, in thine ear: change places, and, handy-dandy, which is the justice, which is the thief?"*

**Comic Effect:** There are some lovely 'smiles' in the lines and Dylan's enunciation on this album. The "3 by 3, don't tread on me" line, in the fade out of 2X2, must've brought a smile to everyone's face.

**Wiggle Wiggle** is a riot. The humour here is different to that of, say, **Bob Dylan's 115th Dream:**

*Ran out to the street  
When a bowling ball came down the road  
And knocked me off my feet  
A payphone was ringing  
It just about blew my mind  
When I picked it up and said hello  
This foot came through the line*

However, I don't understand why, in some quarters, the above should be 'acceptable' while **Wiggle Wiggle** is so scorned.

**Violence:** There is a great deal of violence in this album, - ranging from people coming to blows to the destruction of the world, - beginning in the very first track. Beneath the humour are some pretty savage images: "Wiggle 'til it bites, wiggle 'til it cuts" and "Wiggle 'til you vomit fire". Violence permeates the album. We have children being baked in a pie, the threat of someone having his head eaten off, people being likened to bait in a fish's mouth, people fighting, people rioting, armies marching. The only songs which maybe escape this are **Born In Time**, and **2X2**. I say 'maybe', because the former involves the cutting pain of love and the latter's protagonists have had a violent path to their uncertain end.

**The Roles Of Men and Women:** I'm cheating here as I don't think that this is a dominant theme of the album, only of **10,00 Men** as described below, but others have proposed it as being so. However, there are other moments when we are presented with men and women acting out stereotypical roles. This may be due to the very nature of the worlds Dylan has created for them to inhabit, or Perhaps Dylan is specifically drawing our attention to it. Women appear in very stereotyped roles in **Unbelievable:**

*All the silver, all the gold, all the sweethearts you can hold  
That don't come with stories untold, are hanging on a tree*

*Once there was a man who had no eyes  
Every lady in the land told him lies*

<sup>5</sup> This puts me in mind of Dylan's ruminations on justice in his 'protest' days.



Men are typecast to the same extent in TV Talking Song, coming across as a bunch of loudmouthed meatheads. Interesting though this is, I believe, that, with the notable exception of **10,000 Men**, the emphasis is much more on 'Man' than 'man' and 'woman'. (Let's leave the video to **Unbelievable** out of this for the moment.)

**The Bible And The End Of All Things:** OK, lets bring the video back into this! In case anyone missed it, **The Wicked Messenger (1830)** quotes from **Proverbs, ix 22:**

*Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman who shows no discretion.*

Yes, as a description of the video that is spot on!

**Look Back** points to **Matthew 16:2-4:**

*When it is evening, you say, 'It will be fair weather; for the sky is red.' And in the morning, 'it will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign shall be given it except the sign of Jonah.*

There is a biblical feel to many of the lines - of armies moving, lands being wasted and people poisoned. **2X2** overtly refers to the story of the Ark, while **God Knows** is explicitly a statement of Dylan's faith and a pointer to where we should go to for 'another rendezvous'.

It is in images of Armageddon, however, that we hear the Biblical voice most acutely. The voice of portent and prophecy. The album is suffused with apocalyptic images, of all things drawing to an end:

*"One day the little boy and the little girl were both baked in a pie"*

*"The man in the moon went home and the river went dry"*

*"It's unbelievable the day would finally come"*

*"It's unbelievable it would go down this way"*

*"Until there were none...they headed for heaven...they step in the dark"*

*"How many tomorrows have they given away?...How many more can they afford?"*

*"God knows there's gonna be no more water but fire next time"*

*"God knows it's fragile...it could snap apart right now\Just like putting scissors to a string"*

*"The wolf is looking down...the dogs are going to war...."*

*"Goodnight, my love, may the Lord have mercy on us all".*

Even in **Born In Time**, the lover offers "what's left of me", by the time we get to the last track it seems fitting that 'pappa's hair is falling out'.

To conclude this article I'd like to take a brief look at the two songs from **Under The Red Sky** that seem to have caused most comment and dissension: **Under The Red Sky** and **10,000 Men**.

### ***Under The Red Sky***

*There was a little boy and there was a little girl  
And they lived in an alley under the red sky.  
There was a little boy and there was a little girl  
And they lived in an alley under the red sky.*

*There was an old man and he lived in the moon.  
One summer's day he came passing by.  
There was an old man and he lived in the moon  
And one day he came passing by.*

*Someday little girl everything for you is gonna be new  
Someday little girl you'll have a diamond as big as your shoe*

*Let the wind blow low, let the wind blow high  
One day the little boy and the little girl were both baked in a pie.  
Let the wind blow low, let the wind blow high  
One day the little boy and the little girl were both baked in a pie.*

*There is the key to the kingdom and there is the town  
This is the blind horse that leads you around*

*Let the bird sing, let the bird fly.  
One day the man in the moon went home and the river went dry.  
Let the bird sing, let the bird fly.  
One day the man in the moon went home and the river went dry.*

There are only twenty lines here and eight of those are repeats. Nevertheless, this song shows a concentration of allusion to well known nursery rhymes. For example, the opening verse comes straight from **Proposal**:

*There was a little boy and a little girl  
Lived in an alley;<sup>1</sup>*

The second verse evokes the man in the moon, who came down too soon. The third verse borrows a line from the following:

*Little girl, little girl, where have you been?  
Gathering roses to give to the queen.  
Little girl, little girl, what gave she you?  
She gave me a diamond as big as a shoe.<sup>2</sup>*

The children being baked in a pie evoke the Hansel and Gretel story and:

*Sing a Song of Sixpence,  
A bag full of Rye,  
Four and twenty  
Naughty boys,  
Bak'd in a Pye.<sup>2</sup>*

Indeed, my young nephew read some of his school books to me at Christmas and being eaten seemed a pretty common fate.

The very next line is could be yet another borrowing, this one from the palindromic children's verse **This is the Key of the Kingdom<sup>100</sup>**. (At this point I'd like to express my admiration for those who were watching the Bogart films and managed to pick up the Dylan lines. Even though I was reading **The Mother Goose Nursery Rhyme Treasury** with the sole intention of finding associations with **Under The Red Sky**, I missed this one! Luckily others have pointed it out. (In **Isis** and **The Telegraph**.)

I suspect that, like the Bogart quotes in **Empire Burlesque**, more and more of these will be discovered throughout the album, there may well be a whole load of specifically American ones.

We have apparently reliable information that Dylan meant the song to be a story of his home townfolk. This information is given by Don Was in **The Telegraph** - a rather foolish move if he wants to keep in Bob's good books - and, given the circumstances he describes, I see no reason to doubt that this was Dylan's intention. Dylan himself has said that the song is "intentionally broad and short, so you can draw all kinds of conclusions". This seems

no reason to doubt that this was Dylan's intention. Dylan himself has said that the song is "intentionally broad and short, so you can draw all kinds of conclusions". This seems nearer the mark. The lines:

*There is the key to the kingdom and there is the town  
This is the blind horse that leads you around*

certainly encapsulate a 'fable of missed opportunity'. Dylan eloquently conveys the mood that Don Was relates but without this 'inside knowledge', I doubt we would ever relate it to Hibbing. Dylan clearly states that we aren't meant to look for such specificity. Likewise the "key to the kingdom"; I have a gut feeling that the kingdom here is the Kingdom of heaven but I'm no more sure of this than someone who would claim the apple tree in Apple Suckling Tree to be Edenic.

There is, perhaps, an echo of *Blowin' In The Wind* as well as a touch of the Bible. the seeming non-sequiturs tell a tragic tale. The lack of particularity only increases the sense of devastation of the children being "baked in a pie" and the desolation of "the river went dry". This seems to simultaneously evoke the death of Imagination (the spiritual world), and the end of physical world.

The song has a beautiful melody and Dylan's vocal is staggeringly evocative; with shades of regret, wistfulness, care and a multitude of other emotions. All in all a fine song.

**10,000 Men**

*Ten thousand men on a hill  
Ten thousand men on a hill  
Some of 'em goin' down, some of 'em gonna get killed.*

*Ten thousand men dressed in Oxford Blue  
Ten thousand men dressed in Oxford Blue  
Drummin' in the morning, in the evening they'll be coming for you.*

*Ten thousand men on the move  
Ten thousand men on the move  
None of them doin' nothin' that your mama wouldn't disapprove.*

*Ten thousand men digging for silver and gold  
Ten thousand men digging for silver and gold  
All clean shaven, all coming in from the cold.*

*Hey! Who could your lover be?  
Hey! Who could your lover be?  
Let me eat off his head so you can really see.*

*Ten thousand women all dressed in white  
Ten thousand women all dressed in white  
Standin' at my window wishing me goodnight.*

*Ten thousand men looking so lean and frail  
Ten thousand men looking so lean and frail  
Each of 'em got seven wives, each one of 'em just out of jail.*

*Ten thousand women all sweepin' my room  
Ten thousand women all sweepin' my room  
Spilling my buttermilk, sweeping it up with a broom.*

*Ooh, baby, thank you for my tea!  
 Baby, thank you for my tea!  
 Its so sweet of you to be so nice to me.*

I love these old/timeless bluesy songs, in Dylan's hands I adore them. The ten thousand men must be part of an army, everything they are doing at the beginning points to it. There are possible references here to *The Grand Old Duke of York* and *Nottamun Town*.

There are other notable things in this song, the line: *None of them doin' nothin' that your mama wouldn't disapprove* is one of the finest on the album. In addition this would surely be in the running for 'best vocal performance'.

The fifth stanza seems to come from somewhere else, Dylan's voice verging on the maniacally gleeful and a very peculiar phrase "eat off his head". Dylan makes his image all the more violently forceful by using "eat" rather than the more usual "bite". The novelty of the phrase and the verb's denotation of devouring make it powerful indeed.

The song leads us on from that unsettling image to the first direct mention in a bridal depiction of "dressed in white". There are also ten thousand women to pair with the ten thousand men. However, we do not receive a settled feeling or picture here at all. The bridal image sits uneasily with the previous verse; I presume that the person referred to in *Hey! Who could your lover be?* is female because of the reference to 'his head'. Is this woman one of the ten thousand women? Is her lover one of the ten thousand men? Is the singer? The singular and the ten thousand interchange bewilderingly fast here.

If you are still following the thread of numbers through the song and looking for significance in them, you've then got to take into account that each of the ten thousand men has seven wives. I say 'the' ten thousand men but there is no necessity for it being the same ten thousand men each time. (I tend to feel it is the same men at different times and in various circumstances, but you know, *does it matter?*.) I'm not going hunting for any significance in the numbers. I just don't believe that we are meant to look for specific meanings and connections. We are in the land of non-sequiturs. Why are they "just out of jail"? Perhaps because they've "got seven wives"; that is presuming it is the men, and not the wives, who've just been freed or escaped. Perhaps the spell the men have had in jail is what has made them so "lean and frail", perhaps it is an old nudge-nudge reference to satisfying the sexual demands of seven wives, perhaps it is a combination of the two. All these 'perhapses'! About the only thing for certain is that the men have gone from being an army on the march to being rather decrepit.

Most people have focused on this song as dealing with male/female roles, and indeed it does. At first glance Dylan seems to be almost listing archetypal images of the active male and the subordinant female:

Men

goin ' down ,  
 coming for you  
 drummin'  
 on the move  
 digging for silver & gold  
 coming in from the cold  
 got seven wives  
 just out of jail

Women

dressed in white  
 standin'  
 spilling my buttermilk  
 wishin' me goodnight  
 sweepin' my room  
 sweeping it up with a broom  
 'serving' tea  
 being so nice to me

However, it is not at all that straightforward; the men are also "lookin so lean & frail", and are "gonna get killed".

I think it is important not to force messages or meanings on songs which can pertain to certain areas of experience without making dogmatic statements. I believe that most of the songs from **The Basement Tapes** and **Under The Red Sky** are like that and I don't think the less of them for it. Indeed what they are 'saying' - what we get from them - can be as important, relevant and artistic as what we get from songs which set out a *specific* critique.

Just as this song began with allusions to various nursery rhymes, so it ends. Making cups of tea, and sweeping up occur quite frequently, as does 'buttermilk':

*Hie to the market Jenny come trot,  
Spilt all her butter milk, every drop,<sup>10</sup>*

I know that **Under The Red Sky** has split the Dylan camp but I feel that the songs here do 'make desolation row more bearable'. In fact I'd say that the album was 'a dainty dish to set before a king'.

### Endnotes

- 1-4. **The Chatto Book Of Nonsense.** Edited by Hugh Haunton.
- 5. Sartre. Iris Murdoch, Fontana Books. Also quoted on page 4
- 6. **Don't Look Back.**
- 7. Arthur Rimbaud **Collected Poems.** Penguin Classics.

\*\*\* Sorry about the numbering cock-up (technical term) here. Page 10 ff. \*\*\*

- 4-6. **The Chatto Book Of Nonsense.** Edited by Hugh Haunton.
- 7. **The Mother Goose Treasury.** Edited by Raymond Briggs, Hamish Hamilton 1966.
- 8. **The Helen Oxenbury Nursery Rhyme Book.** Brian Alderson.
- 9-10. **The Mother Goose Treasury.** Edited by Raymond Briggs, Hamish Hamilton 1966.

All Bob Dylan quotes are taken from **Lyrics 1962-1985** or the sleeve lyrics to **Under The Red Sky**.

#### More from MOTHER GOOSE

*Red Sky at night,  
Shepherd's delight;  
Red Sky in the morning,  
Shepherd's warning*

*Baby and I  
Were baked in a pie,  
The gravy was wonderful hot  
We had nothing to pay  
To the baker that day  
And so we crept out of the pot.*

#### More from MOTHER GOOSE

*Milkman, milkman where have you been?  
In Buttermilk Channel up to my chin:  
I spilt my milk, and I spoilt my clothes.*

*As I went up the apple tree  
All the apples fell on me;  
Bake a pudding, bake a pie  
Send it up to John MacKay;  
John Mackay is not in,  
Send it up to the man in the moon.*

*Ding, dong, bell  
Pussy's in the well*

# IT TAKES A LOT TO LAUGH

..... LATE 1989, DYLAN AT HOME IN MALIBU .....



..... SHORT OF IDEAS, DYLAN HEADS FOR HIS LIBRARY.....



..... THIS IS 'UNDER THE RED SKY' BORN.....

© M. CARTER

Giving a whole new twist to the lines: "you don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows"<sup>1</sup>, Alex Hill presents the weather Under The Red Sky.

Listening to, and getting to know any, Bob Dylan album is always a complex process. It takes time and effort. Initial reactions are usually regretted. Consider the editors' first and later thoughts on **SAVED** in **HOMER**, issue one. Though personally, I prefer the first reaction to the second in that case. As an individual I have a great dislike for absolutes, they are almost invariably erroneous. For me **SAVED** lacked irony, lacked Dylan's sideways look at things, lacked his delightful imp of the perverse.<sup>2</sup> Most importantly **SAVED** was totally devoid of scepticism. The scepticism which Dylan in so many songs used as the tool, the scalpel, with which to open up our hypocrisies and lay them bare for all to see. Without this cutting edge, no matter how poetic, how powerful the work, ultimately **SAVED** is like a sandwich with no butter, unfulfilling.

**UNDER THE RED SKY** has few such failings. Only **GOD KNOWS** harks back to the absolute nature of **SAVED**, and is the least successful song on the album, but more of that later. My own initial reaction to **UNDER THE RED SKY** was almost complete distaste. After **OH MERCY** expectations were high and, at first listen, this album was a great disappointment. It sounded sloppy, lazy, toneless, unstructured and poorly produced. It sounded as if it had been thrown together in the aftermath of a drunken weekend. Hung over and irritable.

However, as the weeks went by, I listened more carefully and like the beard on my face, the album grew on me, slowly and prickly.

Andrew, (the editor), suggested, in his inimitable fashion, that the nature of the production may in fact be deliberate. I have to agree with him. The cracked, unfinished music, the almost scratched vinyl sound was designed. Similarly, Dylan's deep and hoarse voice on many of the songs wasn't due to too many fags and a bad dose of the cold, but an attempt to match words and sound and meaning in a coherent whole. In most cases it works. The tone matches the message.

With one or two exceptions the feelings, thoughts and ideas throughout the album are dark and sinister. It is a bleak landscape of lost hope, a desolate desert of the soul. Failure leaks from every line in a despairing, dystopiaic vision of man. Echoes of these thoughts can be found throughout Dylan's work from **HARD RAIN** through **DESOLATION ROW**, **EVERYTHING IS BROKEN** to **UNDER THE RED SKY**. Nor are these thoughts new or unique to Dylan, but they rooted in the twentieth century, as two quotes from either end of the century will illustrate:

"THE PLUNGE OF CIVILISATION INTO THIS ABYSS OF BLOOD AND DARKNESS...IS A THING THAT SO GIVES AWAY THE WHOLE LONG AGE DURING WHICH WE HAVE SUPPOSED THE WORLD TO BE, WITH WHATEVER ABATEMENT, GRADUALLY BETTERING, THAT TO TAKE IT ALL NOW FOR WHAT THE TREACHEROUS YEARS WERE REALLY MAKING FOR AND MEANING IS TOO TRAGIC FOR ANY WORDS"

(HENRY JAMES.)

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<sup>1</sup> For overseas readers - Alex presents the weather on national T.V.

<sup>2</sup> I still agree with you here, Alex.

THE UNITED STATES IS "A THOROUGHLY LOOTED, BANKRUPT NATION WHOSE ASSETS HAVE BEEN SOLD OFF TO FOREIGNERS, A NATION SWAMPED BY UNCHECKED PLAGUES AND SUPERSTITION AND ILLITERACY AND HYPNOTIC TV, WITH VIRTUALLY NO HEALTH SERVICES FOR THE POOR"

(KURT VONNEGUT - HOCUS POCUS 1990.)

I'm sure readers better equipped than me will also find strands of BLAKE, T.S. ELIOT, J.G. BALLARD, P.K. DICK etc, but I will leave to them to expand upon these antecedents. **UNDER THE RED SKY** deserves more careful consideration than perhaps I can give it, nevertheless I will, (editor permitting), leave you with my impressions and superficial thoughts on the songs.

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**WIGGLE WIGGLE:** At first listen a rather inauspicious opening to the album. The joys of disco dancing according to Dylan. Disco the universal panacea, "Wiggle you can raise the dead". The endlessly repetitive "wiggle wiggle wiggle", as mindless as "swarm of bees". But no acid house song this one. Dylan rasps his way through a series of increasingly meaningless metaphors starting with a harmless gypsy queen and ending with a sneering "big fat snake". Come on do the Conga. The main verses linked by two bridges bristling with dance cliches. On first hearing, (stuck in a traffic jam on the M1) I took an instant dislike to this song. However by the fifth or sixth hearing the insistent single background drum beat, underplayed guitars and keyboards, Dylan's lazy occasionally rasping rendition brings out a finely tuned sarcasm and brought me round to a grudging admiration.

It is with **UNDER THE RED SKY** however that you feel the album really gets under way. Softly, softly opens the song, a nice little safe image. Cutesy stuff from fairy land, two urchins living in an alley "Under the red sky". The old man in the moon "Came passing by". Oh the joy of serendipity. The little girl has it all going for her, one day she will have "a diamond as big as your shoe". At first this seems a preposterous notion. A diamond that big just isn't possible, but this simile is doubled edged. A big diamond, yes, but to make the simile work the listener has to recognise how small the shoe is and hence how vulnerable the wearer. As time passes, "Let the wind blow low, let the wind blow high", (where are you Andy Stewart?). Hope dies. The little boy and the little girl come to a cannibalistic end, "Baked in a pie". Swallowed by the maw of adulthood. The man in the moon goes home and the river of imagination runs dry. All grows cold. Nothing for the boy or girl, and by implication, nothing left for anybody. The birds still fly and sing but our eyes don't see and our ears don't hear. The song reaches no musical climax, the tone and background remains virtually constant throughout, quiet keyboards, soft sliding guitar, (George Harrison), simple drums and guitar. Dylan's voice quite mellow, almost bored, adds to the bleak downbeat message. No hope here folks.

**IT'S UNBELIEVABLE,** just when you thought things might get better comes one of the strongest songs on the album to tell you otherwise. Insistent beat, keyboards reminiscent of the Band, fine harmonica, a nicely controlled rasp to Dylan's voice. This is dystopiaic America in thirty five lines, a searing indictment of materialism. "The land of milk and honey" transformed by forces beyond our control to "The land of money", "It's unbelievable, it would get this far". You can do anything you want if you are rich - but you can "Get rich quick". But your freedom is false, superficial, we have been analyzed and civilized so much we are like clones, all interchangeable. And if you don't fit, well, don't worry, "There's always someone who understands". Linking back to the previous song, we are so completely controlled we cannot even imagine anything different, "It's unbelievable". There is so much in this song that it overshadows the whole album. It may seem "Inconceivable" that "It could happen to you", but according to Dylan, it has.



After the wide ranging, all encompassing **IT'S UNBELIEVABLE, BORN IN TIME** brings us back to the personal. A haunting, flowing love song of heartbreaking intensity. Once again a quiet song backed by languid piano. Strong poetic lyrics, the wistful reminiscences of a fading love affair that won't quite die. "Oh babe, that fire is still smoking". The affair opens on a ghostly dreamscape and builds to a passion, "In the record breaking heat" through the first verse. But the commitment necessary for such passion cannot be sustained. It is cut off at it's peak. The slashing line, (shades of **IT AIN'T ME BABE**) "Takes too much will, takes too much skill. It's too revealing." rendered in such a pained strained voice in Bridge #1 displays the burning reality of the protagonists. It's all too much for Dylan's fragile hold on his emotional stability. Better to kill it off now and return to equilibrium. The second four lines of Bridge #1 gives some clues about the woman and why the affair was all too much. Dylan was left "Reelin' with this feelin'". We are only half way through. Bridge #2 repeats #1 in even stronger terms. Pressed for more than he can give, not only Dylan but also the woman will have to pay the price for failure, (that word again). But to the last verse and a little hope, a tiny chink the darkness. Perhaps when their time comes, and the conditions are right, - ("In the foggy web of destiny" a beautiful line perfectly encapsulating, hope, wistfulness, mystery and fate) they will meet again, "Where we were born in time". It will take some time before the full ramifications of this song are worked out, if they ever are. Nevertheless, it will definitely go down as one of Dylan's greatest love/regret songs. Even if the rest of the album was displeasing it would have been worth it just for this one song.

A change of pace now with **TV TALKING SONG**. So far the music has been slow and rather plaintive. However, like the TV in the title, this one is much faster paced and noisier, again another quite successful attempt to match sound and substance. Mostly this song is a fairly obvious tirade against the evils of television. The arguments it causes, the harm it does to kids, how it limits the imagination while at the same time appearing to do the very opposite. TV news controls the agenda of modern life. It is all pervasive deciding what and who are important. TV dominates our culture. This is fairly straight-forward stuff, but in Dylan's hands it is not without its irony. The arguments against TV are viewed from a distance by Dylan, as he listens to a speaker at Speakers Corner in London. The audience listening to the speech begin to fight. As a riot breaks out the TV news crews turn up trampling over Dylan in their haste to get the pictures. Dylan returns home and the song ends with the last ironic shrug of the shoulders "Later on that evening I watched it (the riot) on TV". A fine end to a fairly average song.

**10,000 MEN**: more reworked themes from way back. Dylan's 'aren't people blind' songs. 10,000 Mr and Mrs Jones', 10,000 Thin Men, all going about their business blind deaf and dumb. All looking the same, all conformists, "All dressed in Oxford Blue." Even if we could "eat off his head" and let the heart out it is doubtful if any of them could or would "Really see". So thanks for the tea, it's really sweet of you. This is a truly depressing song, full of hopelessness and despair, hammering home the superficiality of modern life. The whole song could smack of insufferable intellectual arrogance, but the pleading tone of Dylan's voice destroys thoughts that the listeners might be being insulted, or that Dylan thinks he is any better. If I may paraphrase the man himself, it is only a mystery to those who haven't felt the same things he has.

Now comes the perfect counterpoint to the 10,000 men, the opposition of the few 2X2. The few bright lights brave enough and aware enough to see past the banalities, and "Seven by Seven they headed for heaven". Not that it will be easy, the gates of Eden do not open for many. Bridge #1 and #2 document the many problems. The numerous failures, the bile to be swallowed, the sacrifices made, the material tomorrows that have to be mortgaged against a future paradise. Nevertheless, two by two they take a "leap in the dark" into "the

Ark". They take the chance risking all in the material world for spiritual awakening, risking all for a heavenly rendezvous. This song gives some hope after six songs of despair and human misery. It is a highly structured song, powerfully produced, with a strong background beat and some nice rippling piano from Elton John overlaid by some of Dylan's best singing in the album; all this contributes to a rather less depressing note than the previous tracks. The music swells through the first four fifths of the song lifting the listener higher and higher. Almost beseeching you to search for heaven. The last fifth then fades away quietly as the chosen few drift off into the sunset, "to another rendezvous." Possibly this is where the album should have ended, but there is more to come.

**GOD KNOWS:** all hell will break loose if we don't mend our ways. "There's gonna be no more water but fire next time". Here comes God, firing on all cylinders, guns loaded and ready for the apocalypse. Never a pleasant prospect at the best of times. The paths to Armageddon are many and varied as we have witnessed in the previous songs, but here comes the saviour. All is not lost "God knows there's a purpose" and in this perhaps our "darkest hour" we can get to heaven "even if we've got to walk a million miles by candlelight". Give me Armageddon any time. Here we are back at **SAVED**. There is no escape from God, no irony, no scepticism, no unanswered questions. This is it take it or leave it. There is a purpose (Yea?) but it bears no relation to humanity. The song starts quietly enough and builds quickly, but as it approaches a peak it degenerates into chaos. Dylan's voice is virtually drowned out by increasingly belligerent guitars and drums, before mercifully fading away. I suppose there is one advantage to this rabble, it is harder to hear the cliches.

And we can now pass on with some relief to the penultimate song on the album. **HANDY DANDY**, another of Dylan's ubiquitous characters, perhaps Andy Warhol. Poor Andy. A haunted character described in hidden codes by Dylan. Despite the apparent obscurity of some of the lyrics the vision of a man who has it all but is loaded with "A bag full of sorrow" comes through loud and clear. Pity drips from Dylan's voice like treacle from a spoon, slow and glutinous. Handy Dandy may be a sweet person, "Just like sugar and candy", but, perhaps like Dylan himself, his contacts with the world around him leave him sad, isolated and dismayed.

**CAT'S IN THE WELL:** and Dylan takes us back to the central theme of the album, dystopia. Here we are presented with a deceptively jaunty song. It trots along sounding superficially like a sixties pop song with a beat reminiscent of the background music to an episode of the Avengers. The kind of song a teenage band would have played at the annual school dance. But all is not well. The cat's in the well, i.e. the shit is well and truly in the fan and "It's such a bloody disgrace.". Throughout the song Dylan contrasts soft, safe, comfortable images with sharp visions of horror, e.g. "The gentle lady's asleep / The wolf is looking down", "Pappa is reading the news / His daughter needs shoes" and "The drinks are ready / Dogs are going to war". The strong rhyming scheme running through each verse coupled with the repeated "Cat's in the well" adds emphasis to the message, ensuring the listener compares like and unlike. The upbeat almost merry music contrasting sharply with the fatalistic lyrics combine to hammer home the dysfunctional nature of the world around us. All on the surface looks ok, underneath it is dying. So the song progresses through to the final image. The autumn of our days, the last moments prior to a long chilly winter of the soul. "Leaves are starting to fall".

"Goodnight, my love, may the Lord have mercy on us all".

Alex Hill Nov 1990.

### Under A Red Sky

In issue one I was trying to describe the excitement of the arrival of a Dylan tour. Just after I sent issue one out **Under The Red Sky** was released. This release was fraught with difficulties & hassles for me - but it all added to the excitement.

It is the first LP in a while that I've had to wait for. Andy had decided to patiently wait until the official release date and for various reasons no one else sent me a pre-release tape.

This left me in the old position of hunting down all the possible information on it and desperately watching the calendar...

The **Wanted Man** Hotline seems reasonably happy with the LP...**VOX** and **Q** give it a slating...**Melody Maker** gives it a good review (Good ol' Allan Jones) but it smacks of digging for things to praise; in some ways this is more disturbing than the previous two reviews...I buy the revolting **Sounds** but there is no review, ditto the **N.M.E.** which I always get anyway....

The **Wanted Man** Hotline has moved on from being reasonably happy with the LP to rating it the best since **Shot Of Love**. This is, to put it mildly, thrilling; an authoritative voice placing it higher than **Infidels** and **Oh Mercy**. The great day (17th September, a Monday) draws closer. On Saturday the 15th. I 'phone a few record shops to see if they have it in early; they say not.

Monday arrives...I start work before any record shops are open. The morning drags - even though I have to leave at 11:30 to pick some stuff up from a printers...A colleague informs me he saw the LP in HMV's on Saturday. Apoplexy ensues...Some years later 11:30 arrives. I scuttle out, primed with walkman.

A new British sprint record takes me to Farringdon records at Cheapside. I still feel guilty about buying tape rather than vinyl (**Oh Mercy** being the first I'd done this with.) God help me when I can afford cds...

I unwrap the tape and put it in the walkman...I have to go to the bank, there's one round the corner...it seems to be taking a long time to start...I increase the volume...just as I approach the bank an ear splitting **Wiggle, Wiggle** intro blares out. I back off and adjust volume, a doorman for the bank starts asking me what I'm looking for...I walk away to regain composure & listen...

After all the excitement, the fact that **Wiggle** is not totally 'new' relaxes me...I return to the bank, nodding to the doorman who is mouthing away in explanation...I listen to the title track for the first time in the bank queue...I like the sound of his voice (but then I always do)...odd lines stick, especially "baked in a pie", which had already been mentioned in a review...I stop the tape at the end of the track & cash cheque & hurriedly leave bank.

Over lunchtime I manage two full listens to the album - one benefit from its shortness, I suppose - as I take the tube to the Angel and walk back via the printers in torrential rain.

On the second listen a hole develops in my shoe, I can't wipe my glasses as my hands are full & I'm soaked to the skin. I'm also very, very happy as Bob sings to me in the rain & I start to properly listen to his new album.

I don't know about you, but when a new Dylan LP comes out I always hear echoes of past songs in the first few listens. Whether these are actual echoes or just the mind coming to grips with something new and trying to put it in a familiar framework, I'm not sure. Probably both, but mostly the latter? Anyway on those first two listens I heard 'echoes' of **Subterranean**, **Queen Jane**, **Down In The Groove**, and, of course, **Handy Dandy** came as a joyful reminder of **LARS**...and something set me off thinking of the drummer in **Don't Fall Apart On Me Tonight**. Later listenings were to bring **Shot Of Love** to mind; or perhaps it was Andy telling me he had the single & **In The Summertime** was on it - **SOL** became the first thing I played other than **Under The Red Sky** (it took nearly a week before I could listen to anything else.)

It always strikes me as strange how quickly new albums become so familiar. It is as though they had always been there, I can't recreate the feeling of looking at the lyrics of **Under The Red Sky** as something new, of not having heard Dylan sing them.

I'm typing this in Eastbourne, it is October 3rd, I've just put the tape on & it is like an old friend already.

Indeed, I left Pia's walkman on the train last week & **UTRS** was in it. Neither walkman nor tape was handed in & I felt terrible until I could get a new copy the next morning.

The reviews of **UTRS** continued to be dreadful. **Sounds** was downright perverse, **NME's** told us nothing about the album. And to cap it all the revolting **Sun-for-the-would-be-upper-middle-classes Daily Mail** weighed in with a piece of rank hypocrisy. (See reprint below). This man has a strange definition of "courage", his kind are a blot on the face of the Earth - still, more to be pitied than scorned, eh?

Strangely, though, disagreeable though these reviews are - they can occasionally get things right !!!

**Sounds** concludes by ranking it beside **Desire**, **New Morning** and **Slow Train Coming**; take out **New Morning** and I've a feeling that I would rank it similarly in Dylan's work - though from me, of course, this would constitute praise rather than scorn. **NME** - "dreaming up nursery rhymes and nonsense verse for them to put music to" hits the nail pretty smartly on the head, what a shame he doesn't seem to like them overly....

I hear from fellow Dylan admirers an almost unanimous response of "at first I cringed, now I love it". It is strange how so many have reacted in the same way. What makes it stranger for me is that this reaction is my most common one to new albums. Even the mighty **Street Legal** took time to 'grow' on me; but, and the same thing happened to me with **Shot Of Love**, this one I loved as others hesitated. Odd.

There are eventually some positive reviews, the only one I

read but haven't got a copy of to reprint below was from **What Hi-Fi?**, although it praised the album it was only as a fine "joke" from Bobby.

Into November now and the album sounds just fine still. Most of my thoughts on it are to be found in **The Modes Of Nonsense Verse** section. Here are a few thoughts on the album track-by-track.

**Wiggle, Wiggle** is hell of a funny, sometimes I'm not in the mood for it, but mostly it makes me smile. Wonderful delivery ("big fat snake") and seems to have put the needle into lots of 'music critics': "and what do you make of the line "wiggle like a bowl of soup", Mr. Weberman?"

**Under The Red Sky**: what a marvellous melody and what inspired singing. This one's lyrics seem to have upset most people which just shows how many preconceptions and blinkered attitudes are brought into play when the needle/laser beam/tape head is first employed.

It's **Unbelievable**: another great number but I would have thought that **Wiggle Wiggle** would have been a more obvious choice as a single. Is it possible that "the land of milk and honey" could refer to Israel rather than, or as well as, the California/USA that everyone seems to be supposing?

**Born In Time**: is pure, unadulterated Dylan. A melody that is quite magical and a vocal that carries meanings directly from the soul of the poet. What beautiful lines are here:

NOT ONE MORE NIGHT, NOT ONE MORE KISS,  
NOT THIS TIME BABY, NO MORE OF THIS,  
TAKES TOO MUCH SKILL, TAKES TOO MUCH  
WILL.  
IT'S TOO REVEALING

---

ON THE RISING CURVE  
WHERE THE WAYS OF NATURE WILL TEST  
EVERY NERVE,  
YOU WON'T GET ANYTHING YOU DON'T  
DESERVE  
WHERE WE WERE BORN IN TIME.

However, things are somewhat spoiled for me after the glorious "that fire is still smoking" by the couplet that does nothing for me, that sticks out like a sore thumb among the wonders that surround it:

YOU WERE SNOW, YOU WERE RAIN,  
YOU WERE STRIPED, YOU WERE PLAIN,

Overall though, it is a masterpiece. Time is the great enemy, can either Art or Love transcend the mutability of the reality we are born into? (I'm not sure if they can, but if I have to take my chances with anything in Art, I'll go for **Tangled Up In Blue**.) I was tempted to write of **Born In Time** that 'if you don't like this, you don't like Dylan': it isn't true, of course, but that's how it makes you feel.

**TV Talking Song**: I liked this at first, despite the 'obviousness' of the story and the **Black Diamond Bay** ending re-run. My first thoughts were of how much fun it will be live. What good lines you get if you're the protagonist in a Dylan song! And what a great

description of the whole situation. **'Talkin' Bear Mountain Picnic Massacre Blues?....**Yeah, I can still do 'em, only better'.

The only drawback with this one is that it just doesn't stand up to the amount of replays I've (and 99% of you) given it - then again it probably wasn't recorded with an eye to being played time after time, every day for weeks.

Like **Under The Red Sky**, **10,000 Men** and **2X2** get right to the heart of this album and I'll leave my views on them to the portion of my article on **Modes Of Nonsense Verse** that deals with **UTRS**.

**God Knows**: another stunning performance; no wonder we follow this man so avidly. It is a song of religious faith, it warns again of the impending Armageddon, but it also has a deal of humour and irony built in - there is the ambiguity of the title phrase and the delicious use of "out of sight". And the quite exquisite lines:

GOD KNOWS THE SECRETS OF YOUR HEART  
HELL TELL THEM TO YOU WHEN YOU'RE  
ASLEEP

**Handy Dandy**: and the gorgeous, stately, uplifting call-them-anything-you-want-to-but-you-know-what-I-mean chords of **LARS**. It seems to be a past-time to guess who **Handy Dandy** is. I've heard the Stones touted (see cuttings) and if you see the Stones primarily as Mick Jagger, you can certainly see a few fairly wicked put downs in there; Allan Jones, more realistically to my thinking, sees Dylan himself, Alex Hill in his review, contained herein, postulates Andy Warhol, others have said Prince and some lines would certainly seem very pertinent in backing this theory. Is there any end to this game? Probably not. Maybe it is about Frank Sinatra - "sitting with a girl named Nancy" - and his recent tour. Or maybe the Nancy is the ill-fated girl-friend of that other great interpreter (Ok, I'm kidding) of **My Way**, Sid Vicious ??? Maybe it is all of them, a composite character? Whatever, whichever the following, heart rendingly sad, lines smack of personal experience:

HANDY DANDY, HE GOT A BASKETFUL OF  
FLOWERS AND A BAG FULL OF SORROW  
HE FINISHES HIS DRINK, HE GETS UP FROM THE  
TABLE HE SAYS,  
'OKAY BOYS, I'LL SEE YOU TOMORROW'

**Cats In The Well**: again no point in repeating what I say in the article. I've often had it in mind to compose a tape of the last songs in Dylan's Lps; so often they are the strongest songs, encompassing all the themes that have gone before, standing alone, rejecting, accepting, so many of them laden with images of renewal or finality. This stands proudly in the tradition of great last songs and would have to be placed right at the end of the tape, just after **Dark Eyes**. Such finality is scary.

### Jeff Lynne from Rolling Stone

Lynne also served as co-producer of *The Traveling Wilburys, Volume 1*, the debut album by the all star band that featured Orbison, Petty, Harrison, Bob Dylan - and Lynne.

In fact, Lynne has just driven to London from Harrison's house in Henley-On-Thames, where the two have been mixing tracks for the next album by the Wilburys, due this October. "After the first album, we all wanted to do a bit more," Lynne says. "It's not very often you get to work with all these people together. It's almost like a club. It's a relief to everybody to be able to do something a bit off the wall, rather than worrying, "Oh, I can't say that because I'm George Harrison." It's fun and we can do what we like."

Sessions for the album began in April at a 1920s-era house the group rented high above Beverly Hills. As on the first album the recording process was entirely spontaneous. "We just set up in the library, the four of us with acoustic guitars and Jim Keltner on drums, and we just started writing songs," Lynne says. "We actually sit down and do them right on the spot." We got the first song going in half an hour, and we started recording it in probably an hour. One take and it's done. Then we start another one. If we get stuck, there's always somebody who'll go, 'Well, hang on, if we can't get out of that, lets go over here, let's try this chord.' Sometimes it's me who says that. Sometimes it's Bob, or Tom, or George. It's really like a co-op."

While much of the music is collaborative, the Wilburys tend to rely on Dylan for the lyrics. "We all throw in ideas and words," Lynne says. "But when you've got a lyricist like Bob Dylan - well, what are you gonna do?" After the release of the first album, the music business, was rife with rumours that Dylan was a reluctant Wilbury, not eager to help out with such promotional chores as videos and interviews. "Yeah, there were those rumours," Lynne says somewhat evasively. "But I think it was because it was such a wacky idea. I don't know that Dylan even felt that he should be doing it. But he never ceases to amaze me. It depends on his mood - well, that's not the right word, I suppose. But sometimes he'll go in and he'll sing the best fuckin' thing you've ever heard. Like equally as good as any blues singer. But he doesn't always do that....."

This time around, the rumour mill has it that the Wilburys will actually hit the road. Lynne confirms that a tour has been discussed - "at night, when we've had a few beers" - but adds that the logistics and the band members' heavily booked schedules may render it impossible.

### Wilbury's Volume Three

Well Bobby might think that it is better than Volume One, but I'm afraid I can't concur. Maybe he's trying to make up for not helping to promote volume one. It may well be that it is a better *Wilbury's* album, in that they sound consistently like one group rather than a bunch of soloists. Unfortunately I don't think the mixture of twee harmonies and AOR Oh-so-concerned lyrics does much for anyone. It sounds like the Beatles at their twee-est - ELO in other words; quite astonishing for an album containing such a large amount of Dylan lead vocals. No **Tweeter & The Monkey Man** here. I'll admit to a liking for **Seven Deadly Sins** but just hope that this is the end of the road for the Traveling Wilburys.

### Cds

Ok, so I've finally a CD player, now begins the replacement of all the albums: or perhaps not. Of the ones I've got so far only **REAL LIVE** and **STREET LEGAL** sound significantly improved. In the latter's case my vinyl was played to death anyway so I can't compare too well. I got the former because I'd heard it was deleted but found that Virgin Megastore at Marble Arch were selling it at normal CD price, i.e. not an import. Has anyone made an assessment of the comparative virtues of the official albums on vinyl, tape and CD ?

**Two From Home**

My dad writes to tell me of a difficult clue in the Glasgow Herald's crossword: 'Singer in Normandy landings' [5]

And my mum calls to tell of a film called **Dance Party**, an excruciatingly bad film with an interesting ending. Girl loves boy next door and wants him to go to Medical college. Boy next door wants to dance to 'hoodlum' pop music. She likes Broadway musicals. He goes off & has all manner of wild & dangerous 'fun'- but it all ends in tears. He is lying distraught at the end of the film. Enter the girl-next-door supposedly dressed as some kind of rocker; she holds an album but he can't see it as his arm covers his eyes:

Girl: "I got a new record I want you to hear"

Boy : "Oh, no more Broadway musicals, please..."

He looks up and is surprised first by the album sleeve - we still haven't seen it - and then the girl's get-up. We get a brief glimpse of the cover of **Highway 61 Revisited**. The girl attempts a kind of sneer and says :

"It's rock and roll, but you don't have to be a moron to like it." She goes and puts the record on, continuing:

"I can't explain it, but it makes me feel - different."

She sits beside him and gazes adoringly at the back of the sleeve saying, "The words are astounding." (The record starts at that moment so I suppose we're to think that the lyrics are printed on the back cover, rather than the almost-as-astounding-words that are there.) He takes the sleeve and looks at it, we get a full screen close up of the cover, and then the film ends with the happy couple gazing blissfully at a) the album sleeve and b) each other.

I take it he went to medical school.

Track plays as credits roll.

It is from Orion Pictures, 1987 and stars Donovan Leitch (who he?), Joe Pantoliano and Jennifer Runyon.

**The Ticket Saga - Previewed**

What a roller coaster ride on the emotions it has been this year. I'll leave the full grisly tale for the next issue, suffice to say I made the whole thing more difficult and expensive for myself. However, thanks to keeping every option open I'm now quite happy with my tickets. It was also good to meet people in the queue - though more civilised ways of meeting spring easily to mind!

I'd also like to say that **WANTED MAN** came up trumps for me, especially on that last night (currently 17th) which was proving a nightmare.

Mainly though I'd like to thank Lambchops for all his help, the extent of which will become apparent in the next issue.

Most people who know me will be astonished that I'm not going to the Glasgow shows. I simply don't have the money, in addition, I'd hate anyone to think I was *obsessive* about a 'pop singer', especially an American one. Good grief!

**ARENA**

I was sitting typing up my musings on **Under The Red Sky** when who should 'phone but Mr. Hussey. Steve caught an intriguing advert for the new Arena series which showed Bob and unknown Greek strumming away at the Acropolis. Presumably this harks back to the '89 show there and the filming of the what-the-hell-has-happened-to-it Van Morrison special. All very interesting. To be shown "this winter". Steve confidently predicts we'll all be at Hammersmith when it is broadcast.

**Harry Dean Stanton**

From VOX, November issue: Playing music is nothing new to Harry Dean. He's been singing on and off with bands since the 60s, has appeared on TV with Bob Dylan, toured with him as part of the Rolling Thunder Review (along with Kinky Friedman who was also in Australia and sang with him at a number of shows),.....

....."No, I was never into Sinatra," he says when prompted with the names of some musical legends. "Billie Holiday was good. All the jazz....I like John Fogerty, Creedence Clearwater, and I like a lot of Dylan's stuff, when he plays alone especially."

It was Dylan who Harry Dean cites as one of the people who first encouraged him to pursue music more seriously.

"He stayed at my apartment in LA for two or three days in the '70s and we picked and sang," Harry Dean recalls, "He encouraged me then to make an album."

.....the shows had the feeling of a band working out exactly what they wanted to do.. Some songs didn't quite work, others, like the Mexican folk songs, Dylan's *Knocking On Heaven's Door* and Ry Cooder's *Borderline* were executed magnificently.

**Even The Pawn Must Hold A Grudge**

Apologies here, I've lost a cutting relating to the release of the guy jailed for killing Medgar Evers. Old wounds were well & truly opened I think the killer was claiming some kind of 'victimisation'. Anyone got info on this? I may yet come across the cutting, fingers crossed.

**Peter Blake from VOX, December issue**

"Pop Art Supremo" on rock stars who've designed/painted their own record sleeves. The article opens with two quotes, one from Dylan:

*This painter who lived round here, he paints the area in a radius of twenty miles....a person passing by will be painted alongside someone ten miles away, and in the end he'll have this composite picture of something which you can't say exists in his mind. That's more or less what I do.*

Peter Blake: **BOB DYLAN: Planet Waves (1974) and Self Portrait (1970):** "I've always had a soft spot for it but its a terrible painting, really awful. That's a pretty arrogant statement, a head filling the whole space, no lettering so your supposed to guess it's Bob Dylan. **Planet Waves** is better because it's more modest, it's in the same vein as someone like Groz."

**The Cuttings**

1. The N.M.E., with a fair point re LSD. 2. SOUNDS. 3. VOX. 4. MELODY MAKER. 5. N.M.E. 6. Daily Mail. 7. ROLLING STONE. 8. Q. 9. The Independent.
10. N.M.E. 11. MELODY MAKER 12. SELECT 13. N.M.E. Ok, so it isn't directly Bobby, it's still important. Note that they can't resist getting a dig in. (How many digs did they get in via Donovan drivels ?) 14 and 15. Melody Maker Allan Jones should have a word with either the reviewer or his live editor. They'll be claiming that Bob didn't write *Shenandoah* next! 16. N.M.E. Funny eh? 17. Q 18. VOX 19. N.M.E. Funny eh? 20. Letter to the N.M.E. 21. Q Sayings Of The Year. 22 and 23. Q
24. VOX Maximum Volumes, supposedly the best books ever written on rock. Where is *Performing Literature*? 25. Q 26. Sunday Mail (Scottish). 27. Observer, review of the decade from 1989's final issue. Patrick Humphries proving that his review of **Under The Red Sky** was no fluke. 28. Daily Mirror. 29. Grauniad. 30. Evening Standard Magazine I seem to remember an article on the same subject, with the same title in either *Time Out* or *City Limits* some years back - possibly the same author, too. 31 and 32. N.M.E. 33. vox 34. N.M.E. 35. Sunday Mail - still tickets in January! 36. MELODY MAKER Review of the year. 37. Musician 38. Q Review Of The Year. 39. Letter to VOX. 40. Today. 41 VOX.

# IT TAKES A LOT TO LAUGH



'LATE LAST NIGHT AND THE NIGHT BEFORE, TOMMYKNOCKERS, TOMMYKNOCKERS, KNOCKING AT TH DOOR. I WANT TO GO OUT, DON'T KNOW IF I CAN, BECAUSE I'M SO AFRAID OF THE TOMMYKNOCKER MAN.....'



# Dylan: red all about it

2

**BOB DYLAN's** new album 'Under The Red Sky', is released by CBS next Monday. It features contributions from George Harrison, Elton John, Bruce Hornsby, Slash from Guns N' Roses and Stevie Ray Vaughan.

It's been produced by Was (Not Was), and the tracklist reads: 'Wiggle Wiggle', 'Under The Red Sky', 'Unbelievable', 'Born In Time', 'TV Talkin' Song', '10,000 Men', '2 x 2', 'God Knows', 'Handy Dandy' and 'Cat's In The Well'.

'Unbelievable' comes out as a single on the same day, backed with '10,000 Men', 'In The Summertime' and 'Jokerman' – both previously released – make up the CD package.

In a slightly strained bid at whipping up controversy, Bob's new video features sex, violence, drugs and a pig with a ring through its nose.

It stars Brat Pack actress Molly Ringwald and shows Bob as a chauffeur driving around a car with a number plate which says LSD on it.

1

## BOB DYLAN

*Under The Red Sky (CBS)*

**JUST WHEN YOU THINK YOU'VE HEARD IT ALL**, you sit down and listen to Bob Dylan singing 'Wiggle Wiggle Wiggle!' Bored with being spokesman of his generation, tired of rock's poet laureateship, the word on the wire is that Bob Dylan wants a HIT! Dylan wants to be Michael Bolton, rather than be remembered as the Yevtushenko of the juke box. To that dubious commercial end, 'Under The Red Sky' is fashioned to what Dylan thinks is Top 40 material.

There's a supporting cast that Dylan reckons covers the spectrum – Guns N' Roses' Slash is in there, Elton John and Bruce Hornsby are hammering the ivories; the old guard are represented by George Harrison, David Crosby and David Lindley. Unsurprisingly, 'Under The Red Sky' is a mess, the sort of mess that only omry of Bob could cook up.

Lazarus-like, and after a decade of intermittent failure only interrupted by downright disaster, Dylan slipped back into the top drawer with 'Oh Mercy!'. His reputation was further enhanced by a series of shows at Hammersmith Odeon which packed punch and venom, and showed Dylan refusing to rely on former glories. Received wisdom would have him reuniting with producer Daniel Lanois and cutting an album designed to showcase his touring band – particularly the flowery guitar of G E Smith. But not Bob. 'Under The Red Sky' has that peculiar shoddiness that, of all the major rock stars, Dylan so effortlessly dishes out.

As someone who regards Dylan as the single most influential figure in popular music, I've long since given up expecting anything more from the man who has already given so much. That still didn't prepare me for this album. I'm not offended, I'm not even upset by this album; it's nearer to 'Knocked Out Loaded' than 'Highway 61 Revisited', but that's par for the course. Just listening to it is rather like watching Ayrton Senna on a unicycle, like Herman Melville writing limericks, like Stanley Kubrick directing nothing but lager commercials...

As the man who brought poetry to pop, we've all got drawerfuls of favourite Dylan lyrics, he's still capable of writing a couplet that shivers your timbers, but today's his day off. I just can't get excited on the track when Dylan sings: "one day, the little boy and the little girl were baking a pie". Or

## BOB DYLAN

*'Under The Red Sky'*  
(CBS) \*

**THERE ARE** some out there for whom a new Bob Dylan album is an Event in the same way as the birth of a child, the break-up of a relationship or the death of a parent. They affect lives.

The influence that Dylan held throughout the '60s and '70s and the obsessions he inspired is uncanny. One '60s rock critic, writing about 'Sad Eyed Lady Of The Lowlands' from 'Blonde On Blonde', said that the song contained the truth about the Kennedy assassination. Obsessive fan AJ Webberman used to rake through Dylan's garbage, fishing out fragments of lyrics, empty beer cans and corn flakes packets, in an attempt to better understand Dylan's state of mind.

Perhaps once those people came down from whatever drugs they were on, the meanings they invested in Dylan's oblique lyrics evaporated. Take the opening track of 'Under The Red Sky' 'Wiggle Wiggle', which goes: "Wiggle wiggle wiggle like a gypsy queen/Wiggle wiggle wiggle all dressed in green/Wiggle wiggle wiggle 'til the moon is blue/Wiggle 'til the moon sees you."

Wow! Dylan's lyrics are so heavy. Is he telling us something about the World Conspiracy? About what really goes on at the Trilateral Commission? It is, of course, just a crap song about f\*\*king, a 50 year old man trying to come on like a jissom-brained Viz reader.

Stripped of all this Dylanology, of all associations – forget that this is the guy who made 'Planet Waves', 'Highway 61 Revisited' and 'Blonde On Blonde' – 'Under The Red Sky' is a thoroughly mediocre and depressing record.

Slash from Guns N' Roses, George Harrison, Elton John and the late Stevie Ray Vaughan have all been drafted in, perhaps in the hope of shifting a few more units to their respective fans. Their contributions, however, are barely noticeable. The record is dominated by that irritating whine, now sounding weedy and strained with the passing of time.

Much of the blame, however, must lie with producer Don Was. Sure, the songs are lame to begin with, but perhaps a Lanois or (God forbid) a Knopfler would have at least rendered them listenable. The evidence is to be found on side two's 'God Knows', a decent enough noise with Stevie Ray and Jimmy Vaughan beefing up a rather bitter and bruised song. But that's chucked right away on the absurdly titled 'Handy Dandy', which sounds like a lampoon of 'Positively Fourth Street' and 'Like A Rolling Stone'.

If 'Oh Mercy' was seen by many as a return to form, this LP must rank alongside 'Desire', 'New Morning' and 'Slow Train Coming' as Dylan at his most embarrassing, a great leap backwards.

Tommy Udo

3

'TV Song's opening rhyme: "One day in London I went out for a walk/Round a place called Hyde Park where people talk".

Dylan has always maintained that lyrics were only a part of his music, which is fine as long as the music passes muster, but here it's more unmemorable riffing, more uninspired doodles. These are half formed ideas that should have been left to die at the side of the road. I'm not one to venerate Dylan's past, his is a unique body of work that speaks for itself, but as he tumbles towards 50 and remains doggedly determined to keep on keepin' on, he should pay attention to lines from his own song here: "It's unbelievable, it's inconceivable, it could happen to you". ☺

Patrick Humphries



## BOB DYLAN UNDER THE RED SKY (CBS)

HELL and f\*\*\*, what's the mad old bugger done now? There are people who will find "Under The Red Sky" well nigh unlistenable, the final vindication of their collective belief that Dylan's marbles have long-since rattled down the gutter, that the former voice of a generation is now at least five fingers short of a fist.

These people will have a point. They will probably have invested a lot of themselves in Dylan down the years and will doubtless have been warmed by the common perception that last year's "Oh Mercy" was what is conventionally known as a "return to form" – ie: the kind of Dylan album they could listen to **without embarrassment**, the first of its kind in a while. Dylan, however, will not be much impressed by their bleatings; nor should they be surprised by his indifference.

"Can't recall a useful thing you ever did for me, 'cept pat me on the back one time, when I was on my knees," Dylan sneered, years ago, on "Dirge". It was one of many reminders – nothing particularly poignant about this one – that Dylan does what Dylan does and the complete t\*\*\* to everyone else, especially those for whom he remains a stifling fixation, the talisman of legend. Like Neil Young, Dylan remains defiant of every expectation.

There's a cost to be paid for such arrant disregard of your audience, of course, and "Under The Red Sky" has already come in for a fair amount of ridicule. And for sure, it will seem to many a sharp disappointment after "Oh Mercy", whose brooding introspection and melancholy reflections it puckishly refuses to echo or pursue.

There's a mocking tone to much of "Under The Red Sky" that even Dylan stalwarts may have difficulty with. But unpredictability on this scale is rare. And there seems little point, after all this time, to complain about Dylan's sheer bloody-mindedness, his utter intransigence, his unwillingness to bend to preconceptions. This is exactly what keeps us listening to him.

The word is that "Under The Red Sky" has been fashioned to give Dylan a hit. He probably needs one – "Oh Mercy", for which he had the best notices of his recent career, sold a measly 130,000 copies worldwide. To which end, Dylan has here employed Don and David Was, fashionable hands these days behind the mixing desk, and they've brought in a full supporting cast of special guests – George Harrison, Elton John, Bruce Hornsby, Slash from Guns N' Roses, David Crosby, Al Kooper, former Fabulous Thunderbirds guitarist Jimmie Vaughan and his brother, the late Stevie Ray. This sounds like a hellish brew, a recipe for a messy disaster. Mostly, though, they keep a low profile. Thankfully, there are no star turns.

Crosby, for instance, is an almost subliminal presence, adding ghostly harmonies, first of all, to the bleak little ballad, "Born In Time", which has the desolate atmosphere of "Where The Teardrops Fall" and a hissing menace all of its own. Crosby is similarly muted on the stately, nihilistic "2x2", a hymn of sorts to corrupted idealism, whose slight lyric is rescued by a long fade where Dylan seems to be re-writing the song before it's even over.

On "Oh Mercy", the ambient atmospheric of Daniel Lanois' carefully contrived production brilliantly enhanced Dylan's mood of self-doubt, introversion and profound isolation. He sounded like the loneliest man in the world, a forlorn survivor in an empty landscape. "Under The Red Sky" presents us with a more obviously out-going Dylan. His writing here often

has the brashness of something knocked off, just for the hell of it.

At first, the Was brothers' production sounds merely vulgar, too bright and blasting. They give the record a cavernous drum sound, which it doesn't always need, and the album seems like just a succession of familiar hard rock wallops. But when the dust settles and the listener stops looking pointlessly for something as obviously magisterial as "Most Of The Time" or as noble as "Ring Them Bells", the LP quickly becomes more approachable and the Was production begins to make more sense.

On "Wiggle Wiggle", the band – with Slash and the veteran West Coast guitarist David Lindley duking it out over Kenny Aronoff's belting drums – sound as violently upfront as anyone since the malicious heyday of The Attractions. The song's been described elsewhere as self-parody; which is a joke. It's just a song about f\*\*\*ing, raucously played, a bawdy blues shakedown, Dylan in obviously larkish mode. This isn't for a moment complicated stuff. Either dig it or don't. (I do.)

Elsewhere, there are echoes of earlier Dylan incarnations. The title track, for instance, initially suggests the domestic contemplations of parts of "Planet Waves" and "New Morning". But this is a caricature of innocence, mocking, provocatively banal. And it ends bleakly, Dylan resigned to some incipient calamity, his voice as old as the earth itself. "God Knows", meanwhile, takes us back to the fire and brimstone of Dylan's so-called "religious" albums, its lethal musical cackle recalling the ramshackle cut and slash of "Saved", "Unbelievable" and "TV Talkin' Song" hark back respectively to "Subterranean Homesick Blues" and "Highway 61". The rhymes are a bit creaky in both instances, but the force of the performances is undeniably emphatic and Dylan still manages to come up with hilariously absurd advice on how to pull through. "Bang that horse, saddle that drum," he announces hysterically on "Unbelievable", and under certain circumstances this sounds perfectly sage.

The brutally surreal "10,000 Men" is cantankerous, bloody and mean. Dylan is full of swaggering bravado, contriving a hilariously bragging self-portrait of himself, loved by women, feared by men. "Hey, hey, who could your lover be?" he leers nastily over the Vaughans' pugnacious guitars. "Let me eat off his head and you can really see." As an essay in humiliation, it's comparable to Costello's "I Hope You're Happy Now".

This is Dylan playing up to his own assumed omnipotence, that sense of living out his own legend that makes him so dramatically compelling. But it's nothing compared to the outlandish braggadocio of "Handy Dandy". Dylan has never been funnier about his own invincibility. As a piece of self-aggrandizement, "Handy Dandy" makes "I Wanna Be Adored" sound like an expression of lisping modesty. "They say, 'What are you made of?' You say, 'Can you repeat what you say?'" Dylan sings contemptuously. "They say, 'What are you afraid of?' You say, 'Nuthin' – not even night or day..." This is the sound of Dylan enjoying himself hugely, and it's a long way from the lacerating self-doubt of "What Good Am I?". It's appropriate too that it's so specifically set to rock's most imperious song, "Like A Rolling Stone".

"Under The Red Sky" bows out with the brief, exclamatory "Cat's In The Well", which weds the Tex-Mex rock 'n' roll of Sam The Sham's "Woolly Bully" – driving cantina horns, shrieking farfisa and all – to the vocabulary of the apocalypse. "Cat's in the well, the leaves are starting to fall/Cat's in the well, may the Lord have mercy on us all," Dylan sings with awful finality as the record ends with an ominous thump.

Closing in on 50, Dylan is still rock's loosest cannon. Guns won't stop him now.

ALLAN JONES

4

**BOB DYLAN****Under The Red Sky (CBS LP/Cassette/CD)**

HAS BOB Dylan finally flipped? A question that almost everybody who hears the opening track of his latest LP will be secretly asking themselves: "Wiggle, wiggle, wiggle like a bowl of soup", warbles the master's voice... Hell! Even New Kids On The Block could come up with a better song than that. But perhaps that's Dylan's latest ploy. Why should he bust a gut when there's a fortune to be made out there spouting such foolishness as 'Wiggle Wiggle' to the brain dead masses?

Last time's 'Oh Mercy!' was a real return to form for Dylan, a fact that makes listening to most of the pap he's collected here so galling. Perhaps the creative strain that went into making this record, together with an equally strenuous bout of touring, is the cause for Dylan's light of inspiration to burn so dangerously low here. But, to be brutally honest, there can be no excuse for the drivel that pours out from 'Under The Red Sky'.

**6** THERE comes a time in the career of every critic when some particularly difficult issue, on which he has previously prevaricated, equivocated and vacillated, must finally be settled one way or another.

Public dishonour may be the risk, but even so, one has to stand up and be counted — even if everyone else on the planet appears to be sitting down.

For me that time is now, and the issue is Bob Dylan. Is he, in short, one of the most vital and vibrant creative forces in popular music, or is he a dreary old has-been?

It's actually quite a tricky little conundrum. Tradition, orthodoxy and virtually all other rock critics tend to prefer the first interpretation — hence Q Magazine's review of his recent Hammer-smith Odeon concerts, in which Dylan-worship was so automatically assumed that all the songs he played on each night were listed in full.

The evidence, on the other hand, in the form of most of his recorded output since the early Seventies, is not quite so favourable. Dylan's fans, a uniquely intense if necessarily apologetic breed, have tried gallantly to mask this most tragic and complete of creative declines, but even they can't argue against recordings.

Every year a new one comes out, and every year it falls in the range of 'not very good' to 'unbelievably abysmal'. This year's offering is not as appalling as Dylan And The Dead, a misconceived live album recorded with The Grateful Dead, or indeed

**5**

Surrounded by such musical stalwarts as Guns N' Roses guitarist Slash, keyboards team Elton John and Bruce Hornsby, the late Stevie Ray Vaughan, old dinos David Crosby and David Lindley and Traveling Wilbury sidekick George Harrison, Dylan is content to sit in his corner dreaming up nursery rhymes and nonsense verse for them to put music to.

Producers Don and David Was, together with one Jack Frost, manage to keep things from falling totally into the abyss, but how they could have sat poker faced through the sessions that produced such gems as 'Handy Dandy' and 'Cat's In The Well' certainly beggars belief!

"It's unbelievable it would get this far," sings Dylan half way through... That just about sums up this excessive bout of plonker pulling. (2)

**Edwin Pouncey**

**6** 1987's *Down In The Grove*, which remains the most ineffective work recorded by a major artist I have ever heard. No, *Under The Red Sky* (CBS) is for Dylan probably something of a triumph — as a modern rock album, it's merely not very good.

Take the first song, *Wiggle Wiggle*, 'Wiggle Wiggle Wiggle like a gipsy queen,' Dylan sings, from the heart, 'Wiggle wiggle wiggle all dressed in green.' One of the album's main selling points is its galaxy of star sidemen — the usual trick when ideas are thin on the ground — but remarkably there is no credit on this track for either Sonia or Kylie Minogue. 'Wiggle to the front, wiggle to the rear,' Dylan continues, clearly moved, 'Wiggle till you wiggle right out of here.'

**I**

F THE lyrics are lazy (the kindest interpretation), the music is little better. Thanks to the hippest producers of the year — Don and David Was — Dylan always hires the hippest producers of the year — and the aforementioned galaxy of names, which includes George Harrison, Bruce Hornsby, Slash from Guns 'n' Roses and even Elton John, it's well played and well produced — much better so, in fact, than most of Dylan's albums over the years.

Unfortunately, though, the actual songs are dreadful — bereft of ideas, energy or imagination, they shuffle along, disinterring old R&B riffs one after another. Why does Dylan bother? This is wilful mediocrity, and its arrogance is astonishing.

As the sleeve notes tell you, 'Entertainment Connections has secured a limited edition of notes by the artist to the songs... If you are interested in receiving this collector's item, please write... for information on how to place your order.' Think I'll pass on that one, Bob.

## ★ ★

**UNDER THE RED SKY**

Bob Dylan

Columbia

**O**H MERCY, BOB DYLAN'S 1989 ALBUM, showed the singer returning compellingly to form, flexing strengths ranging from the hot topicality of "Political World" to the blue, spare grace of "Where Teardrops Fall." The latter song's stripped-down, essential power suggested the simplifying strategies often adopted by artists in their maturity. Old masters sometimes pare their statements down stylistically to attain the mythic or universal — their work gets simpler, easier. *Under the Red Sky*, certainly, is Dylan taking it easy. Sad to say, he's taking it far too easy.

It's disheartening to find the writer of "Visions of Johanna," and a hundred other cryptic, haunting songs that have inspired countless poets, coming up with titles like "Wiggle Wiggle" and "Handy Dandy." Given a tough, trash-can production by Don Was, David Was and Jack Frost, the record's trusty blues rock sounds strong; a host of rock royalty keeps things rolling — George Harrison, David Crosby, Slash, Bruce Hornsby and a truly fine Al Kooper. Dylan's voice, as dazzlingly expressive as a great bluesman's, sounds sharp, too. The drag is that Dylan doesn't have much to say — or a really memorable way to say it.

There are highlights. Dylan's trademark prophet's rage resurfaces on "Unbelievable" ("Said it was the land of milk and honey/Now they say it's the land of money"); "T.V. Talkin' Song" has a bitter wit ("Sometimes you got to do like Elvis did, and shoot the damn thing out"); "Born in Time" is a moving lament. And the anxious hymn "God Knows" ("God knows the secrets of your heart/He'll tell them to you when you sleep") recalls the bracing air of *New Morning* in its uncanny, soul-baring candor — it's terrific, full-bore Dylan.

For the most part, though, the record is at best workmanlike; at worst, perfunctory. Weakened by a few too many cute or softhearted lyrics ("Baby, thank you for my tea/It's really so sweet of you to be so nice to me," from "10,000 Men") and diluted by tunes that rarely surprise us, *Under the Red Sky* presents a kind of Dylan-Lite. A pastel version of genius isn't, of course, a bad thing — it's just that Dylan's evolving, fully chromatic splendor had made us hope for so much more.

— PAUL EVANS

7

### TRAVELING WILBURYS Traveling Wilburys Volume 3

So Spike, Muddy, Boo and Clayton are back — in the sense that although that's not at all what the Wilburys were called last time, they still are, in gnarled reality, Bob Dylan, George Harrison, Tom Petty and Jeff Lynne (Roy Orbison, of course, being dear and departed). As before, their unvarnished aim is to get in there, give it some wattle, and get out refreshed to resume the solo starchy fray. The improbable result is that, for sheer unbridled galsumphishness, they put you in mind of Motorhead.

For instance, *She's My Baby*, the prospective single, is somehow just so big it makes you laugh. A row of slamming guitars, explosive drums, and the old reprobates taking turns to caterwaul corkingly cross couplets: "She's got a body for business, a head for sin/She knocks me over like a bowling pin," sings Petty. "She's got a body for business, a head for sin/She knocks me over like a bowling pin," sings Petty. "She can play my guitar note by note/She loves to stick her tongue right down my throat," is Dylan's post-born-again rejoinder. In fact, his enthusiasm for a rock 'n' roll knees-up without the burdensomely enigmatic responsibilities of 24-hour-a-day Bobness is ever more apparent than on Vol 1 and stakes the fire for the whole album.

While co-producers Lynne and Harrison cunningly offset their curly-topped friend's crude relish with swathes of chorus harmonies and other sweeteners, Dylan winds the mood up to maximum burlesque and leaves it there. He's as down-in-the-mouth as *Coco The Clown* for *Inside Out*, he sobs his way through *If You Belonged To Me*, he's ludicrously lugubrious in *Seven Deadly Sins* (an Eddie Cochran-style doowop counting song, "Sin number one was when you left me" and so on).

Long on sublime nonsense, short on solemnity, the whole enterprise suggests that, when such talents find they're soulmates too, the first riff and the first word that come to hand may well be just the ticket. Where *Where Were You Last Night?*, a chugalong country lament, is superbly daft. After all, who could possibly wish that, when Dylan asks "Where were you last week?", he'd thought of something more profound to pursue his pained enquiries with than "Were you up the creek?" Not only that, but "Where were you last year?/You sure as hell weren't here" and "It's gittin' to me/Makin' me gloomy" Laureate stuff. The campaign for the release of the missing, already legendary, Volume 2 starts here. ★★★★★

By Satchell

8

### TRAVELLING WILBURYS VOL 3 (Wilbury/WEA)

IT may be a shade unfashionable to say so, but I don't believe that the Wilburys deserved the critical cashing they received over their last album, "Vol 1".

Well, okay, it was never one for the desert island, and the likes of "Dirty World" or "Congratulations" will hardly go down in history among Dylan's greatest utterances, but there was something endearing about the what-we-did-on-our-holidays friendliness of "Handle With Care" and "End Of The Line". It was all very easy.

There was also *The Big O*, the square peg, whose quavering plainiveness seemed quite at odds with the jollity going on around him, an admirably perverse presence in the free-for-alls, and also a solo star: "Not Alone Any More" was exquisite.

Without Orbison, the Wilburys' appeal is rooted purely and simply in their chumminess, the idea of Dylan, Petty, Harrison and Lynne just getting together for a good time. Clearly, then, the tracks which work best are those which find our heroes at their most buddy-buddy, trading lines and verses and backing vocals on "Inside Out", the gently-rolling "The Devil's Been Busy" and the strumalong "She's My Baby".

### ● TRAVELING WILBURYS Volume 3 (Warner Bros/Wilbury WX 384)

The album's dedication to the sadly departed Lefty Wilbury underscores the main difference between *Volume 3* and its predecessor, *Volume 1*: without Roy Orbison's grand operatic touches, the Wilburys are just a sophisticated rockabilly band with a nice line in early Beatles harmonies, courtesy of the production team of George Harrison and Jeff Lynne. This is fine for a few songs — "She's My Baby" is splendidly raw and rough-edged — but when even a Dylan showcase such as "If You Belonged To Me" is just another jovial strumalong, the balance of the first Wilbury collaboration is clearly lacking.

The main problem is the songwriting, which is substantially inferior to *Volume 1*, especially the throwaways that close the sides: "Poor House" is a countrified hoedown; "Wilbury Twist" a gimmicky piece of filler. Where the

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band do take chances, setting Dylan's monotone whine to close-harmony backing vocals on "7 Deadly Sins", you can't help but wonder what the result might have been if Orbison had sung lead — although there's a weary fatalism of a different kind to Dylan's reading that's not entirely displeasing.

### THE TRAVELING WILBURYS: Volume 3 (Warners)

DARK GLASSES, old laurels, tired clichés, rhyming-dictionary rhymes, retarded rhythms, hearty pseudo southern lyrics, grainy old West backdrops, cowboy typography, mega-star mega-tedium does not great music make! Give me Chas 'n' Dave any day.

1 0

### THE TRAVELING WILBURYS The Traveling Wilburys Vol 3

1 2

THE PRIVATE joke continues, but the good news is we're all still allowed to join in.

As the world's denser DJs call the record company demanding to know why they weren't serviced with the non-existent Vol 2, Messrs Harrison, Petty, Dylan and Lynne prove capable of keeping this social group both fun and valid now that the Big O can only look down on proceedings.

The Wilburys sound less inhibited than they did the first time, playing it even more for laughs than on 'Vol 1'. Chief comedian seems to be Tom Petty, in his element on 'Cool Dry Place' and the closing, celebratory 'Wilbury Twist'.

The LP abounds with straight-ahead pop ('If You Belonged To Me' and the rockier-than-usual 'She's My Baby' with guest axe by Gary Moore) to the noticeable exclusion of the weightier moments last time out like 'Tweeter And The Monkey Man'.

Ol' Bob sounds increasingly comfortable as joint lead singer of these ripened popsters and the expected Jeff Lynne takeover doesn't really happen. Instead the musty musketeers explore and salute other areas of rock history such as work on tunes like 'New Blue Moon'. Here's to Vol 5...

■■■■□□ PAUL SEXTON

The fact that the first two of these songs are brimming with concern for the state of the environment, doubtless under the influence of Tom Petty, manages not to detract from their bonhomie.

Elsewhere, the Wilburys wander randomly from country ("Poor House") to a 30-year old dance craze, going so far as to illustrate the steps of the "Wilbury Twist" on the inner sleeve.

And the Sixties crop up more than this once. Dylan, who comes to the fore surprisingly frequently on lead vocal, sails in on a breeze from his early career with a harmonica-ridden "If You Belonged To Me", and George sounds like he's having some fun with The Beatles' jokes: "7 Deadly Sins" rewrites "This Boy", "Inside Out" urges its audience to "twist and shout", and "New Blue Moon" recalls the Fab Four's ancient harmonies to perfection.

The only way to treat Traveling Wilburys is the way they treat themselves, with an irreverent humour and a bottle of Bourbon: definitely nothing to get offended about.

CAROL CLERK

1 1

## THE BYRDS

The Byrds (Columbia/Legacy CD import only)

THERE ARE, as the philosophers among you will know, three irrefutable proofs of the existence of an omnipotent, *benign*, being, of God. One: the shape of the opposite sex. Two: the fact that Glasgow Rangers always get a sound spanking whenever they venture outside the cosy confines of the Scottish Premier League. And three: the music of The Byrds.

There is, as the musicologists among you will know, a commonly recited roll of rock honour that runs 'Elvis, The Beatles, Dylan, The Stones, blah blah blah'. This is wrong. It should run 'Elvis, Chuck Berry, The Beatles, Dylan, *The Byrds*, The Stones, blah blah blah'. They were one of the few rock acts in history who created a wholly original *sound*. Indeed, until the triumph of the 'Funky Drummer'/Soul II Soul shuffle, that sound – the consecrated drone of *flockfuhrer* Roger McGuinn's Rickenbacker 12-string – was still the most aimed-for noise in pop.

The Byrds were formed as an attempt to fuse The Beatles and Dylan; they ended up influencing both. They did much, *much* more besides. In half a decade of incandescent creativity they invented folk rock, dragged oriental influences into pop's previously West-dominated whirl, created the now discredited but then essential Country rock hybrid and popularised psychedelia. With their combination of melodiously soaring music and life-affirmingly close vocal harmony – no band, before or since, has been able to boast three utterly brilliant singers – (*what about The Band?* – Ed) they made sure that in rock's constant battle between light and shade, sweetness and grind, melody and noise, each of the first-named had at least one mighty champion.

And they achieved all these heroic deeds while remaining almost cryogenically cool, a role model for generations of bands that were to follow in their jetstream. When they stepped off the plane in Stockholm at the start of their first European tour – all shades, bowl cuts and Cuban-heeled boots – they were the very blueprint of how a rock group should look, hip incarnate. They were fortunate too. They were able – unlike the goldfish-bowl-trapped Beatles and Stones – to enjoy their massive success of the mid-'60s without let or hindrance. Cars, clobber, drugs and California girls a go-go. Lucky, lucky bastards.

What am I trying to say? Simply this; that throughout their time The Byrds were never less than a great rock group and that the first version – McGuinn, David Crosby, Chris Hillman, Gene Clark and Michael Clarke – was maybe the best of all time, an unmatched archetype.

'The Byrds' is almost too much, like being forced to live on

champagne; four CDs – a total of 90 songs – that cover each phase of The Byrds' fantastic flight, topped off with two reunion recordings from this year's Roy Orbison tribute (including an almost surreally amusing stroll through 'Mr Tambourine Man' with their erstwhile inspiration and top grunter, Dylan) and four songs recorded in Nashville in August. Nicely packaged and copiously annotated (McGuinn himself was consultant on the whole shebang), the collection is laced with lashings of alternate takes and smeared with stuff previously only available on for-fanatics-only bootlegs. To call 'The Byrds' 'definitive' and/or 'authoritative' is like defining the Pacific as 'largish' and 'quite wet'.

It is, almost literally, all here. The names alone bring lumps to the throat, a gingering to the pulse. For the casual observer there are the familiar, epochal, still dazzling hits – 'Mr Tambourine Man', 'I'll Feel A Whole Lot Better', 'Turn! Turn! Turn!', '5D', 'So You Wanna Be A Rock 'N' Roll Star', the holy 'Eight Miles High' and the rest. For the sceptical there's 'Chimes Of Freedom', 'All I Really Want To Do', 'My Back Pages', 'You Ain't Going Nowhere' and all the others that prove that The Byrds, and not Bob Dylan himself, were the ultimate interpreters of rock's most important and influential canon.

For the Byrd fanciers, there's a trove of their less famous but totally wondrous gems – 'She Don't Care About Time', 'Why?', 'John Riley', 'Renaissance Fair', 'Everybody's Been Burned' and 'Lady Friend' (the best rock single ever, probably) and a myriad of others. And for the utterly fixated there's the recently unearthed curios and afterthoughts, some of which (like 'Triad', Crosby's amazing invitation to his lover to indulge in some three-in-a-bed capers) appeared on '88's US-only 'Never Before', while others (including the Gram Parsons-sung rejects from the 'Sweethearts Of The Rodeo' sessions) are unique to this package. All are seriously fab, the sort of things that lesser bands would've built mansions on, never mind chucking in the bin.

I could go on (and on and on) trying desperately to convey the sheer beauty and necessity of this music, trying to commend it to you. Suffice it to say that I would gladly give up three years of my life to be hearing it for the first time. I could go on and on, battling against the inadequacy of the blessed English tongue, trying to describe what I believe to be the greatest rock music ever to sanctify the air into which it billows. Suffice to say that it's the best bits of the human spirit captured, distilled and turned into sound, then sent aloft on wings of perfection. (Infinite 10s)

Danny Kelly

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## 'WANTED MAN'

A SERIES of articles, interviews and brief critical appraisals, "WANTED MAN: IN SEARCH OF BOB DYLAN" (edited by John Bauldie, Black Spring £12.95) is an occasionally illuminating collection, spanning the man's career from his enrolment in 1959 at Minnesota University, to his collaboration with Daniel Lanois on last year's "Oh Mercy".

Paul McCartney recalls how Dylan misheard the lyrics to the middle eight of "I Wanna Hold Your Hand", thinking they went "I get high, I get high, I get high", preferring them to the original, "I can't hide, I can't hide, I can't hide"; Marta McKee relates how Lone Justice were given a new Dylan song "Go Way Little Boy", how he came to the studio to ensure it was sung properly, but wouldn't leave until McKee was virtually forced to do a Zimmerman impression. "Ah, now you're doing some real singing," he said.

Best of all is Patti Smith's account of the "Rolling Thunder" period, where she remembers Dylan as, "A fucking maniac... intense... I look at him and I don't see a guy giving out leaflets, holding a banner, I see a machine gun."

PAUL LESTER



**BOB DYLAN**

**BEACON THEATRE, NYC**  
**WE have been treated to all manner of Dylan during the grizzled bard's annual visits to New York during the past four years: largely brilliant (with Tom Petty, '86), largely inconsequential (with The Grateful Dead, '87), surprisingly transcendent ('88), utterly indifferent ('89). But at the opening show of Dylan's four night return to the Beacon, we got them all at once.**

He shuffled his song-deck with dizzying inconsistency, alternatively flashing aces and jokers like a schizo cardsharp – all too willing, it seemed, to play a losing hand just to upend our expectations. The Protest Prince, The Voice Of A Generation, the Folk-Rock Avenger – none of those Dylans showed up tonight. What we got was the Imp Perverse.

The opening sequence was simply bizarre. Fronting a hard rock quartet, Dylan walked on while the house lights were still up and led the band into a short, chaotic garage-slop instrumental version of – are you ready? – "The Marine Corps Hymn" ("From The Halls Of Montezuma"). Then it was straight into "Rainy Day Women", with Dylan charging through the song with a kind of enraged commitment, spitting out the words and trashing the melody with black glee. Time itself has not been kind to "Joey", that "minute lump in the middle of 'Desire'", and Dylan

didn't do the song any more favours by gassing it up with arena-rock bombast although, gratefully, he cut it by more than half, excising the interminable middle verse.

There were moments when he seemed to appreciate the virtues of good, simple rock 'n' roll – "Silvio", a cracking tear through "Watching The River Flow". But they were few and far between, sprinkled amid throwaway versions of "Don't Think Twice, It's Alright", "Shelter From The Storm" and a truly appalling "I Shall Be Released", its country-hymn quality battered by the band and its redemptive promise shredded by Dylan's contemptuous vocal. He might as well have just taken the song out back and put a bullet through it.

Yet just when you least expected it, another, newly-inspired Dylan would step up to the mike. Ironically, the only song of the night he truly seemed to care about was the only one he hadn't written: the old anti-war folk song "John Brown". He sang brilliantly, vigorously enunciating every word over a sparse acoustic shuffle, clearly relishing the poignancy and articulate range of his performance. And even his cynicism could be transcendent at times. In "It Ain't Me Babe", one of three originals that made up the rest of the short obligatory acoustic set, he toyed with the verses, mocking the need and desire in the verses with anarchic vocal

phrasing, then biting down hard on the irrevocable denial in the chorus. As an expression of his own refusal to be bound either by the desires of his audience or the weight of his achievements, it was his truest performance of the evening.

After that, it was back to abnormal. Dylan sleepwalked through "Under The Red Sky", the only song from the new album. "Man In The Long Black Coat" from "Oh Mercy" fared somewhat better, although the breathless, brittle sound of the band blunted the impact of Dylan's vocal. Surprisingly, he appeared to find new life in that old warhorse, "Like A Rolling Stone", although he couldn't resist playing stump-the-band with a weird, last-minute false ending. He wasn't so patient with "Blowin' In The Wind", though; Dylan literally rewrote the melody right on the spot. And not for the better.

Admittedly, there is a morbid fascination in watching Bob Dylan shoot himself in the foot. And it's much more fun than watching him just jukebox his way through the hits. But too often tonight, it sounded like he'd finally come to truly despise some of his most enduring songs, that he'd given up trying to find anything at all new in them. If he keeps doing them to death up there like that, it may only be a matter of time before we feel the same.

DAVID FRICKE

**WANTED MAN: IN SEARCH OF BOB DYLAN** Edited by John Bauldie (Black Spring Press £12.95)

THIS COLLECTION of interviews with people who have worked with, met or bumped into Bob Dylan over the years looks at first sight to be for obsessive Bobcats only. Who really wants to know what brand of whisky he drinks or what colour tie he wore when he went to college? But after a while the gossip becomes

compulsive reading, and the various narrators reveal more about the contradictions in Dylan's personality than the studious biographers who treat the bard's life as a carefully plotted career.

There are plenty of star interviews, but Paul McCartney, Patti Smith, Leonard Cohen, Bruce Springsteen and Maria McKee say little more than what a great and weird man Bob is. Ronnie Wood, however, reveals that the songs he did with Dylan

and Keith Richards at Live Aid in 1985 were not decided upon until they were walking up the ramp to the stage (No!!! – Ed)

The most interesting section is by Clinton Heylin, who has transcribed various on-stage sermonettes given by Dylan on his 1980 'Saved' tour. One night Dylan attacked San Francisco's gays, saying "I guess they're working up to being 100 per cent of the population. I just think the iniquity is not yet full and I don't want to be around when it is."

But a few years later, Dylan tells poet Allen Ginsberg to tell William Burroughs – a notoriously amoral and savage gay writer – that he's been reading his books and "believes every word he says".

No conclusions are drawn by the editor, which is good news for other writers who want to get in on the Bob book industry; it leaves the field clear for someone else to compose a tome on how Bob's verbal diarrhoea is of cosmos-bending importance.

Duncan Bartlett



Dylan proving that if nothing else, he can read

This month's meeting of mildly eccentric, but nonetheless great, minds: **Bob Dylan** (allegedly a little worse for wear at the time) has recorded "guest vocals" (along with several other illustrious contributors, including Tom Petty and Paula Abdul) on *The Spirit Of Rock 'n' Roll* for **Brian Wilson**. The track was intended for the former Beach Person's forthcoming solo album, but latest reports suggest that it may be left "in the can" after all.

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## The Secret Diary Of Bob Dylan Aged 49<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>

**MON 10:** Got up. Had breakfast – 12 kosher sausages in a fire and brimstone horseradish dip washed down with a goblet of communion wine. Halfway through get a call from Don Was about the new album. "Where are you, Bob? It's 2pm and Elton John, Yoko Ono and Bette Midler are waiting for you at the studio." I told him I'd examined myself with a magnifying glass but I didn't have any karma for new songs. He said: "I'll have you doing 'Walk The Dinosaur' if you don't come up with some soon," so I promised to knock some songs out when I got home from tea. And

supper. And a few swift ones down the local. Remove biographer from garbage pails on way out of house.

**TUES 11:** Got up. Had stinking headache from last night's session with Blind Lemon Leadbelly down the Malibu Beach Moonlight Bar and Coffee House. On way to studio I write song called 'Doomsday Train Runs Through My Farm'. Steal tune from old Donovan B-Side. When I arrive, Don tells me I need eight tunes to fill the album, so we cut it up into eight little bits and I make up the rest as we go along. Have a stiff drink, read a bit of the Pentateuch and sing for a bit. Finished at four and went home to work on my new spiritual rockumentary about Red Indian beat poets. Go to bed. Notice microphone under pillow. Remove bootlegger from under bed. Got back to bed. Take out my teeth and go to sleep.

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### THE MAN WHO COULDN'T SAVE THE WORLD 20

Dear Edwin. It's a pity to see you lambasting Bob Dylan for his new album 'Under The Red Sky'. I thought all you music critics would have by now latched on to the fact that Bob Dylan never was and never will be your messiah, leading you to salvation with his supposed prophetic songs. He is a troubadour (self professed) writing and singing for his own release and if he entertains a few of us along the way all the better.

*PM Geach, Folkestone*  
*If Dylan doesn't have messianic aspirations how come he's using old U2 album titles? – GM*

"I'm not a fantastically gifted singer, in terms of being a proper singer. But then neither's Bob Dylan or Brian Ferry. That's not what pop music's about is it? Our style is defined by what we can't do"

**Neil Tennant.**

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### WANTED MAN: IN SEARCH OF BOB DYLAN

Edited by John Bauldie  
Black Spring Press £12.95

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Just what is it about this grumpy, 49 year old father that inspires such devotion and wide-eyed awe? I mean, will we ever see books like *In Search Of... Michael Bolton?* In the meantime, we'll have to settle for another book on ol' Ramblin' Bob, and a mighty entertainin' one it is too.

Editor John Bauldie and his contributors are impressed by but never in awe of Mr Grumpy. Dip into *Wanted Man* and you'll come out smeared in something mund-grabbing. The opening act of the Rolling Thunder Review's 1978 Tampa show? None other than comedian Steve Martin! The first Bob Dylan original composition? 'Bonnie Why'd You Cut My Hair'!

The book is peppered with close encounters of the Dylan kind, with comments from the original 'Girl From The North Country', Paul McCartney, Patti Smith, Allen Ginsberg, Leonard Cohen, Eric Clapton and Roy Orbison. Great stories abound, such as Neil Diamond storming off stage at The Band's 'Last Waltz' and informing Dylan: "You're really going to have to go some to follow me, man, I was so great", to be greeted by Dylan's: "What do you want me to do, go on stage and fall asleep?"

You don't really get really inside the enigma that is Bob Dylan, but you get real close, particularly when you remember Dylan's impact, and read Joe Boyd on the cataclysmic Newport '68: "Dylan was the answer to their prayers... Everything they had struggled through, the McCarthy period, they'd all struggled through the '50s... and finally here was a guy who had taken up the mantle of Woody Guthrie, who was singing politically aware songs, and getting them to Number 1 on the charts. And white middle-class kids were going south in the summer to register as voters in Mississippi, were protesting against the Vietnam war... and Dylan was the focus".

*Patrick Humphries*



**B**ob Dylan — a four-CD boxed set of unreleased material in the pipeline for the summer — will be playing London, Belfast, Dublin and Glasgow in February no doubt, but as Q goes to press his band can only be described as in a state of complete Bobness. With the redoubtable G. E. Smith's departure as guitarist/MD last October (back to the house band on American TV's long-running Saturday Night Live), the seer began a series of testing live-in-concert auditions for new riffsmiths, checking out the hopefuls' response to the sort of stress endemic to Zimployment by feeding their guitars through his monitors so that they couldn't hear themselves playing — but he could. Unsurprisingly in the circumstances, nobody seems to have survived this trial by fire and the outsider coming up on the rails may well be none other than former Wombie Chris Spedding who has been strolling round Paris telling everyone that he and Dylan are not only linked but inked. What's more, further boat-rocking rumours are that drummer Christopher Parker, faithful for the same three years as G. E., has also departed and may be replaced by Bury-born Ian Wallace, formerly of King Crimson and last heard with Dylan on 1978's Street-Legal.

2 2



**JOAN BAEZ IN CONCERT**

(Old Gold, 55 mins)

Last time she was in the UK, Joan Baez had to cancel her concerts because of poor advance ticket sales, and for the greater part of the 1980s she's been without a recording contract.

2 3

How times have changed for Joanie who, as Queen of Folk, imperiously ruled the early '60s and as Politico Impassionata managed to keep something torch-like aloft through the turbulent early '70s. But though she looks a lot different now, middle-aged glamour becomes her and though she's backed here by a competent little band, her act remains essentially the same as it ever was.

Truly old-timers may be disappointed to hear that there's no Mary Hamilton or Silver Dagger on this video — of a concert recorded recently in the Ventura Theatre, California before a sympathetically grizzled audience but she does start with a Bob Dylan song, Forever Young (performed with over-precise propriety perhaps), shrieks in Spanish through Gracias A La Vida (long a Baez staple) before briefly wallowing in further Dylan nostalgia with Diamonds And Rust still easily the best song Ms Baez has written. A chug through her greatest hit The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down and a warble, in effective soulful-bluesy fashion, of House Of The Rising Sun lead to a gospel clapalong to Oh Freedom and an arms-aloft humalong to Amazing Grace. It is, for the most part, familiar fare.

With two exceptions. It comes as something of a surprise about 15 minutes into the set to see Joan Baez put down her little Gibson guitar to tickle the ivories. She sings a new song which, at first hearing, seems to be yet another of her 'older woman-young lover' encounters, this time with someone who may or may not be from Cameroon (the lyrics cascade so quickly, and rather gauchely, that it's not easy to follow the song's plot) but who certainly was 'not yet born when my career began in '59'. Pur-leeze! The second surprise is the unexpected appearance of Jackson Browne for a couple of duets. Alas, his voice is essentially incompatible with Ms Baez's (whose is?) and the outcome is rather disappointing. ★★

John Bauldin

**NO DIRECTION HOME: THE LIFE AND MUSIC OF BOB DYLAN**

Robert Shelton (Penguin £4.95)

As pop's single most influential figure, Dylan has been written to death, but as it was Shelton's 1961 review that led to Dylan's rise, this is the best book to tell the tale of how a scruffy, ill-educated hick came to be the most quoted and revered figure in pop. Shelton barrels along until the 1966 bike crash (accounting for 75 percent of the book) then fizzles out. Gripping and contentious as his subject, it just makes it hard to reconcile this cultural behemoth with the man who recently wrote 'wiggle, wiggle, wiggle like a bowl of soup.'



LYRICS 1962 - 1985  
Bob Dylan (Cape £9.95)

Here's the printed proof of how Dylan did it. There's a lot of dead wood, a lot of metaphysical tosh and a heap of derivative blues. There's also a whole stack of some of the funniest and most thought-provoking lyrics rock has yet seen. But then, it's time for my boot-heels to be wanderin'...

2 4

**SONG AND DANCE MAN: THE ART OF BOB DYLAN**

Michael Gray (Hamlyn £4.95)

Still the only readable work which treats Dylan as a serious artist, and analyses his work with the scrupulous attention to detail usually only accorded to poets like Blake. Gray can be quirky in his choice of playing favourites, but his critical faculties are sharp, and illuminate the staggering range and scope of Dylan's work from 1962 to 1981.



**BEST LIVE ACT**

**The Rolling Stones**

Award accepted by Bill Wyman  
Voted by Q's readers

Full results: 1 The Rolling Stones 2 Paul McCartney 3 David Bowie 4 Prince 5 Madonna 6 Eric Clapton 7 Pink Floyd 8 The Pixies 9 Sinead O'Connor 10 Bob Dylan  
Bill Wyman: 'On behalf of my back-

ing group, Mick, Keith, Charlie and the new one... what's his name?

... Ronnie Wood, I'd like to say thank you to everyone. It's very nice."

The following message was received from Keith Richards: "I would like to thank all you Q readers for giving my favourite band this honour. Bless you all, Happy New Year. Keith Richards."

2 5





BOB DYLAN

## Win Dylan tickets

**B**OB DYLAN is coming to Scotland and I've got free tickets for you to win.

He has announced he will play two shows at the SECC, Glasgow on February 2 and 3 - his only dates outside London.

**26** Promoters Regular Music have given me four pairs of tickets for *Sunday Mail* readers.

Just drop me a line and tell me what is Bob Dylan's real name.

Send your answers on a postcard to: **DYLAN CONTEST, Sunday Mail, Anderston Quay, Glasgow, G3 3DA.**

A pair of tickets will go to the first four correct entries out of the postbag.

Tickets for the shows are available from usual outlets by personal application and cost £15 plus booking fee.

★ CHART-topping Maria McKee will never forget the weird psychoanalyst she used to visit in New York.

The powerful singer, who put *Show Me Heaven* at No. 1, says: "She started pestering me about getting tickets to see Bob Dylan.

"She wanted to go back-stage afterwards, she said, because God had told her she was going to marry Dylan.

"After that I cancelled my sessions."

**28**

David Beresford  
in Johannesburg

**O**NE of the more startling demonstrations that times they are a-changing in South Africa was provided yesterday by implicit confirmation from President F.W. de Klerk that his son was dating a Coloured woman. **29**

### Bob Dylan's Worst Albums of the Eighties

*Dylan & The Dead* (1989):

Unrecognisable and interminable versions. For completists only.

*Down in the Groove* (1988): Ol' Bob whining through 'Let's Stick Together' and 'Shenandoah'. For completists only.

*Hearts of Fire* (1987): Soundtrack for rock film which was only exceeded in ineptitude by 'Give My Regards to Broad Street' and 'Under A Cherry Moon'. For completists only.

*Knocked Out Loaded* (1986): Bob's version of 'They Killed Him' was the most unpalatable tribute to the son of God since John Wayne's in *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. For completists only.

*Real Life* (1984): Lacklustre live version of the old groaner's 1984 UK tour. Worst live Dylan album since 1976's *Hard Rain*. For completists only.

*Saved* (1980): Bob gets God. Fans suffer.

Does not bode well for Eighties. For loonies only. **27**

In the past ten years, 844 people have jumped or fallen under Tubes. Andrew Tyler talks to the drivers who live in fear

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID MODELL

# BLOOD ON THE TRACKS **30**

**US NEWS**

★ **BRUCE HORNSBY** has been handling an eclectic line of borrowed goods at recent gigs. One show finding him performing Elton John's 'Burn Down The Mission', Traffic's 'Low Spark Of High Heeled Boys', Grateful Dead's 'Jack Straw', Dylan's 'It Takes A Lot To Laugh, It Takes A Train To Cry' and a mini-tribute to Leon Russell.

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**ZIM'S - ANCIENT & MODERN**

Never mind 'Strikin' It Rich', the Hunter must make a note to strike Bob Dylan from next year's Christmas card list! Why? Well, just before the festivities, the crusty ol' Zim launched his own Strikin' It Rich record label with a compilation of obscurities entitled 'Christmas Party With Eddie G'.

The Mr G in question is one Eddie Gorodetsky, a record collector of some repute. For those who missed it, guests at Eddie's shindig included THE FABULOUS THUNDERBIRDS, NRBQ, FOGHAT, RUFUS THOMAS and BOBBY LLOYD & THE SKEL-

ETONS, along with THE THREE STOOGES.

Dylan's label has been a long time coming. It was originally mooted in the mid-70s as Ashes & Sand, with Leon Redbone as the inaugural signing. Whether Strikin' It Rich is to be an ongoing operation with a regular schedule of new and old releases is still unclear.



RETNA  
Come on down - Bob Dylan is Strikin' It Rich

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The first ever advert placed by CBS in NME (1964)

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Meanwhile, elsewhere on the globe, **BOB DYLAN**, haggard spokesman for grey-flecked hippy-types everywhere, has evidently decided that the white dove has sailed over too many seas and it's now time to start shooting the bastards. Bobby, 49, last time we checked the label in the back of his singlet, played a Gulf War Special Show at America's West Point Military Academy last week where 4,000 clean-cut cadets gave a standing ovation to his renditions of 'Masters Of War' and 'A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall'. This is shocking enough but we hear that as Dylan left the stage he was heard to mutter: "They didn't look like no leper colony nuns to me!" Wrong venue Bob, next time ask the bus driver.

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**MAD BUGGER DISEASE**

ON a roll after the critically acclaimed "Oh Mercy" album had provoked a lot of flattering comparisons with "Blood On The Tracks" and earned him the best reviews of his recent career, BOB DYLAN was at London's Hammersmith Odeon for six nights in February. The shows were a stone gas. Dylan refused to stick to the script, of course, and there were some hair-raising moments as he threatened to spiral off into his own wild universe, leaving his hapless but courageous band floundering in his unpredictable slipstream. But Dylan was conspicuously more at ease with his vast and historic repertoire than he had been for some years, and there was little of the thuggish musical vandalism of his own work that had made his Wembley Arena shows just a year

All this promised much for his next album, for which he teamed up with fashionable knob-twiddlers Don and David Was, who in turn enlisted an all-star cast, including Slash from Guns N' Roses, Elton John, Jimmie and Stevie Ray Vaughan, George Harrison and Al Kooper. The record was meant to be a determined attempt at that rare and outrageous thing—a commercial Dylan album, specifically tailored for the charts. It was no such thing, inevitably. It was a loud, cantankerous R&B album, the supporting cast completely overshadowed by Dylan's massively brooding presence. It was greeted with howls of astonished derision as final evidence of Dylan's artistic decline. But there was greatness lurking in Dylan's manic eccentricity, his tumultuous eccentricity, especially on the hilariously self-aggrandizement of "Handy Dandy" and the cataclysmic R&B meltdown of "Cat's In The Well". According to Allan Jones, anyway.

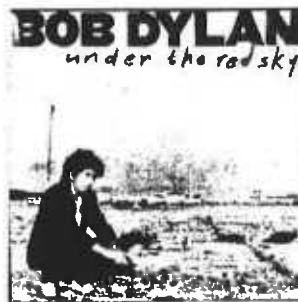
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**Bob Dylan**

*Under the Red Sky*  
(Columbia)

LIKE A LOT OF GOOD Bob Dylan records, *Under the Red Sky* deliberately raises more questions than it intends to answer, yet I can't think of another Dylan album that's ever done so in quite this way or been as difficult to pin down. Many of the songs here seem simultaneously innocent and apocalyptic, comic and sad. The lyrics often strike a somewhat bizarre but genuinely haunting balance between children's tales and biblical fables, most sounding childlike, fresh and as ancient as eternity. More than anything else, *Under the Red Sky* seems to revel in its own mysteriousness, to celebrate the twang of the weird and just how fantastically strange and unbelievable everything we see and know and do is.

Musically, Dylan gathers up a sort of farm-team Traveling Wilburys (George Harrison, Elton John, Randy Jackson, David Crosby, Al Kooper, Slash, Stevie Ray Vaughan, David Lindley, Waddy Wachtel, Bruce Hornsby and others) who sound anonymously exultant and not supersession stiff. When Kooper kicks off the title tune and "Handy Dandy" with some catchy, *Highway 61 Revisited*-style organ playing and Dylan launches into a goofy talking song ("TV Song") reminiscent of those on his early albums, we think we know where we are, and it's a comfortable place for both Dylan and us.



Then the words make us wonder. "Wiggle Wiggle" starts like a classic double-entendre rock 'n' roll song but soon pushes into scary, disturbing territory ("Wiggle till it bites, wiggle till it cuts.../Wiggle till you vomit fire"). Everything seems pastoral for the little boy and girl in "Under the Red Sky" until they're "baked in a pie" and Dylan sings, "This is the key to the kingdom and this is the town/This is the blind horse that leads you around." "Born in Time" is a torchy love song, timelessly happy and unhappy, while "God Knows" suggests that lovers—and people—can get through anything with belief and perseverance. "It's Unbelievable" and "Cat's in the Well" indicate that there's a lot to get through, with more on the horizon.

So far, my favorite songs on *Under the Red Sky* are "10,000 Men" and "2 X 2," a pair of biblical-sounding stunners that are as wonderfully impossible to summarize and grasp as they are to forget, and "Handy Dandy," which takes off on a "Like a Rolling Stone" riff and just doesn't quit. All this is subject to revision, though, because further listenings could well lead to new alleys, and who knows for sure what's here, except mystery and a casual mixture of major and minor that sounds like a deliberately throwaway masterpiece?

—Paul Nelson **37**

**TRAVELING WILBURYS  
Vol. 3**

WILBURY 7599-26324

Ah, the sublime glory of four of rockdom's most sophisticated, accomplished and, let's face it, thoroughly grown-up stars behaving like hormone-intensive pubescents bopping in the garage after school. Apart from the missing Big O, what distinguishes this album from the first is the development of a genuine group feeling, as if Dylan, Petty, Harrison and Lynne have thrown their collective cautions to the wind in the interests of having a good blow. Songs which seem downright silly at first listen grow to be ludicrously lovable second time around and the whole album becomes an irresistible invitation to dance and laugh and fall over.

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DEBATED

DYLAN DECADE

PATRICK HUMPHRIES, IN HIS burial of Dylan's latest LP, describes the previous ten years of the artist's career as "a decade of intermittent failure interrupted only by downright disaster". I'm sick to the back teeth of this mindless journalistic shorthand, and I want to put a bullet into the temple of this myth.

Saved (1980) is musically superb, mixing gospel and R&B beautifully in a forceful statement of Dylan's beliefs. The following year's Shot Of Love, though a rougher, more ramshackle production, is by no means bereft of inspiration, as it includes Dylan's most serene, exquisite song, "Every Grain Of Sand". 1983's over-polished "Inhdele" contained many excellent performances and powerful songs, with one stinker, the Dire Straits-ish "Sweetheart Like You".

Real Live was a crock of shit with listless by-numbers performances, and the next studio LP, "Empire Burlesque", despite containing a half-dozen cracking songs, was flawed by the unnecessarily busy Arthur Baker mix.

The biggest calamity of Dylan's career is usually cited as "Knocked Out Loaded" (after "Self Portrait"). It's true I need a sick-bag for side one with its ethnic-man steel drums and St Winifred's-type kids choir, but can anyone dismiss side two's blockbusting "Brownsville Girl" or the bitter-sweet closer "Under Your Spell"?

Admittedly "Down In The Groove" is a minor piece, with wildly-erratic quality control, but among the sloppy, turgid, half-hearted attempts at entertainment there lay a couple of small gems in "Silvio" and "Death Is Not The End". It was almost a case of shock treatment to find Dylan providing the highlights of the

Travelling Wilburys album and a double shock when he pulled out the stops for "Oh Mercy". One wonders at the wisdom of whoever sanctioned the release of the "Dylan & The Dead" LP release, which is the aural equivalent of seeing a lover dying of cancer. This dirge was slightly redeemed by the delicate but stately "Knockin' On Heaven's Door".

Of course, "Under The Red Sky" is a disappointment after the majestic "Oh Mercy". The latter platter saw Dylan angry, dejected, totally alone and utterly compelling. Red Sky shows him with his curlers out having a knees-up - and why not? This record is terrific, especially "It's Unbelievable" (which would not be out of place on "Oh Mercy") and "Handy Dandy" (crazy name, crazy song).

Patrick Humphries should be told that Bob Dylan has written mediocre ditties and rotten rhymes long before that decade of intermittent failure only interrupted by downright failure. Has he ever heard "Rainy Day Women", "Peggy Day", "Joey", "Ballad In Plain D...?"

Paul Hamilton  
London E2

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Now, almost inevitably, Don is set to twiddle the knobs on the new Cohen album. Though he claims bemusement at his present position as the hottest producer in the business, Don evidently has a studio-side manner which adapts to a wide range of personalities and musical styles. His production work never lifts the Was (Not Was) sound wholesale ("We have a great sound but it's not for everyone"). However, working with **Bob Dylan** on "Under The Blood Red Sky", Don got a request that took him by surprise.

"One day he said: 'Explain this sampling thing to me.' So we explained it and he said: 'Can you do that on my record?' I said 'Yeah, you may not recognize yourself - but we can do it.' So there's a song called 'TV Talking Song' on there, and we took a day with it: took all the instruments out except his voice and brought in all the Was (Not Was) band. It was really cool. Too 'out-to-lunch' for him at the time, but I'd like to think that in six months' time we could talk him into releasing it because it's really wild - basically a hip-hop track which locks right onto his cadence."

But the critical reaction to "Under The Blood Red Sky" has been less than enthusiastic.

Don: "People expect something from Bob Dylan that he can't deliver. People want their youth back; they want the '60s back. Given time to settle, I think they'll realise these aren't just nursery rhymes, because there's depth to these songs. It's a different style of writing, not as complex as 'Gates Of Eden', but there is something there."

"So I stand by the record. It's a cool record. He's not trying to rest on his laurels: I think he really understands it better than some of these bands that take three years to make a record. It's just one in a series of 60 albums that you make if you spend your life making music. This is what I'm thinking today. Tomorrow I might be thinking something different."

"One other thing: in the first issue of VOX there was a piece on Bob Dylan with a quote credited to me that said he was doing speed, which was really irritating because I never said it. He wasn't doing speed, and I would only say something like that as part of a joke - but I've never even met Nick Kent!"

Dave: "We're suggesting Nick doesn't walk down too many dark alleys if he comes to Detroit."

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EMOTIONAL: Dylan



SMART: McCartney

## Rock 'n' rolling in it

**BOB DYLAN** and Paul McCartney both exemplify what I mean when I say Geminis do best financially when they treat commerce as a harmless game rather than a serious threat.

They both sang for the love of it until someone eventually offered to pay them.

At this point, presumably, their innate

business abilities woke up and they drove a smart bargain.

But to prove that their "emotional reaction" to money is as strong as other Geminis, I cite Dylan's line "money doesn't talk, it swears", and remind you that McCartney co-wrote: "I don't care too much for money, money can't buy me love."

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**Paul Simon from Q**

"It's interesting, that Dylan comparison, because there was a line on *The Obvious Child* that I thought sounded so much like Bob I almost rang him up and asked him to sing it on the album in that cracked, humorous voice of his. Then I figured that it might be too distracting. *Hey, what's Bob Dylan doing on here?* But it just had that real Dylan feel and phrasing to it. I could hear him in my head every time I sang it. It's funny too because Dylan's new album is called *Under The Red Sky* and he has a song on it called *Born In Time*. And there's a line in one of the songs on this album which is *She can't sleep now/The moon is red* and I have a song called *Born At The Right Time*. Spooky, right?

Gee, yeah, I can hardly sleep at night.

**The Proclaimers from Q, Feb 1991**

Amongst a veritable glut of superlatives, Bob Dylan & The Band's *The Basement Tapes* holds a particular place in Charlie's affections. "My dad, who wasn't a Bob Dylan fan, bought me this album when I was about 12, and for half of it i wondered, What the fuck is this? But I found it so funny, it's like Monty Python, some of the lyrics are outrageous - *Please Mrs Henry, won't you take me to your room/I've been sucking too many eggs, drinking too many kegs.* -And the band's stuff, *Ain't No More Cane* and *Katie's Been Gone* - it could've come off really badly, but everything on it's brilliant, even the funny ones, like the *Clothes Line Saga*. It's maybe the best album I've ever heard. And it's so badly recorded, y'know ?"

**Neil Young from Vox, Nov 90**

"I just can't associate with anyone or any group involved in a comeback right now. Well, sure I associate with Bob Dylan and Lou Reed. Both their recent albums are great. But with us three, you've got to understand - it's a big time in our lives right now. We've come through, we've survived intact and are still creatively focused."

**How the Mighty Have Fallen**

It was disturbing to notice that, in all the music press hullabaloo about Walter Yetnikoff leaving CBS, Dylan's name was hardly mentioned. CBS was described as the label of various 'top stars' but Bob was hardly ever among those listed.

A similar thing happened with the reviews of *Rubaiyat: Elektra's 40th Anniversary*; an album of cover versions of songs throughout the label's history. With the exception of *The Melody Maker*, none I read mentioned Frisell, Holcob's and Horvitz's *Going, Going, Gone*.

Finally, the beginning of the year horoscopes didn't often feature Dylan as a prominent Gemini. (OK I admit I gave up looking pretty quick).

**Edwin Pouncey**

Here's a little piccie of the chap. I thought you'd all want to see what someone who gives *Dylan & The Dead* 8 out of 10 and *Under The Red Sky* 2 out of 10 looks like. His piece on the latter is included in the cuttings section. Here is a snippet from his review of the former:

"When the 'writer' and the 'hippies' meet on stage, the two pieces fit together perfectly! Dylan returns to his *Blonde On Blonde* swagger while The Dead give him the best backing sound he's had since the Band."

**NME's CBS 100 SERIOUS SOUNDS**

The NME has been stretching my loyalty way past decent limits recently - it is difficult to give it up after nearly 20 years of weekly reading - and this piece from 19 January '91 is no different. As a farewell to CBS they list 100 'serious sounds'. If I told you that there was one Dylan single and one LP, I'd expect you all to guess LARS for the former but none of you to go for **Dylan & The Dead** in the latter! It wasn't as bad as it sounds, actually, as each artist(s) had one entry only. They could've made an exception for Dylan, though.

**Slash from NME, 19 January '91**

"Don Was called me up and asked me to play with Dylan, which turned out to be one of those mistakes you learn from. He must've said two words while I was there. One was 'Hi' and the other was 'play it like Django Reinhart.'<sup>1</sup> With all due respect to Django, that would have been a great concept had it fit the song.

The whole thing was just a drag, nothing against Dylan, because my dad liked him. I mean I grew up on Bob Dylan; he was the guy my family listened to. And I never disliked him until the last five or six albums. I did get to meet George Harrison while I was there, though, and that was great. he was doing some fucking awesome slide playing."

**The Ticket Saga - Previewed Again**

I couldn't resist slipping this in, as I'm sure you'll all be delighted to know that it looks like I've got a front row ticket for the 13th. (Lambchops again !). This being at one time the last night & me being upset at having an "M" - little did I know the traumas to come.

Another point re the tickets: both the N.M.E. and **The Melody Maker** have said that Dylan has added a sixth night on the 17th. Shit what are my tickets on the 15th & 16th all about then ? This is really sloppy, Allan Jones should get a grip; the N.M.E. probably did it on purpose!

**ARENA**

I suppose you've all seen the trailer by now, I haven't, it is Van The Man with Bobby & The Parthenon (*not* the tour backing band). Sounds yummy.

**Live Sky**

My initial high hopes for **Under The Red Sky** songs played live seem justified from the tapes I've heard so far - New York and Carbondale. What about Joey and **Serve Somebody!**? Shit hot or what.

**Record Collector**

The January issue of this excellent magazine has a feature on Dylan 1965-66. It's well worth getting but why is it that every time I buy it with Dylan on the cover does it also have Bowie on the cover? Is this more than coincidence?

**Cds Revisited**

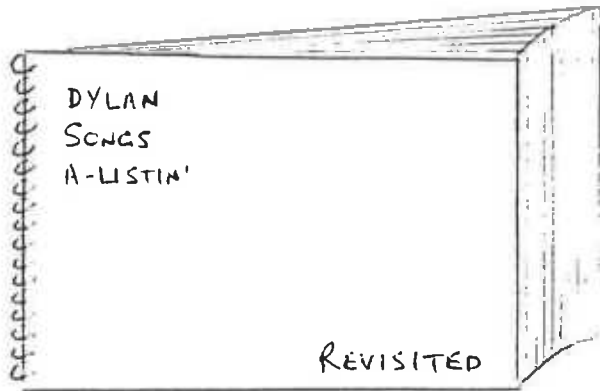
Thanks to Santa, I can add **The Basement Tapes** and **Hard Rain** to the improved stakes. And, yes, Clinton Heylin reviewed the Cds in an earlier **Record Collector**, silly me.

**Sweet Dreams Are Made Of This:**

\*\*\*\*\* Farewell Angelina to be on the boxed cd set !!!!!

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<sup>1</sup> Bet Bobby can count better than you though, Slash

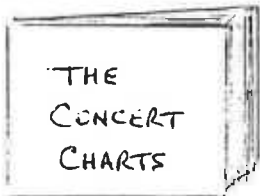


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**Homer, the slut**



**That's All Folks !**

I hope you all enjoy the concerts. The back page is a plan of the Odeon for those going to Hammersmith. The CD set will probably be out before Issue Three, so there is much to look forward to.

I won't make any rash promises for Issue Three's contents and release date, instead I'll tell you what my aims for it are *as of just now!*

It will be a Tour Special, also including two articles on **Oh Mercy**. There will be a new section called **I Read It In A Book**. Of the regular sections there will be **Bits N' Bobs** and **Some Other Kinds Of Songs**, and, maybe, a **Focus On**.



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