

# *Blood on the Tracks:* *'Time is an enemy'*

by John Hinchey

'Up to Me,' an outtake eventually released on *Biograph*, is a rueful ballad of love wasted that picks up the action at the conclusion of 'Idiot Wind,' immediately after the singer realizes that he and his beloved have fallen out of each other's orbits. But its tone seems tempered by the realizations of those songs, discussed in the preceding chapter, in which the singer assimilates a devastating romantic loss and struggles to regain speaking terms both with his lost beloved and with himself. Now, in 'Up to Me,' the singer he returns to tell her – and himself – what he's going to do about it. His plan of action is paradoxical: he's heading out on the 'Union Central' in search of the same missing wife he's leaving.

The song I just described is over by the end of the third verse, yet 'Up to Me' is twelve verses long. The song gets away from Dylan, overflowing the bounds of the paradoxical farewell note. The lyric feels unfinished, and unlike, for instance, the original version of 'Idiot Wind' (later released on *The Bootleg Series, Vol. 1-3*), it also strikes me as unfinishable, except by starting over from scratch. Indeed, 'Shelter from the Storm' can be seen as a radical revision (and revisioning) of 'Up to Me.' The problem is that the momentum of feeling that sweeps the singer from one verse to the next seems to be largely unconscious, feelings he recognizes (if at all) only after the fact. Yet the song's rhetoric is a hyper-rational mix of aphorism and allegory that assures us everything is under control. 'Idiot Wind' possesses a similarly irrational structural energy, but its matching rhetoric makes the singer's harrowing of his own disordered mind the song's main theme. In 'Up to Me' the singer regularly sounds startled by what he's saying, so that his blithe aphorisms and wry allegories often seem brittle. Only the first and last verses possess, from start to finish, the resonance and suggestiveness that similar language possesses everywhere in 'Shelter from the Storm.'

Still, it's a fascinating song. Without its subterranean excavations the five other songs I discuss in this chapter might never have been written. Dylan liked to say that what made the songs on *Blood on the Tracks* different was that in them he found a way to 'stop time.'<sup>1</sup> I'm not sure that this is true of all the songs on the album – except in the generalized sense that all art arrests time in its own moment – but it is certainly not true of 'Up to Me.' On the contrary, it introduces to the world of Dylan's songs the notion that time is something that might need to be stopped. Unlike the big ballads that made it onto the album, it offers no resistance to the traditional ballad structure's fatalistic drive. But it also lacks the cathartic release that the traditional ballad always delivers. Instead, it keeps hurtling itself down the corrosive corridors of time, its title refrain a hapless bit of flotsam carried downstream until the singer finds a way tear himself away from his terminally interminable song.

'And it's all there in the song's unforgettable first verse:

*Everything went from bad to worse,  
 money never changed a thing,  
 Death kept followin', trackin' us down,  
 at least I heard your bluebird sing.  
 Now somebody's got to show their hand,  
 time is an enemy,  
 I know you're long gone,  
 I guess it must be up to me.*

The 'death' chasing this couple is not mortality but the death-in-life evoked in the image of a relationship that is both deteriorating and unable to change. The

'death' invoked here is the specter of rot and decay, of people clutching onto an idea what they once had, and who they once were. Or clutching onto tokens of those things bought with the money that, predictably, 'never changed a thing.'

What the singer realizes is 'up to me' is the imperative to find the courage to move on with living, with or without her. 'Time is an enemy' not because it is running out but because it keeps running on, burying the living soul in each of them – here, as elsewhere on the album, figured as a bird – under the 'stale perfume' of their marriage's stagnation. The 'you' who is 'long gone' is her 'bluebird,' even as his soul is making its withdrawal in singing this song. 'Up to Me' takes a close-up look at the situation evoked in the penultimate verse of 'Tangled Up in Blue,' when she sold 'everything she owned and froze up inside' and he 'became withdrawn.' The end of this first verse leaves the two of them left alone (and stranded together) with their not-dead selves. In the third verse the singer announces (or seems to be announcing) his intentions to remedy the situation by leaving ('the Union Central is pullin' out'), more or less as soon as the song is over – which is why, in the second verse, or so it seems, he assumes that by the time his wife is hearing this song (perhaps in a recording of it he'll leave behind) he'll already be gone.

So where does that leave us, the listeners? If its story is all over by the end of the third verse, why do we still have nine more verses to sit through? Why do we sit through them, and how can we possibly enjoy it? I think it's because it

takes us, like the singer, that long to absorb the shock and grasp the full implications of the song's disturbingly gnomic first verse.

'Time is an enemy.' Really? Since when? I first heard 'Up to Me,' in Roger McGuinn's 1976 version on his *Cardiff Rose* album, at the same time I was first reading Ezra Pound's *Pisan Cantos*, where (in Canto LXXXI) one finds 'Times is not. Time is the evil.' When I heard McGuinn sing 'Time is an enemy,' I was struck by the similarity between the two lines; but I was struck even more by the oddity of Dylan saying such a thing. I knew what Pound meant, and why he meant it: 'What thou lovest well remains, the rest is dross.' Dylan seems to be coming from the same place – a vision of time as ruin and decay – and that just didn't sound like him: his signature kiss-off line, 'You kinda wasted my precious time,' had insisted that time was not to be wasted – and not itself a wasting agent. But in 'Up to Me' that is exactly what time is. I picked that up pretty quickly. But it took me a while to notice that this theme is a major element of the album for which 'Up to Me' was written – an album I then realized I didn't know as well as I thought I did.

So there's really no precedent, no context, in Dylan's earlier songs for understanding a line like 'Time is an enemy' or a song like 'Up to Me.' Dylan's imagination had never grappled with this aspect of time. In 'Up to Me' the singer knows what happened to him, but not really. He didn't see it coming, and maybe he's not sure he'll recognize it the next time either. So, before he can call his song (and his

marriage) quits, he must turn over in his mind various memories – or visions – of his dilapidated marriage, familiarizing himself with the flavor of this 'death' that's been 'tracking us down,' probing for its essence:

*It was like a revelation  
when you betrayed me with your  
touch,  
I'd just about convinced myself  
nothin' had changed that much.  
The old Rounder in the iron mask  
he slipped me the master key,  
Somebody had to unlock your heart,  
He said it was up to me.*

The pseudo-revelation evoked in the first line contrasts pointedly with a moment in 'Shelter from the Storm' that is truly a revelation: 'Suddenly I turned around and she was standing there.' Here, in 'Up to Me,' she does not reveal but conceals herself, in a touch. At the same time, he betrays his own self-concealment from her in his hunger for that touch. Their marriage, their true connection with each other, is rotting in what the singer will later recognize as its own sweetness. But the singer doesn't see this yet: The 'master key' the 'Old Rounder' slips him for remedy sounds like more sugar. The singer sounds suspicious about the efficacy of this approach – 'He said it was up to me' is the only refrain he fobs off on someone else, refusing to vouch for it himself – but if he had any misgivings (as he acknowledges, in the second verse, he always has) he just 'let it slide.'

Letting it slide: it's the story of this marriage. In the next verse he lets his wife

'slowly disappear down into the officer's club' – clearly a place he wishes she'd avoid – with a lame excuse. (Throughout the song – indeed, throughout the album – the sweetness that corrupts him is erotic, while her corruption is associated with the satisfactions of social and material status. The album's vision and feeling are so sharply individualized that it's easy to overlook the fact that the premises of the marriage it explores are so conventional as to be a cliché.) The singer's awareness of his own failure of nerve (which at bottom is a failure of love) surfaces in the next verse, where he recalls ruefully the 'only decent thing' he did for her – and he sounds like he has doubts about the decency of even that. He takes down her picture (on a wanted poster, of course) to protect her from notoriety, or just to keep her 'real identity' for himself – as their marriage slowly squanders itself, sliding, 'from bad to worse,' into ever shallower waters.

The seventh and eighth verses pull back from the recollected narrative of the previous three verses, as if in an effort to make sense of it all. In the seventh, the singer recovers his sense of the pointedly anonymous 'somebody' he fell in love with when he met her 'face to face,' but he also recognizes the 'awful truth' that the enlivening power of their intimacy was corrupted by their mutual addiction to 'how sweet life can be.' The eighth verse is one of the song's most oblique – I think Dylan is pushing his poetic license a bit too far here – but it seems to turn on the irony of finding that paragon of simplicity, the Sermon on the Mount, 'too complex.' I think he means that our lives overwhelm

any effort to manage them, even by the simplest and most straightforward moral regimen. To aspire to live a fully human life, the singer gloomily implies, is to 'bite off more than you can chew.'

More to the present point, the singer's recognition that the sorry story he's telling is his fate returns him to his 'tale' with a fresh urgency to get it right. No longer brooding on the past, he brings his narrative forward to earlier 'tonight.' He sees himself and his wife as the pimp Dupree and Crystal, a name suggestive of fake gemstone. (I can't help but think of that line that had inexplicably lodged itself, like a stray bullet, in 'Dirge': 'In this age of fiberglass I'm searching for a gem.') At first he can do no better than to 'look away' from their ruin, but in the next verse, as if explaining his song, he tells her he's left a note in a bottle for Estelle, a named that recalls the 'risin' star' that, he announced in the second verse, he was leaving to 'reach for.' And if we imagine his wife hearing about this bottle as she's listening to the song – which I identify with the note in the bottle – we might find it easier to imagine that she'll realize that she – or the 'long-gone' bluebird in her, anyway – is herself Estelle. She's the one he's reaching for.

The next line – 'We both heard voices for a while, now the rest is history' – reframes this point in terms that she might have understood as he declared it to her, face to face, presumably while they were still sitting together in the Thunderbird Cafe. This is the point in the lyric where the singer catches up with himself and wrests back control of his song from his runaway imagination. For the first line

since the third verse (or maybe even of the first), his voice commands real authority – he sounds at last like he knows what he’s thinking and feeling before I do. Dylan may have calculated this effect, but if he did, I think he miscalculated: the lyric’s shifting perspectives are too radical, I think, for the ballad form to absorb, yet not sufficiently radical to persuade a listener to hear it as something other than a narrative ballad. In any case, the problem (if it is a problem), which has plagued the song’s middle verses, disappears with this line. The ‘voices’ they once heard are the voices of each other’s better natures, or true selves. It’s that voice in another that, in rousing our full capacity for listening, always is (and not merely ‘is like’) a revelation. And those voices are not gone; the singer and his wife just can’t hear them anymore. What is ‘history’ is everything else (‘the rest’) – including the romance and marriage that furnished the context in which it was possible to hear those voices. ‘What thou lovest well remains, the rest is dross.’ Dylan translates the second part of Pound’s line into the idiom of Henry Ford, a rhetorical diminution that leads to the song’s bracingly cynical penultimate verse (‘life is a pantomime’).

The final verse is an epilogue, the caption on that note in the bottle. Its poetry is as strong and subtle as any in the note itself, and it engages and finally trumps the motives of the rest of the song. The note in the bottle is here re-figured as the song he has just finished singing, but the image of an ‘old-time melody’ he performs ‘for you, free’ evokes the aura of

those ‘voices’ they both once heard. At last, the singer finds the grace to take his leave on a note that resonates not with the ruin he is letting go but with the intimacy that, from the sound of it, is not entirely in ruin after all.

## II

When Dylan talks about writing songs on *Blood on the Tracks* that ‘stop time,’ I imagine that the songs that leap immediately to most of our minds are its two long narrative ballads about loss, ‘Tangled Up in Blue’ and ‘Shelter from the Storm.’ ‘Tangled Up in Blue’ deservedly monopolizes most of the attention given this aspect of the album, but the puzzled, somewhat bemused reflectiveness of ‘Shelter from the Storm’ is actually much more characteristic of way other songs on the album arrest the flow of time. As I tried to show in my first chapter, ‘Tangled Up in Blue’ does not merely ‘stop’ time; it resurrects the past and transfigures it. The song enacts a metamorphosis, striding forth into a future that even ‘Shelter from the Storm’ merely ponders.

I’ve said most of what I have to say about this great song, but there is an aspect of it that I glossed over in the first chapter that I want to return to now. Time both offers the singer the prospect of an Osiris-like restitution and renewal and constitutes the enemy he strives to overcome; the voice of this Osiris, meanwhile, is always shadowed by and shading into that of his anxiously possessive twin brother, the murderous Set. The ambiguity in the valence of time and the ambiguity in the song’s voice are two sides of the same coin.

‘Wondrin’ if she’d changed at all’: it’s that ‘at all’ that makes all the difference, turning an expression of affection (‘is she still herself?’) into a life-denying possessiveness (‘is she still as I remember her?’). Change, even radical change, is not inevitably wounding. On the contrary: ‘The Times They Are A-Changin’ prophecies (or, as I hear it, prays for) a perpetual revolution. It is the Set in us that turns time into an enemy, creating decay by resisting change.

The shifting balance of power between these two aspects of the singer’s voice is measured by the precise blend of exhilarated self-possession and anxious self-absorption we detect in each verse. The accent of Set increases gradually through the first three verses – that’s why they were originally written in the third person – and is gradually expelled in the course of the last three, including the narratively climactic penultimate verse set on Montague Street, the only one in which Osiris and Set are explicitly distinguished, as ‘I’ and ‘he’ respectively. The pivotal verse is the fourth, the only one (before the last) in which the spirit of Set is wholly subdued. His presence is felt only in the slight distress the singer feels as the topless dancer bends down to tie his shoes. This verse concludes with a feeling of ecstatic release beyond any mere self-possession. Appropriately, this is the only verse in which the sense of the refrain is dissociated from the singer’s own state of mind. Here, in a wonderfully Blakean touch, the refrain attaches itself to the tangled ‘laces of my shoe,’ as if finally to put Set’s binding power to some good use!

‘Tangled Up in Blue’ is the album’s one song that concludes on an unambiguously celebratory note, and its leadoff position on the record exerts a brightening influence on the darker songs that follow. But ‘Tangled Up in Blue’ also casts its own darkness, something that up to now I have completely ignored, and this aspect of the song, a kind of undersong, also casts its spell over the rest of the record. What I’m referring to has to do with the unsettling way the darker parts of the singer’s psyche – the element that I’ve been subsuming under the rubric of the mythological figure Set – get into the song. Set just shows up, stealing his voice when the singer’s not looking, whenever he lets down his guard. ‘Wondrin’ if she’s changed at all.’ That ‘at all’ sounds so innocuous, so inadvertent, so throwaway, that we can miss its petulance – and wonder if the singer misses it, too. Of course, had the singer been wondering (as he should have, were he a saintly sort, and not a very typical man) how (and not whether) she may have changed, Set wouldn’t have had an opening. We find the same oddly accidental loss of moral self-mastery in the ‘little too much’ force with which he helps her out of a bad marriage, or in the whole drift of the third verse, which is all about a seemingly harmless drifting that (as Dylan sings it in the Rolling Thunder version released on *The Bootleg Series Vol. 5*) ‘one day just went to hell.’ It’s that ‘just’ that catches the creepy flavor I’m after here. I also hear it at the opening of the third verse: It’s the difference between ‘He started dealing with slaves’ and what Dylan actually wrote and sings: ‘He started into dealing with slaves.’

'Started into' fuses 'started' with 'fell into' in a way that suggests that his slave dealing was neither intentional nor accidental but accidentally intentional.

What this all means is something like this: if, like our hero you're just a regular guy (which, don't forget, is in its own way quite admirable, and certainly a lot better than the darker – and likelier – alternative to saintliness), then sooner or later, you're going to start acting like a jerk. And while eventually you'll probably snap out of it, you're likely to wreak a lot of havoc on your own life and that of those closest to you before you do. The song carries a disconcerting sense that any settled identity or relationship will eventually turn sour. In this light, one notices that the singer's most Osiris-like moments with his Isis all take place off the beaten path of settled identities and relationships: 'in a topless place,' 'in her room' with a pipe (presumably of pot) and incendiary ancient poetry, and, finally, 'on the road headin' for another joint.' (One imagines a joint where people one step ahead of *the* joint share a joint.) In my earlier chapter, I pointed with approval to the singer's determination at the end not to 'get' but to 'get to' his Isis. I'm not about to retract that judgment, but I would note that most of us would find it difficult indeed to imagine marriage – let alone to sustain an imagining of marriage – not as a getting but only as a getting to the one we love. The image of such a marriage fuses life on the road with life in a settled home, and such a fusion seems like a lot of work, a lot more work than we're probably confident we'll always have the energy, wit, or grace, to accomplish.

I've insisted all along on seeing *Blood on the Tracks* as a collection of songs about a man determined to find a way to rescue his crumbling marriage, but in what I've termed its undersong, 'Tangled Up in Blue' suggests a more complex, darker truth. There's an otherworldliness to the singer's deepest feelings for his Isis, something at once peremptory and arbitrary, that seems at once to corrupt and be corrupted by marriage, or, for that matter, any other rationalized social relationship. Yet, those feelings also renew and are renewed by the claims of marriage. Isis and Osiris, remember, are at once brother and sister and husband and wife. But Isis and Osiris are divine; the singer and his wife, however much touched by divinity, remain human. The singer's dual relationship, as brother and as spouse, to the woman he pursues will remain forever vexing and vexed. What I find most surprising about Dylan's visions of marriage, both in this song and others, is not its darkness but its perversely comic élan. The Isis-Osiris quandary (under other names) is an old theme in American literature, one whose persistence probably reflects the inherent tensions between egalitarian and hierarchical impulses in a democratic society. From Melville's *Pierre* to Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* to Sam Shepard's *Fool for Love*, it has almost always provided a theme for tragedy. 'Heading for another joint' as his song closes, a Sisyphus of romance, Dylan's singer could easily have cut just such a doomed, tragic figure. But the note he actually strikes is a comic one, a chastened but undaunted exhilaration.

'Shelter from the Storm' is an especially sly fox of a song. It's another narrative ballad, and it even has what appears to be a clearly discernible narrative. But the song's narrative element is something of a red herring. We don't find ourselves speculating, as we do in 'Tangled Up in Blue,' whether the female figure in the song is one woman or many women. The singer is deliciously indifferent to the mere story his song tells – lost in the storm, rescued from the storm, abandoned again to the storm – because nothing ever happens in his life except what has always been and always will be happening. The weight of his story gradually dissolves, even as it is still unfolding, in the realization that the singer is always somehow at once lost in and sheltered from the storm. The story of his life is recapitulated in each moment of it. His song is finally a series of versions of that recurring moment, as the singer turns over and over, in his mind and on his tongue, his experience of being forever both lost and found, at once 'stranded without love' and secure in the haven love affords. What gives this ten-verse meditative constellation its particular piquancy is its superimposition upon a more or less straightforward recounting of his story's mere chronology, so that the meditative equanimity of the singer's being is shadowed by the continuing pathos of his existence.

The recurring moment that defines the singer's life varies in its precise texture and flavor, so that while his unflagging quest for salvation may be futile, it is anything but boring. In fact, 'meditative equanimity' is far too mild a label for the song's prevailing tone, which is playful,

exuberant, slyly sportive. Or perhaps I should speak of this as the song's secretly prevailing tone. It certainly took me long enough – more than twenty years after first hearing the song – to get a fix on it, but it's a secret that's hidden in plain sight. It all has to do with the difference between the song's imagery and its voice. If we listen to the song attending exclusively to its imagery, the song we hear is a virtual 'Hard Rain Revisited,' one in which an Isis figure's offer of shelter figures as a more fetching promise of salvation than the young girl with her gift of the covenant rainbow in 'Hard Rain.' The imagined apocalypse has a different flavor in the two songs – the fear of drowning has given way to a fear of abandonment – but it's pretty grim any way you cut it.

But if we listen to the song attending to its voice, we hear something completely different. What we hear in fact is not a voice but several voices, at least ten of them. What we hear are the improvised voices of a man trying out and playing with ways of inhabiting his fate. (The singer himself seems to notice – or suddenly to worry we might not have noticed – this gap between what he's saying and the way he's saying it in the eighth verse, when he turns from the verse's unnervingly lovely opening couplet to address us directly: 'Do I understand your question, man, is it hopeless and forlorn?')

The tension between voice and image confronts us in the first verse, which opens with images from a biblical western – the first two-and-a-half lines would have fit nicely on *John Wesley Harding*. It suddenly



grows more drastic when the singer makes his entrance, in an image that seems to have escaped from a Gnostic myth or one of Blake's prophetic books, as a 'creature void of form.' I suggested in the previous chapter that this figure is the Hermetic Nobody of Dylan's 60s heyday, but instead of being the void (or, as in 'Like a Rolling Stone,' the 'vacuum') that looks out from within whatever alias he is inhabiting, he is a formless abyss, disconnected from life. When the refrain arrives for the first time to conclude this quatrain, its promise of shelter beckons as a veritable life-line.

'And yet – 'creature void of form.' If you need a gloss on the image, listen again to 'She's Your Lover Now,' especially the immortal line 'My voice is really warm, it's just that it ain't got no form.' But this is not the feeling conveyed in this song by this voice: 'creature void of form.' It's hilarious, a line from a Gnostic comic book by R. Crumb. The singer is audibly charmed by his own erstwhile nihilism. I think he's happy to know he has it in him. Of course she offers him shelter: he's the catch of a lifetime. We can almost hear her thinking, 'My perfect stranger's coming on in at last!'

Right away, then, we are given to understand that Armageddon lurks around the corner – the stakes are salvation and damnation – but also that the song refuses to take its own bait. Outrageously, when the second verse begins the life-saving shelter has not only already been lost, but its loss is already not even news. (It's reported as news – 'Now there's a wall between us' – in verse six). What's news here is the singer's assurance that he won't completely forget her, an

assurance he offers to no one in particular – to us? to himself? to God? – in a voice of measured, archaic gentility that makes the whole thing sound like dialogue from the epilogue of a *Bonanza* episode. The tone darkens severely – as if this particular episode might have been written by Rod Serling – in the verse's marvelous third line, where the abrupt caesura after "men" links the world of men with a world of death to which we might otherwise have assumed the 'men fighting to be warm' to be opposed. The suggestion is that if all that men seek from life is to stay alive, it is just a matter of time before life defeats them – and since time is an illusion anyway, they are already dead. But not all men are like this. The verse began with the singer addressing an unidentified, perhaps invisible companion who knows better, one with whom he shares an understanding, to borrow a phrase, of 'what any of it is worth.' So, to resume my *Bonanza* fantasy, we might imagine that as he takes leave of his companions and turns his horse toward the cold distance across which he will be riding, he pauses to listen as his song's refrain returns, as if in grateful acknowledgement of the difference an occasional dose of pure, unadulterated love can make in this mostly 'steel-eyed' world. The meaning hasn't really changed between the first and second iterations of the refrain, but the feeling is sure different.

The whole song works this way. Each verse exquisitely creates with its language and movement its own particular mood. In a way that is virtually unique among Dylan's songs, there is no sense of forward

thrust or drive as we move from verse to verse. But it doesn't drag, either. Rather, it pulsates. The song's mode is not meditative but contemplative. Its ten verses are the tracings of the singer's self-refreshing window onto his own variable humor as he tells himself what a mess he's in while (to borrow a trope from 'Up to Me') listening to her 'bluebird sing.'

Two verses – the third and the fifth – evoke memories of the shelter she provided him, but in the other eight, the song's refrain, 'Come in,' she said, 'I'll give you shelter from the storm,' is preceded by three lines evoking the harshness of the storm from which she promises shelter. This structure would seem swing the balance of imaginative power to the reality of the storm, but the longer you listen to the song, the more singer's two worlds leak into and commingle with each other.

Consider, for instance, the fourth verse ('I was burned out from exhaustion'). Initially I took this verse as a reprise, from a different angle of vision, of the 'wilderness' from which this Isis rescued the singer. But the flavor of the disaster here is quite different from the barrenness and desolation evoked in the first verse. In fact, it possesses the same flavor of antic violence as the language of many early Dylan songs about the singer's erotic misadventures – from the unreleased 'Bob Dylan's New Orleans Rag' to 'I Shall Be Free No. 10.' Additionally, 'buried in the hail' here recalls the 'hail fall[ing] down from above' in 'Meet Me in the Morning,' and the sexual resonances of images 'poisoned in the bushes,' 'blown out on the trail,' and 'ravaged in the corn' hardly need

to be elaborated. This verse seems, then, to be about the relationship that ensued between the singer and his Isis once they had settled all those things that 'had been left unresolved' and settled down together. And it's not a pretty picture. But the slapstick of it all is too self-delighting for it to constitute an especially grim picture, either. The singer here comes off as a hapless but indestructible Wile E. Coyote. His marriage may have been a disaster, but it seems also to have been exhilarating, even a perverse sort of fun.

But not that much fun. 'Come in,' she said, 'I'll give you shelter from the storm' – her offer again must sound like a godsend. But even Wile E. Coyote would notice that this offer is coming from the same one who just ravaged him in the corn. So where does the emotional balance of this verse lie? The singer's responsiveness to her promise of shelter is what landed him in the mess he's in now, but it's also his only prospect of rescue from that mess.

Also consider the seventh verse. The singer is back in a desert wilderness – still on the journey, perhaps, on which he seemed about to set out in verse two – and he's traveling with the 'deputy' and the 'preacher,' emblems of social and moral order who may simply represent partly allied and partly conflicting influences in himself. His mood is bleak: 'nothing really matters much, it's doom alone that counts.' This line verges on nihilism, but if you let its sound rattle around at the back of your mind long enough, its meanings become unsettled and deliciously unsettling. The two halves of the line, which initially seem largely redundant, start to

veer off in different directions. 'Doom' is judgment, the Last judgment even, and the fundamentalist legalism of the second half of the line seems to speak for the deputy and the preacher – but not the singer. Doom counts for them, but *nothing* matters to him.

But the singer doesn't actually say that nothing matters. What he actually says are three things; or, a listener assimilates his full statement, I think, in three distinct stages: 'Nothing matters.' 'Nothing *really* matters.' 'Nothing really matters *much*.' Let's take them in order. 'Nothing matters' expresses a simple nihilism. It's the depressive, suicidal mood out of which Ishmael greets us in the first paragraph of *Moby Dick*. 'Nothing really matters' expresses a transcendental nihilism, a sense that the things that matter to us don't finally matter. It is the mood of Ahab, and even more of the crew that responds to the prospect of piercing through the 'pasteboard mask' of seductive but empty appearances. 'Nothing really matters much' expresses the seasoned, resilient realism that I hear in Ishmael's narrative voice in *Moby Dick* – and throughout this song. It is the voice of a nihilism finding and accepting its limit. Conceding that 'nothing really matters *much*,' the singer dissociates himself from the futility of the 'one-eyed undertaker' – monomaniacal agents like the deputy and preacher. He may be traveling with them, but he is no fellow traveler. They are out to wreak destruction upon an evil world (thus the need for the services of an undertaker in the most familiar sense of the word), while he searches for the little, the 'nothing ... much,' that remains.

In this song – as elsewhere, of course – evil is lovelessness, and the 'nothing much' the singer seeks is what remains of love. But when the refrain returns to round off this verse, her invitation to come in (again) from the storm onto the shelter of her love seems to fall on deaf ears. The singer, who in the preceding verse had acknowledged that 'something has been lost' since the first time he took shelter with her, seems to recognize that invitation as something of a siren song. The nihilism of the company he insists on keeping affords him protection against this seduction. It's as if he recognizes that the numinous memory (evoked in the wondrous fifth verse) of their intimacy is a dream, even if it really did happen – it's not a fantasy but a reality out of time. He is not rejecting her offer of shelter so much as recognizing that he now carries it with him. He knows, or has faith, that he is loved, even though the 'wall' of time has separated them from each other. He may be back in the temporal storm, but he no longer wears the 'crown of thorns' her love removed. He no longer confronts the storm as 'a creature void of form' who feels that 'nothing really matters.'

Well. This may seem like an awful lot to dig out of the breach between the first three lines of this verse and its refrain, and it surely is. But I didn't dig it out. This sense of the singer more or less fell into my lap as I sat listening to the song unwrap word by word and line by line, without giving any thought at all to where it thought it was going. 'Tangled Up in Blue' is a song you lean into to hear properly; 'Shelter from the Storm' is a song you have to lean back and let come to you.

Each verse offers one or more surprising spins on the singer's underlying mood. The ninth verse ('On a little hilltop village...') may seem both self-pitying and self-aggrandizing in the singer's implicit self-identification with the crucified Christ, but not if you catch the wit<sup>2</sup> of the notion that there is such a thing as a 'lethal dose' of salvation. The 'innocence' the singer 'offered up' is but the flip side of his nihilism: both are forms of refusal to engage the world in good faith. And in the final verse there is – among many other things – the delicious, crucial ambiguity of the pronoun in 'someday I'll make it mine.' He may still wish he can make 'beauty' his, but he couldn't have written his song had he not recognized that the most he can humanly hope to make his is the 'razor's edge' where beauty walks, which is what he is doing right now, in writing his song. The fact that he ends his song on a note of nostalgia for the primordial is a way of being honest about the limits of the satisfactions his realism provides.

The song is such a rich texture of casual realizations that I could go on forever. But I won't. I do want to say something more, however, about the parts of the song that evoke directly the primordial intimacy that is no doubt what he means by 'beauty'. The subject is introduced in the third verse, which emphasizes the extra-temporal, even extra-experiential nature of the singer's initial encounter with his sheltering Isis:

*Not a word was spoke between us,  
there was no risk involved  
Everything up to that point  
had been left unresolved.*

*Try imagining a place  
where it's always safe and warm.  
'Come in,' she said, 'I'll give you  
shelter from the storm.'*

Time, which measures change, does not exist so long as nothing is changed by being spoken about, let alone resolved. This state of arrested ecstasy may have lasted mere seconds, or weeks or even months, but so long as it is not violated by change, it is one long moment. (This is the state of erotic bliss that is celebrated in 'Love Minus Zero/No Limit.') It's a purified state we can easily imagine – but only so long as we forget that we exist. Which means we recognize it (depending on your mood) as a lie, a dream, a vision.

'The fifth verse is the core of that visionary dream:

*Suddenly I turned around  
and she was standin' there  
With silver bracelets on her wrists  
and flowers in her hair.  
She walked up to me so gracefully  
and took my crown of thorns.  
'Come in,' she said, 'I'll give you  
shelter from the storm.'*

The opening line never fails to give me shivers. Note the placement of 'suddenly': he doesn't turn around to find her suddenly there; he turns around suddenly – because he has a premonition. He knows not just that someone is there but that *she* is there. Their meeting is fraught with a sense of the uncanny: he is surprised by what he already knows and in some sense has always known. She is his soul-mate, his Isis. The 'silver bracelets on her wrists' and 'flowers in her hair' are redolent of the

divine – indeed this verse has always reminded me strongly of Aphrodite’s sudden appearance, decked out in “spiral bracelets” and other jewelry, to an astonished Anchises. In both instances the aesthetic force of the jewelry is not to enhance the goddess’s beauty but to give it a boundary and render it accessible to a mortal, who would be otherwise overwhelmed by it.

Her bold removal of his crown of thorns is both part of this theophany and the gesture that ends it by breaking its spell. With it, something is resolved, something is changed, and time and mortality resume. This is the moment, recalled in the last verse, when ‘god and her were born.’ She is now mortal as well as immortal, human as well as divine, just as his own mortal life is now to be forever crossed with the divinity within himself she has awakened. Thus the lost beginning whose uncanny thrill the singer wished he could ‘turn back the clock’ to recover contains its own demise.

The nostalgia of the song’s penultimate line, then, is undercut by this rueful recognition that love, beauty, eternity – whatever you want to call what you’re looking for – can be found only in a world that lays it to waste. This ruefulness inflects the final return of the song’s refrain, the voice of the divine promise that sustains his travels along the ‘razor’s edge’ between time and eternity.

### III

‘Simple Twist of Fate’ and “You’re Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go’ are the two most purely lyrical songs on

*Blood on the Tracks*. Neither is much complicated by the meditative burdens that enrich the album’s other lyrical songs; the strength of both of them is almost entirely a matter of the clarity and verve with which they realize the mood that animates them. I decided to discuss them together partly because of this and partly because they are the two songs on the album that are clearly not about the collapsing marriage that is the subject of the other songs. We happen to know the identities of the women who inspired each song, but that’s not germane to anything I have to say about them. The crucial fact for me, in the context of this album, is that they are both about romantic relationships unburdened by any history.

While I had these two songs stored together in some back room of my mind waiting for me to get around to them, I eventually noticed something else about them, something that is pretty obvious when you stop to think about it. They are mirror images of each other, and in much the same way that Milton’s ‘L’Allegro’ and ‘Il Penseroso’ or Blake’s *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* mirror each other. ‘You’re Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go’ and ‘Simple Twist of Fate’ sort out the best and the worst elements, respectively, of the relationship that is the subject of most of the songs on the album, and their contrariety is quite thorough. In ‘Simple Twist of Fate,’ for instance, after the singer has awoken to discover that his lover has disappeared, he ‘finds a note she left behind/To which I just could not relate.’<sup>3</sup> The blank void the demise of this relationship has left in his soul contrasts

with the enrichment of his inner life the singer experiences as he says goodbye to the latter affair:

*You're gonna make me  
wonder what I'm doin',  
Stayin' far behind  
without you.  
You're gonna make me wonder  
what I'm sayin',  
You're gonna make me give myself  
a good talkin' to.*

The singer's ebullience here, in the midst of loss, is hardly Pollyannaish. 'What did you think you were doing' is something a parent says to a miscreant child while stinging it with a 'good talking to.' But here the divine child in the singer is audibly subduing the anxious adult in him reluctant to accept so much pain. His mood here is immune to its own ironies. 'You're gonna make me wonder what I'm sayin' refers to his feelings as he sings this verse (actually, it's a bridge) as much as to anything he might later have to say to himself. The singer's buoyant affection absorbs all the pain that undoes the singer of 'Simple Twist of Fate.' His allusions to his romantic past (e.g., 'Dragon clouds so high above/I've only known careless love/It's always hit me from below' and the entire third verse) even seem to refer specifically to 'Simple Twist of Fate.'

The difference between the two songs is rooted in the psychology of their protagonists, whom I'll call Twisted and Lonesome, respectively. When the woman sitting next to him gave him a look that 'tingled to his bones,' Twisted 'felt alone and wished he'd gone straight.' Intimacy

sharpens our sense of our solitude – a paradox central to erotic poetry since Sappho<sup>4</sup> – and Twisted wants no part of his solitude. Lonesome isn't happy that his lover will soon leave him alone, but his song greets lonesomeness, a psychic state the lyric imbues with a dialectical – i.e., bittersweet – flavor. It is painful but also enlivening. The difference between these two protagonists, then, is that one instinctively resists paying the emotional price of love and the other is unstinting in his response to its claims – if only, as the song sometimes strikes me, because it so caught him by surprise he didn't have time to defend himself.

In singing his song, Twisted distances himself from his younger self, investing his evocation of careless love with a rueful melancholy. Lonesome, on the other hand, seems to create the self who inhabits his song as he sings it, as much surprised by the generosity of spirit he finds in himself as he has been by the romance that provokes it. Twisted's tale is a palpable fictionalization, a substitution of poetic truth for historical fact (i.e., 'Ballad in Plain D') that hints, in its severe simplification, at a degree of self-awareness the lyric never directly confirms. (The final verse merely acknowledges that he missed his chance and needs to get over it.) The lyric possesses a remarkable sweetness and tenderness that's accentuated by the casual waywardness of the remembered lovers. Lonesome's song is a fiction that, haplessly and comically, conceals nothing, including the fact that the pain of losing her is scarcely distinguishable from the delicious pain of having her:

*Purple clover,  
Queen Anne's lace,  
Crimson hair  
across your face,  
You could make me cry  
if you don't know.  
Can't remember what I was  
thinkin' of  
You might be spoilin' me,  
too much love,  
Yer gonna make me  
lonesome when you go.*

Its currents of feeling rippling through it in ever modulating colors, this verse is the most exquisitely (and classically) lyrical verse Dylan has ever written. It shimmers with a self-forgetting sense of her overpowering beauty, but that beauty is represented directly in only one line, and then only glancingly.

Both songs have five verses, but 'You're Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go' also has two bridges – one evoking the Edenic flavor of 'this affair' and the other (quoted above) evoking the scarcely less inviting flavor of its anticipated aftermath – that contribute mightily to the airy brightness of the song's overall mood. There is nothing airy about 'Simple Twist of Fate.' Its lyric traces a fatalistic unraveling, a course driven by the twin forces, as Lonesome will remember it, of erotic possessiveness ('dragon clouds so far above') and sexual need ('it always has hit me from below'). Each verse sustains the entropic drift in its own way, but I'll take a closer look at the second, if only because it's my favorite:

*They walked along  
by the old canal  
A little confused  
I remember well  
Stopped into  
a strange hotel  
With a neon  
burning bright  
He felt the  
heat of the night  
Hit him  
like a freight  
Train moving with a  
simple twist of fate*

The couple's walk along the canal is sweet and innocent enough, but in the context of the song, the 'old canal' figures as the rut of desire that has hijacked their romance. The singer's sense of self has been reduced to his confusion (or what remains of it: 'a *little* confused'). 'Stopped into a strange hotel' sounds like they've decided to have a drink or a dessert – the sorts of things a couple out for a walk might do on impulse, without giving it much thought. I had been listening to this song for several years before it dawned on me that they stopped into this hotel to get a room – that this is the same hotel the singer wakes up in the next morning. 'Strange hotel' replaces the 'old hotel' of the *Blood on the Tracks* lyric, a revision Dylan may have made because 'old hotel' follows too close on the tracks of 'old canal.' But 'strange' works because it redounds upon our sense of the singer's self-estrangement in allowing himself so carelessly to stop in. This gathering sense of self-loss climaxes when his enflamed

desire – in the form of the ‘heat of the night’ – wallops what’s left of him ‘like a freight/Train’ – as if it were not only alien to him but inanimate. (I don’t know why it works this way, but by splitting the phrasing between the rhymed – and thus already heavily freighted – ‘freight’ and ‘train’ results in a kinesthetic mimesis of being run over that carries quite a wallop itself.)

One other note about this verse. Dylan always seems to play around with the fictive details when performing the song. I remember, for instance hearing ‘with the neon burning bright’ replaced by a ‘desk clerk dressed in white.’ (My favorite such revision, was the transformation, in the fourth verse, of ‘put his clothes back on’ to ‘screwed his head back on.’) Unlike the revisions he made of the *Blood on the Tracks* lyric in early 1975, these don’t feel like they arose out of an effort to strengthen the lyric, or even, as in his 1984 revision of ‘Tangled Up in Blue,’ to adapt a song to a different mood. In this case, I think he’s gently mocking the lovers, hinting that however enigmatic or goofy their surroundings or behaviors, neither will ever notice or react to anything but their own urgent desires. The effects of these sorts of revisions, then, depends partly on our memory of the text they only provisionally revise.

‘You’re Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go’ traces a very different course of feeling. The singer is revitalized by his relinquishment of himself, not to his desires, but to his affections. ‘Right on target, so direct,’ his feelings for this woman go straight to his heart. The lyric

possesses a pervasive, almost pantheistic eroticism, and we take for granted, I think, that this affair has a sexual component, but erotic desire and sexual need do not shape either the song or the affair. These dark forces are subordinated to and disciplined by affection. And while the singer of ‘Simple Twist of Fate’ finds himself diminished by his lover’s abandonment of him, this singer finds the orbit of his being energized when he lets go of whatever claims he may wish to make on her:

*I'll look for you  
in old Honolulu,  
San Francisco,  
Ashtabula,  
Yer gonna have to  
leave me now, I know.  
But I'll see you in the  
sky above,  
In the tall grass,  
in the ones I love,  
Yer gonna make me  
lonesome when you go.*

(Yes, I know the city is not spelled ‘Honolulu,’ but that’s what he sings, it rhymes, and besides, there’s an appropriately whimsical submerged pun on ‘hula.’) Part of the immense charm is this verse is in the way its opening couplet, if misconstrued, could sound like a threat to stalk her – as the singer of ‘Simple Twist of Fate’ all but does when he obsessively ‘hunts for’ his lost lover. But this singer is not going to make a ‘scene,’ as Twisted does – and as (in one of Dylan’s more startling analogies) Verlaine and Rimbaud certainly did. Here, the singer is not threatening to stalk her body but promising to keep an eye out for



her spirit throughout a world freshened for him by his affair with her.

The freshening friendliness that breezes through these lines is positively Whitmanesque. Indeed, this verse is almost certainly a conscious salute to Whitman, as it pointedly inverts of the sublime valedictory with which Whitman takes his leave at the end of *Song of Myself*:<sup>5</sup>

*I bequeathe myself to the dirt,  
to grow from the grass I  
love;*

*If you want me again, look for me  
under your boot-soles.*

*You will hardly know who I am, or  
what I mean;  
But I shall be good health to you  
nevertheless,  
And filter and fibre your blood.*

*Failing to fetch me at first, keep  
encouraged;  
Missing me one place, search another;  
I stop somewhere, waiting for you.*

In Dylan's reversal of Whitman's trope, the spirit of the singer's beloved is the poem, and he is her affectionate reader. Dylan replaces Whitman's sublimity with a sense of illimitable wonder. Dylan has inexplicably all but ignored 'You're Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go' in his live performances, but it's on my short list of his most underrated gems.

#### IV

'Lily, Rosemary, and the Jack of Hearts' presents a quasi-mythical synopsis of the major themes of *Blood on the Tracks*, but it doesn't sound like it belongs on the album at

all. Dylan himself seems to have discovered this fact just in the nick of time. In the take included on the original unreleased version of the album, he sings the song in a deliberate meditative tempo like the one he employed to give breathing room to the nuanced emotional tapestry of songs like 'Idiot Wind' and 'Shelter from the Storm.' But in 'Jack of Hearts' narrative suspense, not emotional tension, is the driving wheel, so the original recording is somewhat tediously sluggish. When Dylan returned to the song during the Minnesota sessions in December, 1974, he took it at a much brisker pace that released its panache and glamour.

The song sits on *Blood on the Tracks* like a canto from Byron's *Don Juan* in the middle of a collection of Keats's odes and sonnets. The anomalous character of its verbal music and texture arises from the obliquity with it treats deeply personal themes. It is the only song on the album whose singer is not part of the action. We assume, I think, that the singer recognizes himself in the Jack of Hearts, but to the extent that he does, he is parodying his own emotional anguish in the album's other songs. Placed two-thirds of the way through the album, the song acts as a tonic that, I would guess, makes the unrelenting emotional intensity of the other songs easier to take in. But it's also worth noting that it's the song on the album that most connects *Blood on the Tracks* to *Desire*. The best brief map of the mutations in Dylan's treatment of romance during the Seventies lies along the course that runs from 'Lily, Rosemary, and the Jack of Hearts' through 'Isis' and 'Changing of the Guard' to 'Precious Angel.'

Of all the songs in this sequence, 'Jack of Hearts' is the blithest in the feelings it summons about the possibilities of romance. The same could be said, I find myself surprised to think, of *Blood on the Tracks* in relation to the albums on which those other three songs appear. For all its anguish, the true hallmark of the *Blood on the Tracks* songs is their emotional resilience. There is nothing like the lurking despair that gives *Desire* its edge of hysteria, the radical alienation that lends *Street-Legal* its edge of psychosis, or the pervasive dread that keeps *Slow Train Coming* on the straight and narrow. 'Has your luck run out?' Lily asks the Jack of Hearts, 'Well, I guess you must have known it would someday.' Well, no. It doesn't appear that his luck has run out, and in any case, he doesn't act like he believes it ever will. And in his apparently bottomless reserve of self-confidence, the Jack of Hearts speaks implicitly for the singer of all the songs on this album.

Indeed, all four of the song's main characters – the titular trio and Big Jim – are familiar to us from the album's other major ballads. To employ the implicit mythography of 'Tangled Up in Blue,' The Jack of Hearts and Big Jim are Osiris and Set, respectively, while Lily is Isis. Rosemary, meanwhile, Set's wife, Nephthys, a vulture goddess of death and decay who is a sort of anti-Isis. Even in mythological terms, it's not quite that simple. Dylan's Jack of Hearts, for instance, also evinces characteristics of trickster gods, but as a basic map of the song's mythos, it'll do.

Crudely viewed, then, the song is an allegory about the furtive, outlaw terms to which true love must resort to survive the corrupting social contract of marriage. Well, I suppose, not quite. Were this the case, Rosemary would have slipped Big Jim a mickey and carted him off to bed so that Lily and the Jack of Hearts could be together. So let's say that the song is an apocalyptic variation on this theme, one in which true love must blow the marriage apart in order to escape intact.

But it's not at all as simple (or clear) as this, either, because the song is not an allegory. It is either a myth or a legend, or a cunning semblance of both modes at once. If we take it as a myth – call it an episode from an Americanized analogue of the Isis-Osiris myth – then it purports to reveal what always and eternally happens. If we take it as a legend, then it purports to report something that is said once to have (and actually might have) happened. And it makes a pragmatic difference which way we take it. If we take it as a legend, then we might conceivably (as Paul Williams has plausibly suggested that Dylan himself did<sup>6</sup>) take the Jack of Hearts as a role model. If we take it as myth, well you can't make a god your role model, now can you? All you can do is pray to (or meditate upon) him or her.

This uncertainty about how to take the song is facilitated by the famous holes and obscurities in its narrative, most of which involve the identity, behavior, and fate of the Jack of Hearts himself.<sup>7</sup> The primary ambiguity that attaches to this figure, although no one else seems to have mentioned it, is his name, which is not a

name at all but a title, an honorific – and a poetic or even divine honorific at that. Let me put it this way: If I were to assert that the Jack of Hearts does not appear in person anywhere in the song, could you prove me wrong? I don't think you could. The strongest evidence against me would be when Big Jim is caught 'starin' into space over at the Jack of Hearts.' But this comes after a verse in which 'Jack of Hearts' (who is named only in each verse's final line) refers specifically to a card Lily has drawn. Perhaps Jim, his blank gaze fixed on the drawn card, is simply 'starin' into space,' lost in thought. But even if we decide that Big Jim has his gaze fixed upon the man over in the corner, he certainly doesn't know him (if he knows him at all) by the name of 'The Jack of Hearts.' No, if Big Jim sees him as a Jack of Hearts, it's because he intuitively recognizes this stranger as the kind of man who poses a threat to his sole proprietorship of his little world.

In the historically plausible legend, the fourth character is an anonymous 'he' who enters the song striding 'across the mirrored room' of the saloon. The room may be 'mirrored' in the sense that its walls are covered with mirrors (or because the narrator spies him in a mirror behind the bar), but it may also be 'mirrored' in the sense that the human world is said to be a mirror of the divine world. This stranger is not the Jack of Hearts, but he may very well, as it appears he does, have the Jack of Hearts 'about him' (to borrow Dylan's erstwhile producer Bob Johnston's wonderful locution from *No Direction Home*.) Consider, for instance, the line, which occurs just after the 'backstage

manager' announces to himself 'there's something funny going on' and then disappears, hysterically, in search of the 'hanging judge.' In the next line 'the leading actor hurried by in the costume of a monk.' The 'leading actor' might, like the backstage manager, be a brand-new character, one with only this bit part in the song; an actual actor, that is, in some sort evening show at the cabaret. But it's probably the anonymous stranger, the leading actor of this song, and he probably got his monk costume from the cabaret's theatrical wardrobe. The following line – 'There was no actor anywhere better than the Jack of Hearts' – is a way of recognizing that this ruse has 'Jack of Hearts' (i.e., a divine inspiration) written all over it, both because it effectively conceals his identity and because it reveals a fundamental truth (more of which below) about him. So, yes, in one sense, the nameless stranger is the Jack of Hearts, and in another, equally important sense, he most assuredly is not.

The human world is a mirror of the divine, but it is something of a funhouse (or horror house) mirror. The Jack of Hearts may be an equal to Osiris, but the stranger is not exactly the Jack of Hearts, and Lily, Rosemary, and Big Jim match up even less perfectly with their divine counterparts. Had this song been a true myth, Big Jim would have gotten a share of the title billing. Set certainly would have, because, nasty as he is, he represents a necessary force in the world. Big Jim is not just death and destruction ('he laid it all to waste'); he is a dead man walking – the embodiment of the element in us (and

himself) Dylan assails in the *Shot of Love* song 'Dead Man, Dead Man.' The mythopoeic balance is re-established, you could say, by transferring the creative aspect of Set's destructiveness to the Jack of Hearts, who is the head of (or guardian spirit of the head of) a gang of bank robbers.

A similar shifting of the mythic balance conditions the characterizations of Lily and Rosemary. Lily is 'precious as a child,' but she is an abandoned, traumatized, and compromised child. Like the topless dancer in 'Tangled Up in Blue,' Lily is also an entertainer who caters to male fantasies. She is Isis disguised as Magdalene – disguised from herself as well as everyone except the man with the Jack of Hearts aura. When she asks him if his luck has run out, she reveals her doubt that would have come back to someone like her if he had any other options. Ironically, while Lily's chronic lack of faith in her own self-worth prevents her from seizing whatever opportunity he (or anyone else) might offer her, Rosemary's self-hatred, the last resort of whatever of a 'precious child' abides in her, enables her to be the agent of redemption.

The balance of good and evil and of agency and passivity struck among these four characters resonates strongly with the representation, in the album's other songs, of the relationship between the singer and his lover-wife. For instance, viewed through the prism of 'The Jack of Hearts,' 'Idiot Wind' is placed as a song the singer sings to himself, after his wife has killed the husband in him by throwing him out, as he is gradually realizing what he (his true self) had become. When he concludes

his song, 'We're idiots, babe, it's a wonder we can even feed ourselves,' we can imagine her retorting, 'You got that right. It's about time, schmuck!'

This still leaves the question of what happened to the stranger with the Jack of Hearts about him. Several of the song's commentators have suggested that, since the click of Big Jim's 'cold revolver' could have been either the sound of a misfire or the cocking of the gun, we don't know for sure whether our leading actor was killed or escaped. Well, yes, I suppose. But it would be rather odd, had he been killed, for the narrator to have omitted mentioning his whereabouts from the 'hanging' day' scene, where he places Big Jim 'covered up' in his grave and Rosemary on the gallows. It's true that the last we hear of his gang, they are waiting for him 'by the riverbed,' but that was the night before. (What I find curious is the notion that they 'couldn't go no further' – not wouldn't, but couldn't – without him. It's the most romantic touch in the entire song.) I think this is what happened: After his brief reunion with Lily, he slips out of her dressing room, disguised as a monk (or as an actor playing a monk, since actual monks are pretty scarce in Westerns), with the intention of rejoining his men. Perhaps alerted by the backstage manager after the latter discovered that the hanging judge was too drunk to be of any help, Big Jim hustles off, trailed closely by Rosemary, to Lily's dressing room. He bursts in, cocks his gun, and discovers to his surprise that his rival has given him the slip. 'You couldn't say surprised,' though, because in his gut he already knew he was

beaten. So maybe, in his impotent rage, he turns his cocked gun on Lily. Or maybe Rosemary didn't even require that much further provocation to decide it was about time strike a blow for life. And why, you ask, didn't the stranger take Lily along with him? That one's easy. Like any Western legend worthy of his horse, he's not the marrying kind. That monk's costume was not entirely a disguise.<sup>8</sup>

The stranger hightails it out of town, or in any case out of the song, but the Jack of Hearts doesn't go anywhere. He's a god,

1. **he found a way to 'stop time.'** See my essay "Tangled Up in Blue: Getting It Together" *Judas!* 7, note 1.

2. **but not if you catch the wit I am tempted to call it 'the Laurentian wit,'** in part because I always suspected that *The Man Who Died*, D. H. Lawrence's novella about an affair between a Resurrected Christ and a priestess of Isis, was a major inspiration for 'Shelter from the Storm.'

3. **I just could not relate.** I've decided to base my discussion on the revised lyric Dylan introduced in October, 1975, when he performed the song on a TV show honoring Columbia Records producer John Hammond. My text is a transcription of the Rolling Thunder Review performance of this version of the song included on *Live 1975 (The Bootleg Series, vol. 6)*. Dylan stayed with this version of the song through the 1978 world tour, and while he's tinkered with the lyrics continuously since then, the 1975 version has remained the template in the live recordings I have heard. He has on occasion returned to the *Blood on the Tracks* version of the final verse.

4. **erotic poetry since Sappho** See Anne Carson's classic brief study *Eros the Bittersweet* (Princeton University Press, 1986; reissued by Dalkey Archive Press, 1998).

5. **at the end of Song of Myself:** I suspect that Dylan's friendly rivalry here with Whitman, which also leaves traces elsewhere in the song, has something to do with the appearance in the fourth verse of Verlaine and Rimbaud, poets whose creative friendship was sabotaged by erotic jealousy.

6. **as Paul Williams has plausibly suggested that Dylan himself did** *What Happened?* (and books/Entwistle Books, 1980), p.41-42

7. **the Jack of Hearts himself.** For a good summary of this aspect of the song, see Wendy Lesser, 'Dancing with Dylan,' in Greil Marcus and Sean Wilentz, eds, *The Rose*

remember; he's already everywhere. He's both present and absent from the hanging day tableau ('missing on the scene,' says the narrator, who himself has more than a little of the Jack's tricksterly ways about him): present because he always is, and absent because at the moment there's no one left on the scene to cause that card to turn up.

And it's right here that the stranger parts company with the singer of the album's other songs. He's still trying to find an opening through which he can get back on the scene and maintain himself there.

*and the Briar: Death, Love, and Liberty in the American Ballad* (Norton, 2005), pp. 315-325.

8. **That monk's costume was not entirely a disguise.** One might object to my hypothetical account of the events of the song – and given the nature of the song, any such account is doomed to be merely hypothetical – by pointing to a verse Dylan edited out of the song when he re-recorded it in Minneapolis. In that verse, which immediately follows the verse in which the stranger hurries by in the costume of a monk, the stranger is still in Lily's dressing room. Thus, my reading makes the preceding verse – unlike any other verse in the song – out of chronological order. True, but in the original recording, that verse is out of chronological order any way you look at it – unless you want to posit that, for reasons unknown, the stranger took a break in the middle of his meeting with Lily, and for further reasons unknown, felt constrained to disguise himself as a monk while he was doing whatever he was doing. So, yes, we can make up lots of scenarios that are not contradicted the known facts; e.g., perhaps the man in the excised verse, the man Lily 'dearly loved to touch,' is Big Jim, who visits her – apparently an even dicier dish that we've been figuring – after the stranger had left, and the person Jim pulls his gun on in the next verse is Rosemary, who has come looking for him. When he realizes it's only Rosemary, he turns his attention back to Lily and his back, fatefully, to Rosemary. But it seems to make most sense, if we're forced to resort to hypothesis, to go with the one requires least amount of plot-writing on our part. And besides, Dylan did cut the verse out of the song. That said, I will confess to one nagging notion. 'Set it up for everyone,' he said: How much of the plot is a set-up, not by the narrator but by his leading actor? How much did he contrive to have happen?

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# Exhibiting Dylan

by Alan Davis

He nearly didn't get exhibited at all. But I'd better begin at the beginning.

In Issue 7 of *Judas!* you'll find a piece I wrote called 'Bob Dylan and the Nature of Gothic'. That was really just the tip of an iceberg – a small part of a much larger project that involved exploring how certain ideas of the nineteenth-century writer, artist and critic, John Ruskin, could still be of very practical help today in understanding and appreciating a wide range of art forms. I developed the argument into a one-hour paper and presented it to the Ruskin Programme (a Ruskin research group) at Lancaster University in December 2003. The basic idea was that three key concepts identified by Ruskin ('savageness', 'changefulness' and 'naturalism') have archetypal qualities: they're fundamental to nature, life and art in such a way that an understanding of them will illuminate our experience of almost any art form. I've given a detailed description of the meanings of those words in the earlier *Judas!* article, so I'll merely summarise them here. Briefly, 'savageness' refers to the imperfection that will always be found in great art because we respond to the feeling of 'life' in art; so, because life is imperfect we expect (perhaps subconsciously) to see that imperfection expressed. But also, a great artist's work will always be exploratory. He will always be working close to his limits and will only stop when he reaches his point of failure – which again, gives rise to a certain kind of imperfection. 'Changefulness' refers to the unpredictability of great art. There is no formula for producing it - a great artist doesn't repeat himself. And 'naturalism' refers to the inspiration the artist gains from studying the forms and rhythms of the natural world.

'There is no wealth but life' writes Ruskin, famously. Life is the only true basis for value that we possess. And because Ruskin's vision of the world has this essential organic, life-based quality, the idea of risk is built into it. Ruskinism (if there is such a thing) is risky and unpredictable because life is risky and unpredictable. In a way, my whole project seemed to be imbued with a kind of Ruskinian riskiness. I didn't know what the outcome would be when I embarked on it; I didn't know at the outset that the whole thing would grow and sprout branches, like a tree. But from very early on, the riskiness of Bob Dylan's art struck me as fundamentally Ruskinian in nature.

Still, it's one thing to suggest this to the committed and knowledgeable Dylan enthusiasts who read *Judas!* It's another to try to convince a roomful of academics, most of whom would take some persuading. Nevertheless, I took the plunge. In my seminar paper I tried to show how the three key concepts might be applied to Ruskin's etchings of Gothic architecture, ancient oriental ceramics, and – controversially – the performance art of Bob Dylan. It stimulated a lot of interest, and a lot of discussion; but despite all that, when it was all over I felt that I'd chosen the wrong medium to deliver the message. Rather than *argue* the case, I felt that it was necessary to *show* it, because the concepts were more about perception than intellectual assent. In other words, the most appropriate medium was not a scholarly paper, but an exhibition.



The Ruskin Library at Lancaster was the perfect place to do it. It houses what is probably the finest and largest collection of Ruskin material anywhere in the world, and its exhibition space is conveniently divided into two connected public galleries, which would be well suited to what I had in mind. In the first gallery I

could display material chosen from Ruskin's books, drawings, diaries and sketchbooks, to show how Ruskin had arrived at his three archetypal concepts. And in the second gallery I could present a wide range of art forms that would provide visitors with the opportunity to see how those key concepts might enrich their experience. So I discussed the idea with the curator of the Ruskin Library, Stephen Wildman. He was agreeable, and I began planning. The proposed title was *Ruskin's Organic Vision. Nature, Life and Art*. I had about a year and a half to prepare for it.

To my dismay, Dylan was a casualty almost immediately. My original idea had been to have headphones available, offering samples of his music to illustrate the savageness and changefulness of his performances, but it all crumbled to dust when it became clear that the Ruskin Library didn't possess a public performance licence. It had never been necessary before; and it was unlikely to be necessary ever again – so it was hardly feasible to acquire the necessary licence just for a single exhibition. With deep reluctance I ditched the whole Dylan idea; what was the point of putting Dylan into an exhibition if his music couldn't be heard?

Many months later, at a session in which the Ruskin Programme was planning its future research activities, I gave a brief progress report on the preparations for my exhibition. Afterwards a few people accosted me to express their surprise (and in some cases, disappointment) that Bob wouldn't be represented in the display. I explained the problem about the public

performance licence, but it was clear that there was an expectation among some members of the Ruskin Programme that somehow Dylan should have a presence, even if it had to be a silent one. I hadn't anticipated this. I decided to think again.

At this point I need to explain a little about the layout of the Ruskin Library. Each of its two long, thin galleries is a mirror image of the other, and they are connected in the middle by a short passage. In each gallery, one long curved wall provides a space for hanging pictures. Along the opposite wall is a series of glass-topped cabinets. These provide spaces for exhibiting books, diaries, sketchbooks – that sort of thing – while above each cabinet is yet more wall space for hanging pictures (one above each case). In the overall plan of the show, each cabinet would have a coherent theme. One cabinet would be devoted to Chinese ceramics, for example; another to Ruskin's (almost abstract) studies of the organic shapes of boats and sails. If Dylan were going to be included in the exhibition I should have to devote one of the cabinets (and the wall space above it) entirely to him – and somehow try to bring out the ideas of savageness, changefulness and naturalism purely by visual means.

I had a few ideas but they seemed pretty thin. I thought I could use Emmy Lou Harris's comments about Dylan's reluctance to overdub while they were recording *Desire*. Her comments illustrated the changefulness of Dylan's art – his reluctance to do the same thing twice. So perhaps I could display a CD of *Desire* in the cabinet, accompanied by Emmy

Lou's quotations. But such a relatively insignificant (and very unexciting) exhibit could only be a tiny part of the whole. I needed something a lot stronger than that. Bootleg recordings would add a bit of spice, I thought – an element of risk. On a market stall or in a CD fair they'd have no impact at all, of course – but in the quietly conventional galleries of the Ruskin Library they would strike a distinctly outlaw-ish chord. Many of its visitors might never have seen a bootleg Dylan CD. And after all, the reason why Dylan is so intensely bootlegged is due to his savageness (expressed through the out-on-the-edge riskiness of his best performances) and his changefulness (because you never know what he'll do from one performance to the next). So a small display of bootleg CD sets, together with a few well-chosen sentences in the accompanying label, might make that point nicely. I looked through my collection for examples that seemed suitably well-designed, appropriate to the special nature of the contents. In the end I settled on *Bathed in a Stream of Pure Heat, No More Alibis*, and *At the Globe Arena*, which have some attractive fold-out sections when the CD case is opened.

But the display cabinets measure 2 feet by 3 feet; and that still left a lot of empty space. However, another term coined by Ruskin that's relevant to Dylan (though not playing much of a part elsewhere in the exhibition) is 'grotesqueness' – by which Ruskin means 'the tendency to delight in fantastic and ludicrous, as well as in sublime images'. There's a lot of this sort of thing in Dylan's lyrics – and how

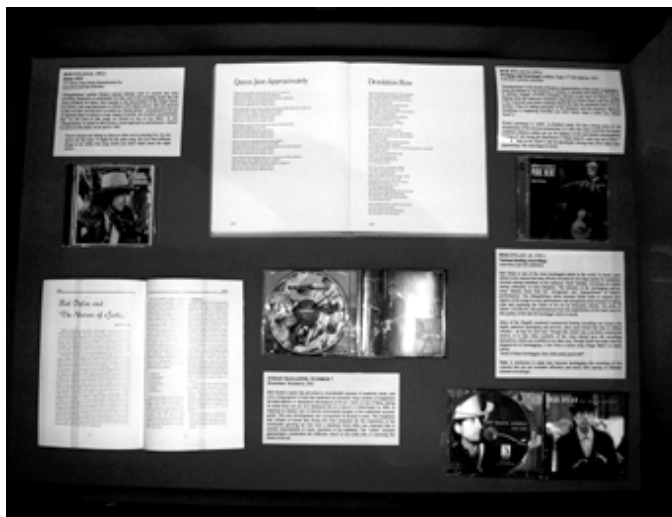


better to illustrate it than with a copy of *Writings and Drawings*, lying open at the page for 'Desolation Row'? I settled, tentatively on that. Finally, I thought it was essential that somewhere in the cabinet there should be an expression of the Manchester '66 'Judas!' moment – that marvellous symbol of an artist operating at the very limit of his performance, going where no one has been before, and in the process presenting his audience with something they may not be able, at first, to comprehend. That is truly Ruskinian savageness in action. It was a small step from the idea to the expression: it was immediately obvious that all I needed was a copy of this esteemed journal – *Judas!* – which takes its very name from that crucial confrontational moment. If I used Issue 7 (there's a copy in the Ruskin Library collection, so I didn't even need to lend my own), I could display it open at my 'Dylan and the Nature of Gothic' article. So everything would link together in a coherent manner and come round full circle.

I knew that separately each idea was a bit weak, but as a composite whole I thought it might work in an interesting way. Even so, it wasn't enough. In particular, the problem remained about what to hang above the cabinet. This would be the most visible item of the Dylan display and would dominate the whole, so it had to be good. It needed to be a first rate piece of art – whatever else it was – because it would be hanging in a gallery containing a selection of superb works by some of our finest contemporary artists. In this same gallery I was planning to hang abstract paintings by Sandra Blow, Terry Frost and Wilhelmina Barns-Graham; several outstanding pots by Bernard Leach and other fine British studio potters; and a collection of ancient but timelessly beautiful Chinese ceramics from the Sung, Ming and Tang dynasties – not to mention some of Ruskin's own finest drawings. In some ways this was the most daunting task of all: to choose something that was relevant to Dylan and the theme of the exhibition, yet powerful

enough to hold its own in such elevated company. If I failed to choose wisely, the Dylan cabinet would look tawdry and feeble, and I couldn't allow that to happen, either for my sake or Dylan's.

The answer came when I glanced at my copy of *Judas!* Issue 7, and saw again on its front cover the magnificent photograph of



Dylan in Paris, taken in 2002 by Duncan Hume. If only I could somehow get a large, top quality print of that photograph! *That* would stand its ground among the exalted company around it. The Ruskinian savageness in that portrait spoke volumes, and the circumstances of taking the photograph were perfect! Here was a photographer, pushed to the limits of what is possible under the difficult conditions of taking photographs in a Dylan show, and emerging triumphant with a truly masterly and unforgettable image. I didn't know Duncan Hume, but I did know Andy Muir. An email was despatched. Andy responded. I wrote to Duncan.

If there is a hero of this story, apart from Bob Dylan and John Ruskin, then it is Duncan Hume. He was wonderfully helpful. He not only sent me a selection of images to choose from, but also, when I finally did settle on the Paris 2002 portrait, he supplied me with a print of it at his own expense. When I opened the package on its arrival, my first glimpse of the photograph was stunning. It was exactly what was needed. All I had to do was get it suitably mounted and framed, and my problem was solved. You can make some judgement yourself of the final effect from the photographs accompanying this article. Of course I didn't know exactly how it would look in context, until everything else was hanging in its appropriate place in the gallery, but from the moment Duncan's photograph was screwed to the wall, it was clearly going to be fine. There is some strange unanswerable quality about the shaggy grandeur of Dylan in that photo-

graph, as he stares out over the contents of the cabinet below, towards the Terry Frosts on the opposite wall. I might have been able to find a better combination of items to put in the cabinet. But I could never have found anything better to hang on the wall above it.



So all my decisions were made; and on 8th October, the exhibition opened. And the big question is: how has the Dylan display been received? I can't give a full answer, because the exhibition is still showing as I write this. There are many weeks still to run, and I can't anticipate future responses. But my impression is that most visitors seem happy to accept Dylan on these terms, in this new light, and in this company. The real challenge of the show was always whether people can be persuaded to accept that the ideas of Ruskin, whose work hangs in the first gallery, can have anything to do with the utterly different works on display in the second. I'm delighted to say that as far as I can judge from their responses, most people can. And if you can swallow the

(superficially) absurd idea that Chinese ceramics, abstract painting, and studio pottery are not just tenuously, but *fundamentally* linked with Ruskin's vision, then it seems to be a relatively easy thing to swallow Dylan along with them. The gratifying fact is that the Dylan cabinet doesn't look out of place in such company. Even reduced to silence, he stands his ground, as he should: a great artist among great artists.

### Acknowledgements

My thanks to Andy Muir for coming to my rescue when I was desperate; to Sheila Clarke for the gift of a copy of *Writings and Drawings*; to Stephen Wildman, Rebecca Patterson, and the staff of the Ruskin Library, without whom none of this would have been possible; and to Duncan Hume for all his help, and for his magnificent photograph.

### Appendix

An illustrated 52-page catalogue of the exhibition is available, price £2.50,

from the Ruskin Library. See <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/users/ruskinlib/> for contact details.

A web page describing the exhibition (which closes on 22nd December) can be found at <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/users/ruskinlib/organic.htm>.

For completeness, I'd originally thought to include here the text of all the labels I wrote for the Dylan cabinet, but for some of them I drew so heavily on what I'd written in issue 7 of *Judas!* that there seemed to be no point in repeating the same things in a slightly different way merely for the sake of completeness. However, the labels for Duncan Hume's photograph, for the bootleg display, and for the copy of *Judas!* do offer some additional material. So here they are:

Duncan Hume b. 1960  
Bob Dylan, Paris 2002  
Photograph  
Lent by the artist

Duncan Hume has been photographing Bob Dylan in concert since 1984, and has attended about 180 shows. His photographs have been published in books and magazines all over the world. This one was taken in Paris in 2002 using a 300mm lens. Conditions for photography are invariably difficult: the taking of photographs in Dylan concerts is actively discouraged, and the stage lighting is kept low.



The photographer comments:

Dylan has a magnetic quality I catch every once in a while. Richard Marquand once described when making the film *Hearts of Fire* how it was impossible to take your eyes off Dylan despite whatever else was going on. I understood what he meant.

*Judas!* Magazine, Number 7  
Bluntisham: Woodstock, 2003

Bob Dylan's music has provoked a considerable amount of academic study, and over a long period of time has sustained an unusually large number of magazines devoted entirely to discussion and analysis of his art. *Judas!* is one of these, taking its name from the cry of a dismayed fan at a concert in Manchester in 1966, in response to Dylan's use of electric instruments instead of the traditional acoustic guitar. This new development was 'savageness' in Ruskin's sense. The roughness and volume of sound that Dylan felt were necessary for the expression of his continually growing art was such a departure from what was expected that it seemed unacceptable to many members of his audience. The 'Judas!' moment appropriately symbolises the difficulty faced by the artist who is exploring the limits of his art.

Bob Dylan  
Various bootleg recordings  
Lent from a private collection

Bob Dylan is one of the most bootlegged artists in the world. In recent years almost every concert has been illicitly recorded in very high quality by equip-

ment secreted among members of the audience. Such 'bootleg' recordings are traded among collectors, or sold (illegally). The intensity of the bootlegging activity arises directly from both the 'savageness' and 'changefulness' of Dylan's performances. The changefulness arises because Dylan seeks to explore new aspects of the songs in every performance; the savageness arises because in taking risks and exploring the limits of his art he frequently reaches 'his point of failure'. His performances have the imperfection of life itself, and it is this quality of life that the bootlegger seeks to record.

Many of the illegally produced commercial bootleg recordings are issued with highly attractive packaging and artwork, often more lavish than that of official releases – as may be seen here. Though this clearly has a primarily commercial motive, it is also often symbolic of the value placed upon the recordings themselves, which are available in no other way. Though Dylan has made clear his disapproval of bootlegging, a line from a recent song ('Sugar Baby') is surely telling:

*'Some of these bootleggers, they make pretty good stuff.'*

**Note:** A distinction is made here between bootlegging (the recording of live concerts that are not available officially) and piracy (the copying of officially released recordings).

# Photo

# Songs from, but not out of, History

## Bob Dylan and Traditional Scottish Music

### The Conclusion

by Andrew Muir

The bridging portion of this article, in the last *Judas!*, ended with a discussion of Dylan's performance of the old Scottish song, 'Wild Mountain Thyme' at the Isle of Wight festival in 1969. In it I intimated that Dylan has returned at crucial, later junctures to some of the Scottish songs and ballads that we looked at him playing at the beginning of his career. In this concluding section of my piece I will begin by looking at another time when this occurred before moving on to look at the parallels between Bob Dylan and Scotland's national poet, and renowned folk-revivalist, Robert Burns.

A caveat may be in order before we begin inasmuch as I will inevitably be covering areas that I have already written about in detail and at length in *Razor's Edge* and *Troubadour* (the beginning of the Never Ending Tour and 'Highlands' respectively). I have endeavoured to avoid too much repetition here but, as my views of that period and that song are essentially unchanged, there is bound to be some. This is because this article, albeit in a slightly different format, is also scheduled to appear in a non-Dylan centred publication the majority of whose readers will be new to the Never Ending Tour and indeed 'Highlands', far less any writings on them. So, you may find me in the rather odd position of quoting from and plagiarising myself.

Turning now to the beginning of the Never Ending Tour, it is perhaps worth reminding ourselves of how crucial this stage was in Dylan's career. This is something that has been alluded to every time Bob Dylan has taken the stage for the past three years and more. You will doubtless recall that for many years and over a thousand consecutive shows, fans had been informed that Dylan was about to appear on stage with the words 'Ladies and gentlemen, would you please welcome Columbia Recording Artist, Bob Dylan.' At first these words seemed somewhat demeaning, the best one could think of them was that they were cutely self-deprecating, not that there was any hint that this was the intent. As time passed however, they became ingrained as an integral part of the ritual of going to a Dylan show. They called you from the bar, if you were so blasé as to leave it late to find your place, they ended your pre-show conversation, or if you were in the happy position of being pressed against the front barrier, they set your already pumping heart valves into over-drive. The words merged memories of favourite shows with the one you were about to witness. They were a call to arms, an immovable part of the event itself. Or so it seemed.

Then all that changed in a most unexpected manner at the Erie County Fair in Hamburg, New York State on the 15th of August 2002, Dylan's entrance was preceded by a whole new slew of words preceding the normal invocation for the festivities to begin, to wit:

*'The poet laureate of rock 'n' roll. The voice of the promise of the '60s countercul-*

*ture. The guy who forced folk into bed with rock, who donned makeup in the '70s and disappeared into a haze of substance abuse, who emerged to 'find Jesus', who was written off as a has-been by the end of the '80s, and who suddenly shifted gears and released some of the strongest music of his career beginning in the mid-'90s.'*

Journalist Jeff Miers who was present at the show wrote these words and was unsurprisingly shell-shocked upon hearing a passage from his pre-concert preview read aloud.<sup>1</sup> I thought this story most amusing when I first heard of it but I did not for a minute expect that it would have remained, yet it has. I cannot say that I enjoy this hackneyed career summary being repeated each night and it seems most un-Dylan like to allow – or even insist upon – it. I presume it is a joke of some kind but on what level of satire or irony I cannot fathom, nor do I know whether it is well intentioned or (as Mr. Miers fears) malevolently meant.

Whatever the case the quote seems self-mocking as well as mocking the clichéd history and hints at the depth of Dylan's despair in the 80s, something he has talked about in interview and in *Chronicles*. His well-recounted epiphany in Switzerland in 1987 set him off on what we have come to know as the Never Ending Tour.

In June 1988 that tour began in splendid fashion. This remains one of my favourite times of the entire Never Ending Tour and much as I adore those blistering electric sets, I find even more magic in the acoustic numbers, especially in the songs Dylan covered, above even his own

wonderful compositions. For the record, these were:

'Across The Borderline', 'Baby Let Me Follow You Down', 'Barbara Allen', 'Big River', 'Eileen Aroon', 'Everybody's Movin', 'Give My Love To Rose', 'Hallelujah!', 'I'll Be Around', 'I'm In The Mood For Love', 'Lakes Of Pontchartrain', 'Nadine', 'Pretty Peggy-O', 'Rank Strangers To Me', 'San Francisco Bay Blues', 'She's About A Mover', 'Trail Of The Buffalo', 'The Two Soldiers', 'Waggoner's Lad', 'We Three (My Echo, My Shadow And Me)', 'Wild Mountain Thyme'.

The eagle-eyed reader will notice that at this crucial juncture Scottish songs appeared again; this list includes three songs that have already been discussed in this article, 'Barbara Allen', 'Wild Mountain Thyme' and 'Pretty Peggy-O'. They appeared as part of a whole list of covers that usually occupied the middle slot of a three song acoustic set that sat between the opening and closing electric sets. This afforded time to catch your breath as the rest of the show was nonsense rock'n'roll played at a ferocious pace as a high energy Dylan led his stripped down back-to-basics band.

'Barbara Allen' was consistently outstanding: the beauty of the 1962 version not forgotten, nonetheless many of my favourite performances of this song (one that never fails to move me) come from this opening period of the Never Ending Tour. It usually appeared in song slot nine, the middle acoustic song, and Dylan brought to his performances of it drama and exquisite poignancy; he invariably sang it superbly. I have said it before

and I believe to this day that on some nights the way he sang the last word of: *'oh yes, I am sick, so awfully sick and I will not be better'* was worth the admission to every show on the tour.

'Pretty Peggy-O', too, has lit up the Never Ending Tour, although perhaps not the best version, a personal favourite was from Hammersmith Odeon on February 3rd, 1990. This was the first of a series of six consecutive concerts at the same venue. I had recently moved to within a short walk of it and my cousin Andy was down staying with us for the shows. Just before we left the house he played a video of electric 'Pretty Peggy-O' from 1986. It sounded superb, I was half-convinced that I had never heard it performed better but two songs into that night's set-list I had reason to change my mind. Dylan gave us a fabulous rendition; the words were sung with crystal clarity and Dylan evoked all the magic from inside the melody and lyrics of the old, timeless classic.

'Wild Mountain Thyme' was also tremendously moving. In the first few weeks of the Never Ending Tour, June 22nd 1988 to be precise we were treated to the most impressive 'Wild Mountain Thyme'. Dylan got inside the song and propelled a stunning version out over the noisy crowd to such an extent that it is probably my single most treasured Dylan cover of a Scottish song on the entire Never Ending Tour. He sang it in a way no-one ever has before or since, dragging a wild, despairing yet courageously steadfast stance from the well known lyrics and music in a truly knife-edge performance. This is not to say there have not been many



other stellar performances from a variety of artists. Sandy Denny, in particular, having committed to vinyl a version so heartbreakingly beautiful that it stops time; even breathing seems almost immoral when you play it. Nonetheless, Dylan's interpretation that night was something else entirely; a prime example of the overwhelming importance to Dylan of the live performance of traditional folk songs.

It makes me recall Dylan's eloquent response to interviewer Mikal Gilmore's comment:

*'It seems that some of your most impassioned and affecting performances, from night to night, are your covers of traditional folk songs.'* Dylan's reply was: *'Folk music is where it all starts and in many ways ends. If you don't have that foundation, or if you're not knowledgeable about it and you don't know how to control that, and you don't feel historically tied to it, then what you're doing is not going to be as strong as it could be. Of course, it helps to have been born in a certain era because it would've been closer to you, or it helps to be a part of the culture when it was happening. It's not the same thing, relating to something second- or third-hand off of a record.'*<sup>2</sup>

To hear Dylan singing traditional songs like these is magical, it is different from hearing them by anyone else that I know of. Dylan involves the listener directly in the ancient story, in myth. We are not just listening to a singer, accomplished or otherwise, re-telling a tale and

pushing the buttons of our emotional responses, we are dragged in, perhaps even reluctantly, to what Dylan described in the famous 1966 *Playboy* interview as 'the one true, valid death you can feel today off a record player.'



In turning to the links between Bob Dylan and Robert Burns, I am conscious that it may seem surprising to some that I am linking the two. This is partly because Burns is best known solely for his poetry but it should be noted that music, and particularly folk music, was just as important to the Scottish genius and his achievements in that field parallel his peerless poetic output.

It was recently written of Burns that:

*'Burns understood how song could be used to transmit words and ideas perhaps more efficiently than any other medium. He would have swiftly latched on to the opportunities of modern broadcasting and recording. People would be downloading his tracks for their iPods. He would be writing for the greatest singers.'*

*Burns was passionate about song, and devoted much of the later part of his life to writing and collecting songs. Though his strength as a lyricist is undisputed, the extent to which he also wrote music is less clear. History records him as a "passable" fiddler; Dr Fred Freeman, the man behind the 13-CD recording of Burns's *The Complete Songs*, is among those who think he was also a composer and arranger of consummate skill –*

*maybe even the world's greatest songwriter.'*

The article went on to make an explicit connection to Dylan himself and to his one-time mentor, Woody Guthrie:

*'The spirit of Burns extends far beyond those who work directly with his material. It is reflected by singer-songwriters such as Bob Dylan – whose Highlands is inspired by Burns – and Woody Guthrie, in the political egalitarianism of Hamish Henderson's Freedom Come All Ye, and in the work of contemporary Scottish singer-songwriters such as Dougie MacLean and Karine Polwart. Ronnie Gurr, music promoter and producer who has worked with Culture Club, the Boomtown Rats, Simple Minds and, as creative director of Virgin's V2 label, signed Stereophonics, is a big fan. "Burns knew the power of song. By looking at the collections of the time and putting his own words to the tunes, he realised the power of the song as the vehicle to get his great words across. Songs are the heart of everything, the steam in the engine."'*<sup>3</sup>

At the beginning of this article, in *Judas!* 14, I quoted Professor Corcoran's laudation on the occasion of Dylan being presented with an honorary degree from the University of St. Andrews on June 23rd 2004. That quotation included the words: '... and his great song 'Highlands' is an elaborate riff, or descant, on Robert Burns.'

Before examining that song and what that 'elaborate riff' or 'descant' consisted of, it is worth remarking upon the mani-

fold connections and similarities between the two artists – despite the vast differences in time, place and cultural background. If we begin by looking at similarities in life we can then, by thinking of both artists as song-writers illuminate the more interesting and pertinent parallels in their work.

Before examining that work, which is after all the reason the men are famous and the thing that matters, it is worth noting, in passing, some of the correlations in their lives and legends.

Both men travelled to the sophisticated cities of their respective time to stake their claims to fame from countryside backgrounds. This encouraged myths about both being untutored geniuses, neither were. Burns was talked of as a Heaven (or nature) sent ploughman; that is a poet sprung directly from the soil with no learning. Dylan similarly seemed to arrive fully formed from a background in carnivals, box-cars and the 'invisible republic' of the people of the folk and blues traditions; this was something he assiduously cultivated.

In fact both men were well read, Burns's writings and letters are full of references to a wide range of noted authors and one cannot help but recall Dave Van Ronk speaking of the young Dylan in his early New York days:

*'Did Dylan ever say he admired Dylan Thomas? "He assiduously avoided it," replied Dave. "I think the reasons are obvious". I did come on to Bob about Francois Villon. I also told him about Rimbaud and Apollinaire. I once asked*

*Bobby: "Have you ever heard about Rimbaud?" He said: "Who?" I repeated: "Rimbaud-R-I-M-B-A-U-D. He's a French poet. You really ought to read him," I said. Bobby kind of twitched a little; he seemed to be thinking about it. He just said: "Yeah, yeah." I raised Rimbaud with him a couple of times after than. Much later, I was up at his place. I always look at people's books. On his shelf I discovered a book of translations of French symbolist poets that had obviously been thumbed through over a period of years! I think he probably knew Rimbaud backward and forward before I even mentioned him. I didn't mention Rimbaud to him again until I heard his 'A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall,' his first symbolist verse. I said to Bob: "You know, that song of yours is heavy in symbolism, don't you?" He said: "Huh?"*<sup>4</sup>

Indeed both men are surrounded by myths that are easily disproved but believed by nearly all. Their names are lauded and loved, even by those who have never read or listened to them. And both are claimed as a spokesman for a wide variety of (often mutually exclusive) causes.

Both artists are almost – if not – as well known for their excesses as their lyrics. Burns was famously fond of drink as Dylan has often been reported to be; although in the latter's case stronger drugs took centre stage in his wildest years. When one compares them to their peers, 17th century hard working Scottish farmers and indulgent 1960s rock stars respectively, one might see their seemingly

Herculean prowesses in the realm of chemical abuse as more 'par for the course' than they look from the vantage point of a contemporary, 'normal', lifestyle.

Similarly, although both men are known for womanising and begetting children by numerous women: their histories are not so unusual by the standards of rural Scotland in the 17th Century and rock stars in the late 20th. In Burns's case a rather mundane historical factor explains a great deal; there was an almost complete lack of contraceptive devices available to him. If one were to compare his life to Byron's – and there are many instructive parallels there in another who was a direct influence on Dylan as we know from interview comments and *Chronicles* – Byron used condoms but Burns lived in a prophylactic-free zone.

There is a major difference in the ability of the men to look after their children. Forever short of funds, Burns could not be as generous in providing for the upkeep of his children whereas Dylan both can afford it and, by all accounts, does so fully and generously. Testaments to Dylan's fatherly duties have followed from his ex-wives. Dylan himself has firmly pointed out that whilst he was a failure as a husband he has obvious pride in the fact that he was a success as a father. Speaking of money; both men have reputations for both being mean and generous at different times – only one of the many instances where both seem able to contain polar opposites. As Jack Nicholson remarked of Dylan, the best word to describe him is a paradox and as Jeff Lynn famously said, 'there are so many sides to

Dylan he's round'. These are apt quotes for both Bobs as it happens.

There are many similarities and of course huge discrepancies in lifestyles and times. One thing that binds them together forever and the pertinent point for this article is their shared love for and deep knowledge of folk music and how they used that to inspire their own writing. Both song-writers are to be seen firmly in the folk tradition, utilising and interspersing melodies and lyrics from ancient songs in their own, new, creations.

There are many correlations – as well as the inevitable huge discrepancies - between the two men's work, I would like to look at four areas of correspondence(s). The first two are general, songs about the oppressed and their utilisation of the folk tradition; then, more particularly, the third correspondence is how they both merge so-called high art into vernacular based folk lyrics. (With specific reference to Shakespeare as so many other examples in Dylan's lyrics are to artists whom Burns pre-dated.) Finally we will examine how Dylan drew directly from Burns for his epic 'Highlands'.

As part of the folk influence both were affected by, and wrote, ballads. This also led to a fascination with outlaws; a respect, if not love for, *'the misdemeanor outlaw, chased and cheated by pursuit'*. The outlaw tradition features prominently in both men's work; from romanticized tales of ancient Scottish bandit heroes to romanticized tales of wild west gunmen and latter day gangsters, the lure of the 'pure', untamed individual opposed to a corrupt, institutionalized society is strongly sustained.

Both artists are renowned for their lyrics in defence of the oppressed, *'for the aching ones whose wounds cannot be nursed/For the countless confused accused misused strung-out ones and worse'*.

Burns's 'The Slave's Lament' is famous today in Senegalese as sung by Youssou N'dour. Like Dylan's 'political lyrics' Burns's song's survives long after the circumstances that inspired its creation is because of its intrinsic worth and universality (as opposed to the topical song that are inherently dated due to being tied to the particular).

It is not only political commentary that binds their work but it is an important common strand and is a touchstone that is often referred to. As here, for example, by Nod Knowles, head of music at the Scottish Arts Council when speaking about how Burns's poetic work has long overshadowed his song-writing. Knowles also helpfully describes the range of themes in Burns's songs and it will strike the Dylan listener as a very familiar one:

*'(Burns's) has always been acknowledged as Scotland's great poet, but he was equally interested in songs. His work deals with an incredible range of themes: love, politics, the environment, the big themes of life. For anybody writing songs now, he embodies exactly what song-writing is about. The spirit of music (sic – presumably "his music") is deeply inspiring to other songwriters, whether or not their music sounds anything like his ballads. Think of his political lyrics - he makes Bob Dylan look quite tame.'*

It is not too unusual to come across the name Bob Dylan when Burns's scholars talk of their subject. It works both ways, of course, some Dylan commentators have mentioned connections between the two writers in the past; eager, mainly, to link Dylan to a poet with immense critical kudos. On the other hand Burns's admirers make the same connection in the desire for the kudos of popularity and contemporary relevance.

There are interesting parallels in the way that both writers used the work of others of noted authority. For this article I am going to refer to Shakespeare only for the reason already given. Ironically, like Burns and Dylan, Shakespeare also long went under the mythical title of 'bard by nature taught'. Indeed in Burns's time this legend still held sway, adding an extra layer of contrariness to what follows. However, as Burns was quoting an English authority while writing in the Scottish dialect his references were seen as audacious in the manner we are going on to look at in Dylan too. This is because 'Scotticisms' were seen as vulgar in the post Act of Union political and cultural landscape that Burns found himself in.

In 'A Winter's Night' Burn's establishes a profound and unsettling correspondence with two separate Shakespeare plays, the dramatic tragedy of *King Lear* and the witty comedy of *As You Like It*. While one can read and admire the poem without picking up on the associations he embeds, they add to the overall effect via their inherent incongruity. The Dylan listener will think of the similar incongruity of Ophelia (*Now Ophelia, she's*

*'neath the window/ For her I feel so afraid/ On her twenty-second birthday/She already is an old maid) and Romeo (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')* appearing in 'Desolation Row' and, most pertinently, Romeo again in 'Floater (Too Much To Ask)' and Othello and Desdemona in 'Po' Boy' (both from "*Love And Theft*").

In 'Po' Boy' we hear:

*Othello told Desdemona, 'I'm cold,  
cover me with a blanket.  
By the way, what happened to that  
poison wine?'  
She says, 'I gave it to you, you drank  
it.'*

The way that Dylan both refers to the Shakespeare play and misattributes who drank the wine finds parallels in Burns's complex manner of referring to Shakespeare.

At the same time we should note that Burns's Shakespearian references stand out all the more for appearing in rustic Scots language setting which brings to mind Dylan's dialogue between Romeo and Juliet in 'Floater (Too Much To Ask)':

*Romeo, he said to Juliet, 'You got a  
poor complexion.  
It doesn't give your appearance a very  
youthful touch!'  
Juliet said back to Romeo, 'Why don't  
you just shove off  
If it bothers you so much.'*

It is typical of the complexity of the rich lyrics throughout "*Love And Theft*"

that Dylan simultaneously is enhancing the minstrelsy theme that underpins the album<sup>5</sup> and in the latter case making one of a multitude of self-references to his own earlier lyrics.<sup>6</sup>

We are going to conclude by looking at Dylan's 'Highlands'<sup>7</sup> whose opening lines do seem to place the area as being the Highlands of Scotland (though there are many 'Aberdeens' in the world):

*Well my heart's in The Highlands,  
gentle and fair  
Honeysuckle blooming in the wildwood  
air  
Bluebells blazing where the Aberdeen  
waters flow  
Well my heart's in The Highlands  
I'm gonna go there when I feel good  
enough to go*

However the song quickly develops a more ambiguous and vague setting. This is all to the good of the song. The lack of specificity in lines like:

*My heart's in The Highlands at the  
break of dawn  
By the beautiful lake of the Black Swan  
Big white clouds like chariots that  
swing down low  
Well my heart's in The Highlands  
Only place left to go*

further strengthen the impression of a far away realm from 'time out of mind' that is central to the song. The reality of Dylan's Highlands is to be found not in Aberdeenshire but in the expressly heavenly reference of this verse:

*Well my heart's in The Highlands  
wherever I roam*

*That's where I'll be when I get called  
home  
The wind, it whispers to the buckeyed  
trees in rhyme  
Well my heart's in The Highlands  
I can only get there one step at a time*

And the quite beautifully fitting description of it in the last verse as being: over the hills and far away.

Dylan achieves this 'magical realm'-effect not just by geographical vagueness and 'ye olde world' references, but by using verses from a song-writer as famed for taking and re-shaping the oral, folk tradition as himself, Robert Burns.

Dylan takes a fun, if trivial, lyric from Burns and uses it as a touchstone throughout to evoke a 'highlands' that stands for an uncertain and undefined heaven. It forms a contrast to what is going on in the rest of the song which depicts the daily reality of the singing narrator's (and we cannot but feel this is Dylan's own perspective) which we are privileged to be shown through his eyes.

Burns' poem is short enough to quote in full:

*My heart's in the Highlands, my heart  
is not here;  
My heart's in the Highlands a-chasing  
the deer;  
Chasing the wild deer, and following  
the roe;  
My heart's in the Highlands, wherever  
I go.*

*Farewell to the Highlands, farewell to  
the North;  
The birth-place of valour, the country  
of Worth;*

*Wherever I wander, wherever I rove,  
The hills of the Highlands for ever I  
love.*

*Farewell to the mountains high cover'd  
with snow;  
Farewell to the Straths and green  
valleys below;  
Farewell to the forest and wild-  
hanging woods;  
Farewell to the torrents and loud-  
pouring floods. --*

*My heart's in the Highlands, my heart  
is not here,  
My heart's in the Highlands a-chasing  
the deer;  
Chasing the wild deer, and following  
the roe;  
My heart's in the Highlands, wherever  
I go.*

How much Dylan knows of this poem and its composition is something I am not privy to. I first wrote that it would not surprise me if he only vaguely knew it or had maybe heard the refrain in song or ballad (we are talking here of a 'trad. arranged by R. Burns' type of thing). I later came across a reference to an unpublished remark that Dylan made to David Gates during the marvellous 1997 interview for *Newsweek* confirming that it was a deliberate reference.<sup>8</sup>

Whatever the truth behind all this is, it remains a startlingly apt Burns reference for a number of reasons. The opening (and closing) verse is Burns's take on a circulating folk source with a couple of stock traditional images thrown in – much like most of the songs on this album. The

verses they enclose are trite, clichéd love lines of the Hallmark greeting card type, much like 'Till I Fell In Love With You' and 'Make You Feel My Love' in fact.

As an aside, as we talked about Shakespeare earlier, Dylan uses a device much beloved of the dramatist in this song. Shakespeare often utilised the idea of the 'play-within-a-play' to provide comic relief that also broadened and deepened the themes of the 'serious' action. Similarly Dylan provides a marvellously rich and humorous song within a song in his 'waitress episode' which as well as delighting on its 'surface level' explores the nature of artistic creation and the relationship (and problems with that relationship) between the artist and his audience, while also deftly counteracting the dominant male viewpoint of the rest of the album's love songs.

The episode is integral to the song – or indeed the whole album. It portrays Bob Dylan's life on this (fallen) Earth; meanwhile there may or may not be a heavenly future in the 'highlands' – he won't know for sure until he has walked through this world with its meaningless, disjointed encounters. He depicts one of those encounters here with skill, charm and a self-revealing insight while making us laugh at the same time. It is something that makes 'highlands' stand out from the rest of *Time Out of Mind* and point towards "*Love And Theft*".

To return to my main point, Dylan takes the five verses from Burns and spaces them throughout his long monologue, the central core that he meanders verbally and physically around before returning to at

the end. Not only does the Burns' poem provide the opening lines and backbone but it also gives a general feel and coherence of imagery. The Highlands of Burns's light poem become something far more serious in Dylan's song, forming, as they do, the climax of the whole album.

It is entirely fitting given the influences

traced in this article of traditional Scottish songs on the works of Bob Dylan throughout his career that this late masterpiece uses, as a base, a lyric from Scotland's bard, originally conjured from circulating folk lyrics handed down through the centuries. *Songs from, but not out of, history.*

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### Notes

1. Mr Miers recounts the tale in an amusing follow-up piece for *The Buffalo News*, August 23rd 2002 available for a small fee from their archives at <http://www.buffalonews.com/newslibrary/>

2. Mikal Gilmore 'The Rolling Stone Interview', *Rolling Stone* 882 – Nov. 22, 2001

3. Mansfield, Susan *Call them Burns knights*, *The Scotsman* January 22 2005

4. Robert Shelton, *No Direction Home*, William Morrow & Co Inc, 1986

5. See Muir, Andrew, *Troubadour* Woodstock Publications 2003 pages 265-274 and Richard Jobs in *Judas!* Issue 2

6. See *Troubadour* pages 289-300

7. The following remarks are adapted and summarized from a more detailed examination in *Troubadour*; the 'play-within-a-play analogy is added due to the earlier references to Shakespeare.

8. One can never know for sure what influences are at play in the creator's mind. The same conversation surrounding the interview revealed Dylan was in the middle of reading Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain*. Interestingly enough the book begins with a patient in hospital who soon dreams of escaping to an area – vague and unknown to the reader at this stage – called 'highlands'.





Welcome to a double letters' section; as you may remember our last issue was bulging with items on the flood of on-going Dylan activities, particularly *No Direction Home* and we had to postpone the letters due to appear there until this issue. The good news about that is that Andrew Davies got a few more months to search for a hidden cave in Siberia.

### Letters to Judas! 15

Andrew Davies's 115th rant

Hi Andy,  
Hope you're well.

The other night, for absolutely no conceivable reason at all save an incredible lack of anything akin to a life, I cruelly abused my DVD player by inserting into it the quite appalling waste of plastic that is *Masked and Anonymous*. This was attempt number two to sit through it. The first occurred the day the damn thing was released when I, like a number of other blinkered Dylan devotees, rushed out to buy it just so I could say that I had. I watched in horror up until the bit involving Val Kilmer and got thankfully distracted by the doorbell. I put it back on the shelf where it sat for months. Back to the other night, I watched it all. It's terrible. It made me want to cry and not in a Bambi's mother dying sort of way. There's no plot, no ideas, no story, the newspaper testimonial on the back of the DVD box from (sic) Rolling Stone is absolute bobbins ('so full of wisdom, both real and faux', oh please!), the impressive, on paper at least, cast promises some sort of Robert Altman-style ensemble piece but their all awful and Larry Charles has done a Bob Dylan and tarnished his hitherto immaculate CV but putting his name to a dog.

*Hearts of Fire* (though equally as shocking) at least had a plot of sorts and was a representation of Dylan on film at a time in his career when he wasn't on the best of form. Also, as with many similar other films, *Hearts of Fire* will historically be written off as a product of a highly questionable fashion period existing purely for future ridicule. But *Masked And Anonymous* represents an era in time when Dylan is making good records, winning new fans, gaining new respects and, frankly, ought to know better. It got me thinking, has Dylan ever done anything outside of writing, recording and performing music that's actually any good?

Look at the evidence without the Emperor's New Clothes factor: he made a right pig's ear of *Eat the Document*, a documentary that would have stood handsomely as a sister piece to *Dont Look Back* had he not insisted on directing and editing the thing (see also *Renaldo & Clara*). *Pat Garret and Billy the Kid?* Well, he's OK in it but his part is insignificant and involves little more than reading the labels of tinned food. *Tarantula* is good to have for its historical significance as a collectors piece but it's the sort of unreadable rubbish that a Creative Writing student may try to pass off as abstract prose only to be thrown off the course when the tutor had stopped laughing. Likewise, all the sleeve notes to all the albums (with arguable exceptions in *John Wesley Harding* and *World Gone Wrong*) suffer from the same nonsense. Which brings me onto a subject that will inevitably make me unpopular with your readers: *Chronicles Volume One*. This, too, is rubbish!

Would you like me to go on?

Ha!

Sorry, just had to get that off my chest.

Cheers

Andrew Davies

Bath

Hi Andrew

I just finished reading *Judas* #14 and felt the need to contact you. The magazine just gets better and better! I am now judging Dylan fanzines the same way I judge a Dylan concert. That being how many times during a show or the reading of an article a tear will develop in my eye. When it happens 3 times you know I witnessed a fantastic show but even when I get a one tear show it more then covers the price of admission. The final article by J.R. Stokes was a revelation. So please keep up the great and important work you are doing and if you are missing any issues of 'Homer' I would be glad to make copies for you.

Dylanogically yours,

Mel Prussack

Curator of The Dylan Shrine

Dear Andy

Thanks for your enjoyable reading at John Green Day 5, and for the consistently enjoyable, stimulating and provocative *Judas!* magazine.

You made it clear both in your talk and in *Judas!* 14 that you're not enjoying Dylan's singing much the last couple of years (since 2001 I would guess – 2000 was surely a great year), and also you said you'd welcome other perspectives, so here's my two pen'orth, no great claims to insight or originality, but I suspect a common response.

I still think Bob is out there giving unique and phenomenal, moving performances with great phrasing and that sense of finding and exploring the individual moments within a song which may never be sung quite the same way again – all the qualities which drew us to him as a performer in the first place. The ravaged voice he undoubtedly has now I think is still a wonderful instrument – EXCEPT for the bloody upsinging. That's the long and short of the problem for me. I don't know whether upsinging means Bob is switching to autopilot or quite the reverse, that he's really trying to sing (!) but for me the moment it starts I want to hit the forward button (if I'm listening to a CD. If I'm fortunate enough to be there my heart just sinks). I rarely do hit the forward button, because as we know the next verse or even the next line might be priceless, but unfortunately it usually means the whole song is probably scuppered, and it is dispiriting.

Fortunately, as someone else at JG5 said, Bob is always evolving, and already the upsinging in 2005 is not quite as prevalent, one dimensional and irritating as it has been. You mentioned that you hadn't heard many of the 2005 shows as you are trying to listen chronologically and are still mired in 2004. I think you're in for a treat at least with regard to one song – Bob's rediscovery of 'New Morning' has been a consistent delight. Listen to that long noodling piano intro on that first performance, and then really inspired singing culminating in that joyous, incredulous shouting out of 'This must be the day that all of my dreams come true!' – and subsequent performances I've heard have been just as great.

Anyway, I hope you do find things to enjoy with Bob live 2005 (and incidentally I think it is all credit to you and Clinton Heylin that both of you were at pains to make it clear that it was you yourselves who were not connecting with what Dylan is doing these days rather than saying the usual 'Bob's past it' etc.)

Take care

Graham Stephenson  
Birmingham

Dear Andy,

I just wanted to let you know that I agree with what Ole Bernt Lysne mentioned in his most perceptive letter published last issue. He is of course absolutely right in his appreciation. Personally, I have no problem with Dylan's current voice, as I think you know. It's all a matter of how he uses it, and I believe he can still do it with skill and passion, and as a matter of fact he does most of the time. Most of the 2005 shows I've heard prove my point: just listen to 'Visions of Johanna' at Eastlake on June 26. And the 'Mr. Tambourine Man' performance mentioned by Ole is truly fine, too, and these are not isolated cases. Dylan still moves me, and how!

You may be right in what you mention about age and weariness taking their toll on the more veteran Dylan fans, but I am not sure that is really the problem, although it is true it is always

difficult to be as enthusiast about something when you've been doing it for years than when you've just started. On the other hand, there are many younger Dylan fans who in my opinion are simply not discriminating enough: what with the easy availability of recordings from all periods, they may think they know enough to think Dylan's present shows are tremendous, but they really lack mileage, or the background. It's a complicated life.

As to Jonathon Shimkin's interesting comments, I would like to say that of course, I think he is right, but then, aren't we all with the benefit of hindsight? However, these reap-praisals work both ways: I have recently been revisiting past NET years and while some I remembered as distinctly lacklustre now appear, with perspective, far more commendable (the US Fall 1990 tour, for instance, or the Fall 1996 tour, which for me, at the time, was ruined by Kemper's obtrusive and incompetent drumming), there are others which I've now found rather less good than I remembered them: the Spring 1992 US West Coast is pretty dull, for one, in spite of 'Idiot Wind' and a few decent performances. Yet at the time, I thought it was really very good... particularly after the disastrous 1991 shows and the ramshackle Australian shows in early 1992. But now, the fall 1991 shows appear to me far better and more centred than the following spring's ones! But the relevant part of Shimkin's comment is that we should refrain from judging today's shows by the standard of yesterday's, because we lack the overall perspective we will gain in a few years' time.

Anyway, it will be interesting to see what other readers think of this, and forget the 'his voice is crap' chorus for a while. It'll be relaxing. And congratulations for yet another excellent issue!

Keep on keeping on, etc.

Antonio J. Iriarte  
Madrid

Dear Andy,

It's a while since I wrote a letter to *Judas!*, and things have stacked up a bit. So here is a motley collection of items (three to be precise) that might fill up an unobtrusive hole in the letters pages. There's a story; a question; and some news.

First, a story about Bob. This goes back some months, so my memory may not be entirely accurate on the fine detail, but it's good enough on the essentials. I present it to you as it was presented to me, and leave you to make of it what you will.

I was walking through the centre of town when I was approached by an old pupil of mine, who knew (of course) about my interest in Dylan. He scuttled across the road towards me in a state of some excitement and announced that he'd met Bob Dylan! I enquired where this had happened? 'Madrid airport' was the reply. He'd spotted Dylan signing autographs for a small group of people, and hastened to join them. He had a pen about his person, but no paper – but he managed to scrounge a small scrap from some-

where and rushed over to Dylan. By this time Dylan had finished signing and was either walking away, or about to.

'Bob!' asked my friend, holding out the pen and the paper scrap, 'Will you sign this for me please?'

Dylan turned. Looked at him. Looked at the scrap of paper. Took the pen and the paper. Looked at him again. Then he jabbed once with the pen, making a single dot in the middle of the paper, gave the pen and paper back, and walked off without a word.

I'll leave the theorists to interpret the significance of that one, and move on to my second item: sound levels in concerts. I took part in a discussion about this in the pages of *Isis* a while ago, but now I'd like to dust it off and look at it again, with a little more information.

When I recall the sound levels in Dylan shows from 2000 onwards, there seems to have been a general trend upwards, culminating in the last show I attended – at Birmingham in 2003. After that show I was seriously worried that my hearing had been damaged. That the performance was terrible was mostly irrelevant. I knew he'd been ill. But the sound level was like a physical assault, and when I left the arena I knew that even if my hearing recovered from this, I wouldn't be giving Dylan another chance to wreck it. Fortunately my ears were OK again after about two or three weeks.

I don't go to many live shows – there aren't many performers I care about enough, I suppose – but one performer I very much wanted to see was Alanis Morissette; and it so happened that I had the opportunity to see her in Manchester last April (2005). Small venue – Manchester Apollo; great seats at the front of the circle near the middle. I was enormously looking forward to it. The support act was dire, but I didn't care. Then the main event began.

I've never been exposed to a sound level like that before. It was as if the sound engineer had set the levels to fill a stadium instead of a small theatre. It was terrifying. The songs were almost indistinguishable. She was clearly putting her heart and soul into a performance that no one could possibly hear, because it was lost forever in that great wall of noise, like a perpetually onrushing tidal wave of sound. I had my hands over my ears most of the time; I wondered about leaving, but decided that my ears had in any case already been exposed to (probably) permanently damaging levels – so I might as well at least see the performance even if I couldn't hear it. The cost afterwards was heavy. My loss of hearing was very noticeable for two weeks. The tinnitus drove me to distraction for five weeks until, just as I started to wonder about having my ears surgically removed, it began to diminish and finally subsided back to levels I could tolerate. (No, it hasn't gone completely, even now.)

I had thought that it was just Dylan shows that, for some unfathomable reason, were getting louder – but clearly there's a bigger, broader movement afoot. Why? What's the point of driving sound levels so high that the performance can't be heard properly, and

the ears of the audience are put at risk? I started asking around, discussing the issue with people who attend live shows more frequently than me. It turns out that many of them now wear earplugs as a matter of course. 'Not very rock and roll,' they say, 'but the music actually sounds better, and who wants to go prematurely deaf?'

Does anyone out there have anything comforting or sensible to say about this lunacy? Why do serious artists like Bob Dylan (or indeed Alanis Morissette) permit this to happen? Do they know about the absurdity of members of the audience listening to their shows wearing earplugs? Are their sound engineers so deaf after years of exposure that they have no concept of the hearing limits of ordinary people? Why are audiences not complaining en masse to the venues they attend? Answers, please, on a postcard...

Alan Davis  
Lancaster

### Letters to *Judas!* 16

Hello Andrew

...Just a quick note to say I laughed out loud at your Pete Seeger/Bono comments this quarter. Like you, I've always found both men quite irritating – both too self-righteous, too arrogant and too self-important. This week Bono met with President Bush – and while watching Bono on the news I turned to my wife and said – 'He's this generation's fool. He's another Pete Seeger'. Two days later I received my copy of *Judas!* and saw your comments.

Well done.  
Keep up the great work,  
Richard Dominick  
The Jerry Springer Show

Hi Andrew,

At last! Someone who shares my take on Bob's response to the Judas! shout! I have NEVER believed that the 'Play f\*\*\*ing loud!' comment was made by Bob. To my ears, the sound, tone, and inflection of the voice are not his. I have also never understood the comment to be 'Play f\*\*\*ing loud!' I hear 'You're a f\*\*\*ing liar!' I can't read his lips in the *No Direction Home* footage, but I'm sure that whatever he's saying after his 'You're a liar!' remark is inaudible.

In a similar 'What did he really say?' vein, I have read many references to a song called 'Cover Down/Break Through' which Bob performed several times in his Gospel shows. I do not believe that this is the correct title. I believe he's actually singing 'Cover down; pray

through.' The expression 'Pray through' is a very common one in the evangelical strain of Christianity which Bob embraced during his affiliation with the Vineyard Fellowship in 1979-'80. I heard him do the song live at least five times in the spring of 1980. It sounded like 'Cover down; pray through' to me then, and it still sounds that way on the many bootleg versions I've collected. I suppose this would be a difficult issue to resolve because the song does not appear in Lyrics or in the titles listed at the official website.

My copy of the magazine just arrived a few minutes ago so I've only had a chance to skim it. It looks like a great issue though, and of course I'm excited to see my own contribution in print! Have a good week -

All the best,  
Jim LaClair  
USA

Dear Andrew,

Thank you for making me feel if not entirely normal, then at least in excellent company; I too had that 'strong, creepy feeling' (from Inside A Prune, *Judas!* 15) when confronted with the recent massive Dylan coverage.

We're not used to it and its unsettling – a reminder of the one occasion when an artist can expect to receive such coverage. Personally, I'm quite happy for Bob not to be everywhere – leave it alone, don't meddle and it will be alright - illogical, i know, but it keeps me happy.

And even though I can hear him admonishing me with 'that which ties everyone together and which makes everyone equal is our mortality', it just doesn't bear thinking about – so I won't.

Then I read that Stephen Scobie has 'a weakness for the name 'Dylan' and that any combination of the letters 'dul' will catch his eye. Now, I've never told anyone this, but I know that I'm among friends, so I will admit to thinking it was just me – that my obsession has gone a bit too far and was affecting my perspective. So thanks, Stephen – it's been such a relief. And I'm with you, Andrew, on the infamous 'Judas!' moments; I was never convinced that it was Bob, but as everyone seemed to disagree I decided that I must be wrong.

Just a thought – and I realise we might be none the wiser – but do we know if he has ever been asked? As I say, just a thought. But Bob, if you're reading this, could you please put us out of our misery? it would be much appreciated.

The first things I turned to in an exceptionally strong issue 15 were the articles on 'No Direction Home!' In my letter to *Judas!* 14 I said that I found 1965 the most riveting period of Dylan's career, but I had no idea that outtakes from 'Bringing It All Back Home' and 'Highway 61 Revisited' would make up so much of bootleg series seven; with the addition of three from 'Blonde on Blonde', my happiness was complete.

Now, I know concentration on pre-1967 can be frustrating (I am the first one to champion the whole of Bob's work as an awesome achievement) But I will always have a special affection for the mid – sixties songs and performances.

To have witnessed the 61-66 changes, followed him through those amazing times and viewed it all in the light of his subsequent career, makes me very glad that I was a near contemporary.

I agree with most of what Nick Hawthorne says in 'the road less traveled' a review of 'No Direction Home': the soundtrack, including the excellent quality of the accompanying booklet, there are memorable contributions from Al Kooper and Eddie Gorodetsky, but whose idea was it to get such a pretentious writer as Andrew Loog Oldham to comment on someone who has fought pretension all his life?

The Autographs are great, too – doesn't the one on page 34, with its 'blow up' style, encapsulate everything about that time?

I do disagree though with Nick on one major point; unlike him – and this may come as no surprise – I prefer disc two.

Disc one is indeed heavy with 'so much gold; (Nick) starting with the all-too-brief home recorded blues and ending with a sublime 'Baby Blue' on its own showing how far Dylan had traveled and how fast, but add disc two and it takes your breath away.

I love these songs – its hard to remember a time when they were not a part of my life - and now we have alternative arrangements, lines that would be improved or some that would be discarded altogether, in fact, as Nick says 'great insight into Dylan's creative process, where a song starts from and where it ends up'. He goes on 'we get to listen to that process, see what worked, and what didn't and how earlier models were changed into the songs we know and love'. And its mostly wonderful stuff.

Also, two of Bob's most famous – and notorious – gigs are on this disc; Newport Folk Festival 1965, where he attacks 'Maggie's Farm' like a man on a mission, cracking with energy and defying anyone to get in his way, and the 'Judas' 'Like a Rolling Stone' from Manchester Free Trade Hall.

But back to the outtakes – 'She Belongs to Me' and 'Highway 61' offer little that's new (apart from the letter being minus the police whistle) but its right that these seminal songs should be included here. And 'Visions of Johanna' loses a lot from having everything thrown at it, but I can forgive this in order to get to the other gems.

'It Takes a Lot to Laugh, It Takes a Train to Cry' just drives along, taking an inspired – sounding Dylan with it; how have I managed for so long without 'I stamped on forty compasses, god knows what they cost?'

'Tombstone Blues' is a raucous romp for Bob and his mates, who join him for the chorus sing-along. When he cracks up laughing at the end you can't help but smile with him.



## Judas!

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Both 'Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues' and 'Desolation Row' are powerful alternatives, though some lines have not received their final polish and are, as Nick correctly identifies, all inferior to the album version.

(John the blacksmith torturing a thief doesn't have the imaginative clout of John The Baptist doing the same thing), and the 'wasted varnish' (great phrase, Nick) of 'Tom Thumb's final version maybe missing here, but on both these tracks the desecration in the lyrics is caught by Dylan's voice – we were doomed and he knew it. (Only last year, in the prim seaside resort of Llandudno, North Wales, I saw the following graffiti – 'Bob Dylan knows where its at! Unbelievable.

'Leopard-Skin Pill-Box Hat' has grown on me (an interesting look) with each hearing. Dylan improvising is always a thrill and there's no denying he gets right down to his roots, but the sleek hipness of the album version does sit more comfortable with its 'Blonde on Blonde' companions.

'Stuck Inside of Mobile!' is a bit of a mess – but an incredibly effective one none the less. Bob loses his words more than once, hums along, then catches up, but it still manages to convey a feeling of controlled despair, captured perfectly by the end of chorus organ breaks.

The final two tracks – Live '66 versions of 'Ballad of a Thin Man' and the 'Judas!' 'Like a Rolling Stone' are brilliant, painful reminders of a man on the edge – or even a little beyond it. This is a high-wired act taut with danger. From lovable hobo to king of cool in five short years had taken a horrible toll; its amazing that he was still standing at this time and the fact that three months later he wasn't is probably the best thing that could have happened. Like Stephen Scobie, I would rather see Dylan live in concert in 2005 than dead in 1966.

There is no doubt that 'No Direction Home' provides an important service by charting his development up to then; it will be invaluable for anyone coming to Dylan now – that growing percentage of younger readers, perhaps.

Giving a taste of what it was like to see the artist grow and flourish, it follows a phenomenal journey of discovery and vision, we get hesitant home recorder to peerless song writer in half a dozen tracks, and then a demonstration of how a few mid-sixties classics became just that.

And here in the UK it was released, after a little delay, in September 5th 2005 – my birthday. So thank you, Columbia, and thank you, Bob – I couldn't have wished for a better present.

Sincerely  
Sheila Clarke  
Chester

An 11 year old's take on Bob Dylan – by Ryan Macready

**1. Ballad of a Thin Man – from Highway 61 Revisited**

Because the words make you feel how confused Mr. Jones (the music critic and journalist) felt when Bob Dylan released a new and different type of music.

**2. Sara – from Desire**

Because of Bob's brilliant guitar playing and last strum. I like the way he describes Sara in such a loving way and he characterises himself as a family man.

**3. It's Alright Ma (I'm only bleeding) – from the Dont Look Back Outtakes**

I like this because of the political message which is very relevant to today. I think his style of 'talking blues' expresses his message better than in a typical song.

**4. Isis – from Desire**

I find the tune quite unusual in comparison to Bob's folk style of music. It is also in my top 10 because my mom's birthday is the 5th of May – so I never forget it!!!!

**5. Hurricane – from Desire**

I like this because it describes the injustice of racism in the Ruben Carter case. It also shows political issues like 'It's Alright Ma'.

**6. It Ain't Me Babe – from Bob Dylan and the Rolling Thunder Revue**

I like the highly distinctive chorus that stays in your head and makes you keep singing it back.

**7. Joey – from Desire**

I like the descriptive image you get of all the brothers with barely any money and always getting into fights. The title reminds me of my step-dad, Joe, who first introduced me to Bob Dylan.

**8. All Along the Watchtower – from John Wesley Harding**

I like the fact that this song is told as a sonnet. I like the way this is told as a conversation between a business man and a thief and the way the guitar playing and story go around in a circle. I also like the fact that this song can also be played in a 'rock' style as in Jimi Hendrix's version.

**9. Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again – from Blonde on Blonde**

I like the way Bob describes that he is stuck somewhere but wants to be somewhere else. I like the pun on 'mobile' – it could be anything you are stuck in not just a town such as a relationship, a style of music etc.

**10. Just Like a Woman – from Blonde on Blonde**

I like the way Bob describes how some women can seem like grown-ups on the outside but are like little girls (child like) on the inside.

I hope that Bob will play some of my top 10 when I see him for the 1st time at the SECC in November!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Ryan Macready  
2nd October 2005  
Aged 11

Finally subscriber Paul Maxin sent in this amusing item, if you want to see more of the same (not Dylan related) see <http://www.thespoof.com>

### **Reservoir Dogs Run Free**

The BBC, Sky, Channel 4, Channel 5 and the Arena programme, in association with Sony Pictures, The Biography Channel, Arena again, Spitfire Pictures, PBS and HBO are thrilled to announce a co-production with WHDH-TV, KACL and BobCat Movies to make the sequel to the Scorsese directed and critically acclaimed biopic 'No Direction Home: Bob Dylan'.

The follow up is to be directed by Quentin Tarantino and is provisionally entitled: 'Reservoir Dogs Run Free: Mr Dylan'. Production is scheduled to begin in 2015 with a likely premiere on Microsoft Xbox in the year 2525.

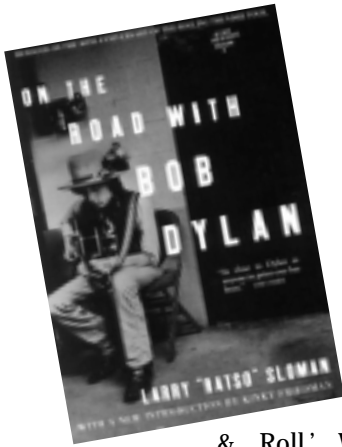
'The mighty Zim has consented to appear as a virtual reality hologram to discuss his career from 1966 until his untimely future death from a publicity overdose. Cate Blanchet will provide the voiceover to Bob's dialogue.

'The film will cover three basic themes post his infamous 1966 motorcycle crash. 'Bob tries to save the world', 'Bob tries to save his marriage', and 'Bob tries to save himself'. Interspersed with footage from the 156th year of his 'Never Ending Tour', Bob evolves from electric punk post gospel country singer into an ageing song and dance man peeling off layers of clothing as he struggles to perform in a globally warmed world, whilst playing the triangle sitting on a commode. The search has already begun for the 'holy grail' concert footage where, appalled by Bob's decision to reproduce his back catalogue as atonal nursery rhymes, a frustrated fan yells out 'JK Rowling'. Bob, dressed as the Fat Friar from Hogwarts, retorts 'oh no, I'm not. You're a fibber!' He then demanded that the band 'play effing quidditch' and launched into a searing version of 'Lilly, Rosemary, Jack and Jill'. Naturally he'd altered the lyrics to tell the story of a same sex ménage a quartet.

Discussing the project at yesterday's press conference and speaking through an interpreter Mr Dylan said that as he was now 'knocking on heaven's door' he was delighted to finally put the record crooked and lay bare his story, warts and all, in an entirely fictitious manner while sucking on his shades. Joan Baez made one more cup of coffee for the road.

Paul Maxin  
Henham

by Jim LaClair



# Ratso Revisited

'The *War and Peace* of Rock & Roll.' With this ringing endorsement from the master himself, Larry Sloman's epic *On the Road With Bob Dylan* arrived in bookstores around the world in June of 1978. I would have bought it just for the (original) cover – a striking Mary Alfieri shot taken from behind Dylan as he was performing in one of the Rolling Thunder Revue concerts during the late autumn of 1975. Hailed immediately as a masterpiece of rock journalism, the book was out of print for two decades or more until it finally resurfaced as a companion piece to the *Live 1975 Bootleg Series* set in 2002.

Now it's available again, this time as a 30th anniversary commemorative of the legendary Rolling Thunder tour which it documents in such a unique manner.

All of this raises a rather logical question: how does one approach a review of a book which has already been hailed as a rock & roll classic? The task is daunting to say the least. For starters it is essential for 21st century readers to grasp the context of the era in American history which frames Sloman's narrative. In the fall of 1975, the country was still in the first

stages of recovery from the national trauma that was the war in Vietnam. A pall of suspicion and cynicism enveloped the land. At the same time, the entire nation was preparing for the biggest party in its history – the Bicentennial celebration of 1976. Somehow, the Rolling Thunder tour managed to connect with each of these phenomena simultaneously. It was pure Americana, and it is this dynamic that Sloman's book manages to capture brilliantly. But it wasn't easy.

As he relates the tale in the book's opening chapter, Larry Sloman had the good fortune of being in the right place at the right time late one Sunday night/early Monday morning in October of 1975. That evening, Sloman, in the company of Byrds founding father Roger McGuinn, strolled into New York's famed Other End café on the hunch that a suddenly rejuvenated Bob Dylan might be among the patrons. It was this stroke of intuition that culminated in Sloman's being given the chance not only to observe but to actually chronicle an extraordinary chapter of rock & roll history. Sloman and McGuinn arrive at the famed club to find Dylan sequestered at a side table with Off Broadway director Jacques Levy and singer David Blue among others. Mischief is in

the air and Sloman is ready to seize the moment. Bored and perhaps a bit disillusioned by the structure and predictability of the greatest hits arena tour with the Band in 1974, Dylan on this evening is ready for something new and outrageous. Before sunrise, the scene has shifted to the Kettle of Fish, and we discover that Dylan is a man on a mission, ready to launch a tour reminiscent of the traveling medicine shows of a century earlier. A surprise birthday party for Gerde's Folk City proprietor Mike Porco later in the week is designated as a sort of dress rehearsal for what will become the Rolling Thunder show, and as the long evening dissolves into daylight, Dylan announces that he's ready to hit the road and invites an elated Sloman to come on board as a reporter. In this capacity, Sloman will have the double barreled assignment of covering the tour for *Rolling Stone* magazine while he acts simultaneously as a scribe appointed by Dylan to produce a book which will record the Rolling Thunder odyssey.

As one might expect, Sloman begins his tale from the first person point of view, but a humorous encounter with Joan Baez in the parking lot of a Shelburne, Vermont country inn culminates in his receiving the nickname 'Ratso' from the folk music queen. For Sloman, this is serendipity; he realizes that in a unique way, the new handle defines his role on the tour, and from this point on, the narrative switches to third person point of view, allowing 'Ratso' to become the main character in his own drama.

The very essence of the tour is spontaneous, and to survive in this frenzied

environment, Sloman must overcome two formidable adversaries: tour manager Lou Kemp and Chet Flippo, his editor at *Rolling Stone*. From the outset, Kemp is suspicious of the reporter's methods and motives. Any effort by Ratso to acquire anything but the most mundane material constitutes a threat to Dylan's self-appointed watchdog, and, of course, accessibility to Dylan himself is out of the question. Flippo, for his part, is insistent that Sloman's articles for the magazine emphasize the very details that Kemp seems to be guarding with his life, and when the *Rolling Stone* editor finally eliminates Sloman's per diem, it appears that the reporter's efforts will go up in smoke.

All of this culminates in a climactic episode when Ratso finally encounters Dylan in the lobby of a Boxboro, Massachusetts hotel where the tour has established temporary headquarters, and informs the singer of the crisis. Although he can't resist teasing the reporter, Dylan is actually sympathetic to Ratso's plight, and by the time their conversation ends, Sloman has scored lodging, a per diem, and most importantly, Dylan's promise of greater accessibility to the performers. From this point on, Sloman strives with a fair degree of success to forge alliances with the key members of the RTR entourage along with a number of other friends and acquaintances from Dylan's past. It is these exchanges with cast members occupying a variety of positions on the tour pecking order that provide some of the most satisfying moments of Sloman's journal.

Joni Mitchell, a latecomer to the cast, is portrayed as the archetypal artist, refusing to be categorized by her music or her gender. Already a major star in her own rite, Mitchell is content with her role as an opening act in the Rolling Thunder shows. The tour, she suggests, has given her a rare opportunity to perform and to examine the implications of her own celebrity away from the primary spotlight.

Ronee Blakely, whose short solo spot provided some of the tour's most rewarding moments, emerges as a victim of her own success, unable to escape the long shadow of Barbara Jean, the neurotic character she portrayed in producer Robert Altman's 1975 cult film classic, *Nashville*. Blakely concedes to Sloman that she often feels like an outcast, consigned to the 'second wave' of performers. But like the intrepid reporter in whom she has discovered a comrade in arms, she is a survivor, steadfast in her resolve to ride out the storm.

Certainly Sloman's characterization of Sara Dylan provides some of this book's most engaging reading. Through his eyes we meet a woman of extraordinary beauty and grace. Deeply philosophical and spiritual at times, she nevertheless demonstrates a sense of humor and playfulness that is most refreshing. In one of the book's lighter moments, Ratso 'rescues' Dylan's bride from a 'potentially dangerous' intruder in the Boxboro hotel lobby. As they 'escape' in Sloman's rented Monte Carlo and enter Cambridge enroute to the show at Boston's Music Hall, Sara suddenly notices a 'hippy Salvation Army' shop. This launches Sara

on a spontaneous shopping spree, and she and Ratso eventually emerge from the offbeat emporium with a stash of merchandise ranging from cowboy shirts to candles.

A place on the tour roster is not a prerequisite for inclusion in Ratso's journal. Michael Bloomfield for one, figures prominently as an ally to Sloman when he receives a pre-dawn phone call from the reporter who is stranded in a remote motel in Maine. In an effort to penetrate Dylan's 'character armor,' Ratso discovers that the blues guitar icon is surprisingly forthcoming when it comes to sharing his experiences during his own brief but historic stint as a Dylan sideman. Ten years down the road from that alliance, Bloomfield clearly remains loyal to his enigmatic friend, but this fidelity is tempered by the frustration he has endured in efforts to connect with Dylan on a personal or artistic level. The highlight of this dialogue is Bloomfield's hilarious description of his experience playing with both Dylan and the Butterfield Blues Band at the legendary 1965 Newport Folk Festival. This episode itself is worth the price of the book.

Leonard Cohen, the reclusive Canadian songwriter/poet, adds a warmer and lighter dimension to his typically dark public persona while hosting Ratso, Joni Mitchell, and Roger McGuinn at his rustic bungalow in Old Montreal during the Revue's visit to the French Canadian metropolis. There are many similar instances as Sloman is able to cultivate friendships with McGuinn, Beattie Zimmerman, and Allen Ginsberg to mention a few.

All of this attention on the role players is well and good, you say, but how does Dylan himself fit into the equation? Well, as is the case with virtually all-things-Dylan, the answer is not simple. Throughout the tour, Sloman finds himself in an unending cat-and-mouse game with his hero. From the word go, however, it's clear that Dylan has a three-fold purpose for this endeavor. First there is the drive to reclaim his muse. Reinvigorated by a summer back in New York City, frequenting his old haunts, hanging out with his old cronies, and buoyed by a host of new songs, Dylan is ready for the road. In one of the book's most revealing episodes Sloman recounts a conversation between Dylan and Don DeVito at a party held in the producer's West Side apartment to celebrate the completion of the *Desire* recording sessions. It is here that an exuberant Dylan first suggests his idea of a 'tour that would last forever.' The format would afford Dylan and a host of other artists to move in and out of the lineup at will. The entire operation would be self-sufficient. Just reserve a school auditorium. Dylan and company would arrive at the venue two or three days later with a complete self-contained package – sound system, lights, even pre-printed tickets. Seen from the perspective of 2005, it's obvious that the seeds for the Never Ending Tour were sown long before the genesis of that still-thriving venture in 1988.

A second incentive for the tour is the campaign to free falsely imprisoned middleweight boxer, Rubin 'Hurricane' Carter. It is in this dynamic that Dylan's

sense of purpose is most clearly defined. After reading *The Sixteenth Round*, the incarcerated fighter's autobiography, Dylan was inspired to visit Carter at the New Jersey prison where he was confined. Dylan emerges from the day-long session convinced of Carter's innocence and committed to bringing national attention to his plight. Before the dust settles, Dylan has written 'Hurricane,' an eight-and-a-half minute *tour de force*, which documents the miscarriage of justice in considerable detail. After a trial run performance of the song at the Chicago PBS tribute honoring legendary producer John Hammond, Dylan and his ad hoc band spend an exhausting night recording the mini epic less than a week before the Rolling Thunder Revue hits the road. His nightly performances of this passionate new song will ultimately represent the signature moment of each Rolling Thunder concert. Eventually the show makes its way to the Clinton, New Jersey prison where Carter is confined, and the following night the first leg of the RTR ends with the 'Night of the Hurricane' in New York's Madison Square Garden.

Last but far from least is *Renaldo and Clara*, the movie which Dylan produced in conjunction with the Rolling Thunder odyssey. The magnitude of this enterprise cannot be emphasized enough. It is so critical that one could argue that for Dylan, the RTR was primarily a convenient means to an end. In one very real sense, it is Dylan's preoccupation with the film that validates Sloman's presence on the scene. Once Dylan recognizes Ratso's potential as a resource for his pet project,

Sloman's place on the payroll becomes secure. Ever the opportunist, the vigilant reporter is constantly alert for potential filming opportunities as the troupe wends its way through the northeastern states and eastern Canada. Finding these opportunities is Ratso's gift, and it is through his initiative that some of the film's most intriguing characters find their way into the script.

Ratso's narrative ends where it began, in New York City with the 'Night of the Hurricane' show and its immediate aftermath. For Sloman (or 'Slocum' as he has been affectionately dubbed by Dylan), this final performance proves to be a chaotic anti-climax to the pure energy of the previous shows. Nevertheless, the occasion allows the reader to savor another rare nugget, this time in the form of a chat between Ratso and Mike Porco, who regales the reporter with one example after another of Dylan's affection and loyalty towards the special friend who was there for him at the very beginning.

The Rolling Thunder Revue would resume in the spring, but by most accounts, much of the magic was gone. Dylan, his marriage now headed for the rocks, and deeply saddened by the suicide of his friend/foil, Phil Ochs, seemed no longer able to sustain the *joie de vivre* of the first leg, and in spite of some stellar performances, eventually it would limp to its conclusion with a sparsely attended date in Salt Lake City, Utah.

Flash forward to 2005. Hurricane Carter is a free man, living in Canada and a fixture on the lecture circuit. The irrepressible Kinky Friedman with whom

Ratso shares a comical 'tennis-shoe' escapade, is an author of note, currently running a surprisingly serious campaign as an Independent candidate for governor of Texas. T-Bone Burnett has established himself as one of the most prominent producers in contemporary American music with the enormously popular *O Brother Where Art Thou?* soundtrack among his many credits. Joan Baez, who comes across as something of a prima donna in Ratso's portrayal, is enjoying a career resurgence on the heels of a critically acclaimed new album and a successful tour to support it. Ramblin' Jack Elliot..., well they don't call him Ramblin' Jack for nothing. Sloman himself has reinforced his position as one of the more versatile members of the literary community with books that cover topics ranging from the life of Abbie Hoffman to a season with the National Hockey League's New York Rangers. He has retained his ties to Dylan as the co-producer of Bob's 'Jokerman' video and as the author of the excellent booklet included in the wonderful *Live 1975 Bootleg Series* set.

Sadly, however, as Friedman notes in his introduction to this new edition of the book, many of the other principals in this amazing odyssey have been 'bugled to Jesus.' But Mick Ronson, David Blue, Allen Ginsberg, Beattie Zimmerman and the rest of those who have passed from the scene live on in the pages of Ratso's opus, and certainly the opportunity to share their company on this journey of three decades back in time is one of the greatest gifts the reader will receive.



Dylan, for his part, *found* Jesus, and within four short years, the gypsy caravan that was the RTR had resurfaced as an old fashioned Gospel revival tent show with only Bob himself remaining from the original cast. But that's another tale for another time.

So what's not to like *On The Road With Bob Dylan* you ask. When I first acquired the book, I considered Sloman's writing style to be a bit pretentious. The text, it appeared to me, had a lot more to say about Ratso than it did about Dylan. Reading it again after 27 years, this seems less the case. Indeed, Ratso is the main character, but if this were not so, the book would lose much of its humor and intimacy. Certainly Dylan is not absent from the scene, and at times Ratso's persistence is rewarded with a unique glimpse of our hero's personal life.

Another of my original reservations pertained to Sloman's reliance on some graphic language in the telling of his tale. This is strictly a personal observation, but books, movies, etc. which deliver an overdose of profanity have never appealed to me. In this respect, Ratso's writing is not for the faint of heart. It should be noted, however, that the potentially offensive

sections are almost tame by way of comparison to much of today's standard fare.

In 1991, a friend of mine made a comment that I'll never forget. The occasion was Columbia's long-anticipated release of *The Bootleg Series, Volumes 1-3*. After listening to the set and savoring every moment of the experience, my friend's first observation was, "It retrieves the ambiance of the time." I can think of no higher praise for Ratso's book than to reiterate my friend's statement. Reading the text again after all these years yields what another friend refers to as "remembered wellness."

Grab *On the Road With Bob Dylan* while you can. It's an all-access pass to the most unique tour of Bob Dylan's career delivered with authority, humor, and love. You'll spend six amazing weeks on the road with some of the most engaging representatives of the golden age of rock & roll, not the least outrageous of whom is Ratso himself. Best of all, if you had the wonderfully good fortune to be there, as I was for three of the shows, you'll recapture a good dose of the magic and mystery that characterized Dylan's pre-Bicentennial saga.

# Bob Dylan's Secret

by Steve Nelson

Well Bob you caused quite a stir with that Victoria's Secret ad – and I've got to tell you that while most people, even the self-proclaimed hardcore Dylan fans, cried sellout, I understood completely; not only why you did it but how it all fits together, you and Victoria's Secret, your song and that girl. I've been listening to your stuff for a while, but it's different since I've seen that ad, since I've seen the flash of your sour puss as you gaze upon that dreamboat in Venice, well, it all makes sense to me now, at least I understand what you're getting at, and I'm not sure everyone else does, which is why I'm writing you, to lend my support, to let you know that I get it, and maybe to give you something to think about too.

You've always had the reputation of an ambivalent sort, mumbler, back to the audience, that sort of thing, but obviously you've had plenty to say, and wanted others to hear it too – if you didn't care you wouldn't be singing, but you are, and while the Victoria's Secret ad may seem like a desperate grasp to some, I see that it's a stroke of genius, your genius, which I could never fully appreciate until I heard your voice as I looked into the eyes of that temptress and felt like crying, and that's the point you're trying to make, right, that that's what life is all about – desire, pain, suffering.

'All life is suffering,' that's what the Buddhists say, that's what the original Buddha discovered that day long ago as he sat under that tree and tried to make sense of his life, all his pleasures, then his sacrifices. He had nearly starved to death when he figured it out finally, and he figured out more than that of course, but that was the first truth and you really can't move on to the others if you don't get that one first and I've been thinking about this for years, and have had an idea what he meant, but I never really felt it until I saw you in that Victoria's Secret ad and felt finally that desire does not lead to frustration, but rather is frustration, because we know, we know, that our desires can never really be satisfied.

So it seems you're spreading the word and maybe that makes you a Bodhisattva, huh? Has anyone ever called you Bodhisattva Bob? Maybe not. I read in a book once that you'd 'found' God, which as far as I know isn't the Buddhist way, but can't you see how it all fits together, you and Victoria's Secret and the Buddha – now that's a crazy love triangle, huh, and it's all about time, isn't it? Time is the four-letter word and in a Victoria's Secret ad, especially a television ad, time is key, because the fleeting glimpse is all you get. As soon as you begin to soak something in, a juicy leg, a delicious breast, it's gone, replaced with another image, the blue eyes, the smoldering lips, which again lasts just long enough for you to think you're about to get a good look before it too disappears. You want it to come back, you want a better look, but you can't have it because time is going, because time never stops. That's what you're getting at, right? That Life = Desire and Life = Suffering because in life the fleeting glimpse, the passing glance, is all one can ever get, and I can see now that you've been singing about this all along, but I never quite got it until now, which I guess means I'm a step or so behind you Bob, but that's not a bad thing, a step behind you is not such a bad place to be.

Now of course I don't mean to say that your songs are about eyeballing supermodels. They're about the human condition, right, the fact that life is temporary, that in life we've got ourselves and other people and everything else is just a means to better understand or appreciate one or the other. My favorite songs of yours are the ones about love and I like the way they mix that bursting feeling of falling in love with the somber acknowledgement that it can't

last, that is to say that even if the love affair lasts, the buoyant feelings of the onset don't. Most other people's songs are about one thing or the other, are either celebrations or laments, but you somehow capture the glee and the gloom at the same time, because that's how we truly experience life, if we're able to open ourselves to our feelings, we get the birth and death, as it were, all at once, and maybe yours are the only real love songs ever written, though I think I may be overstepping myself a bit by saying that, I haven't listened to everyone's love songs and don't want to, but I say that because the achy throb that runs through me while listening to your songs is the same I have when I'm trying to bring a prancing Victoria's Secret model into focus. There's desire of course, longing, and simultaneously, and that's the key, simultaneously, there's melancholia, borne out of the admission that the dream can never be realized. And the dream is not just a lusty one, not just want of the girl, though others are obviously confused on this point. Really the dream is that of stopping time, and the downheartedness I feel after seeing a Victoria's Secret ad is the same I get when listening to your songs like 'Don't Think Twice It's All Right' or 'To Ramona' or 'I Want You' and I almost hate to start listing songs because I'm sure to leave some out, to make some mistakes, but like in 'Love Sick,' the song in the ad, the begrudging admission you make is that nothing can last. I think that's what we want most out of life – something to last forever. Instead we learn that all we get are moments, a second, an hour, a day, a lifetime. These are all just moments. The moment is all we have, but the moment is not enough, unless it's too much, of course, which it is at times.

I hope I'm not confusing you Bob. And before I go on I should say that Victoria's Secret has always done something for me, even back before they hit the TV, when they were just catalogs that came in the mail. What delightful surprises amidst the bills and credit card applications, and that Stephanie Seymour was always my favorite, because she was the sultriest one, the most divine, the most diabolical, and I see that she's acting now – she was in that Pollock movie with Ed Harris, she played, I don't know, 'the beautiful woman,' which I suppose is the kind of work she'll get. Did you see that movie, Bob? Do you go to the movies? I know that Elvis used to rent out movie theaters. You're not quite Elvis, but you are Bob Dylan, which is still something, and I can't imagine that you wouldn't go to movies, I suppose you do, but famous people are so mysterious. I wonder if you even know who Stephanie Seymour is. I think she used to be married to some rock stud. I don't know if they're still together though I doubt it – you know how relationships seem to fall apart nowadays. But if you don't know who she is you should take a look some time. She'll bring you to tears, if you know what I mean, and of course you do, because what I'm trying to do is take what you've told me and say it back to you, right? Is that what I'm trying to do? I guess I'm not so sure.

Another thing before I move on is about that biography of yours I read a few years ago. I'm sad to report it didn't tell me much. The most interesting thing was that on your way to record *Desire* you picked up that fiddle player on the side of the road. Is that true? I can't imagine that album without that, and I think that's my favorite album of yours, though I know it's

wrong to pick favorites, as it discounts everything else, and is small-minded, and here I've just done it twice, but I like to listen to that album over and over, some of those songs seem to have no middle and end, they just are, they're so natural. 'Sara' of course just kills me, and I love 'Hurricane.' The only problem is that when I listen to that album I can't fall to sleep because the songs keep going on and on in my head. I think I read somewhere that some guy killed his mom because she was hassling him to turn off his stereo on which he was playing *Desire* over and over and over. What is it about that one? Maybe it's circular, huh, like the Buddhist cycle of life and death. Well, it's literally a circle too, but that's not important. Facts rarely are.

But about that biography, everything was pretty superficial, which is the problem with most biographies, don't you think? I mean, if I ever got famous and someone wrote a biography about me, they'd have to guess at most everything and probably get it all wrong, the important stuff, that is, because I'm a stealthy sort and I think you're the same way. I mean, who knows what's really going on inside another person? I say no one, though those are the interesting things, and I suppose that's the other problem with life – besides the fact that it goes too fast and ends in death, we can never really know another person. We're isolated, alone. These are the two things we want most out of life but we can never have them. (I hope this isn't bringing you down Bob. For example, if you were having a good day and then began reading this and now feel like crap, I do apologize.)

I suppose now I should bring up sex, because to say this is not about sex would

be wrong, right? Well, I'll admit, as you surely know, that there's no greater joy than being wrapped up with a beautiful woman. Sure, there are other kinds of peace and satisfaction, other kinds of gladness, but for joy, pure joy, that's it, that's tops, the thing we do that empties our minds, that makes time disappear, and that's no secret, or at least it shouldn't be, and I guess what I've always liked about the Victoria's Secret girls is that they seem to promise this time-stopping joy, because when you soak in the gaze of one of these girls for a long moment, well, you know how everything else just goes away.

Depicting them as angels is another stroke of genius, not yours this time, but somebody's, and aren't all strokes of genius so obvious after the fact, don't they all make perfect sense, and this one too relates to time and life and death and that other place, heaven, is it? That imaginary realm beyond time. When a beautiful woman opens herself to you you're in heaven, right? That's what I think. And giving the girls their angel wings not only acknowledges this, but the sacredness of the sex act as well. I don't know how you've been operating over the years Bob, but I've always been an all-or-nothing guy, that is, I want sex with love, but not either alone, not just love, not just sex. I'd rather be alone than have only one of the two though I'm beginning to realize that an all-or-nothing guy usually ends up with nothing. Sometimes he may think he's got it all, but then when it all comes clean he's got nothing, and that nothing's a lot worse when you think you may have had it all. Maybe nobody can have it all, but that's what I've always wanted; I guess I'm simple that way. But surely you know that

simplicity leads to complexity, that simplicity is just denial of complexity, right? Anyway, I know when I find myself caught in the eyes of a Victoria's Secret model it nearly suffocates me and I'm not sure what I'm feeling – lust, love, fear, pain, and it sure seems that when you're singing in that commercial you're feeling the same things – lovesick, sexhungry, captivated, and contemptuous all at once – and you're 'sick of it' because you can't stop the feelings, you know you're at their mercy.

You're a soldier of love, Bob, and we both know that all soldiers get wounded eventually. And we know that it's not really about sex at all, that sex is only a means to an end, a pathway, that the coalescence of bodies is simply the closest thing we have to stopping everything and getting a real glimpse of another person. That's why it's a sacred transaction, why the girls are angels. They're otherworldly, of course, not coming literally through our television sets into our living rooms but more than that; in situations like this, one is brought face to face with the truth that any satisfaction a person can have is fleeting, temporary, doomed. This is what you're trying to tell us, right Bob, this is the sad reality of life, that nothing can last, because time can't be stopped, that the entirety of our existences are mere flashes, getting every moment ridiculously smaller and smaller. From what I understand the Buddhists would say that putting this into perspective is exhilarating, that's what the Eightfold Path is about, dealing with this, and maybe someday we'll get to that state, huh? Where every moment is an infinity unto itself and everything is good and fine. Of course, wanting to get there stands

in the way of getting there, that's a hurdle for you, but I'm not getting tripped up on that right now because the way I'm feeling I don't see how that state can really exist. I mean, how can you tell yourself there's a state of mind where 'nothing matters' and 'everything's perfect' when every time you see a beautiful woman prancing in her underwear you begin to ache?

And we feel that ache other times too, with other people, but it's strongest when there's lust swirled up with it, which should be no surprise. Matters of the flesh are of paramount importance to us because we are made of flesh, 100%. There's something more to us, of course, but there's nothing else, so it makes sense that we do things for our bodies – sex, drugs, vitamins, exercise. If we can get our flesh right, we can get in touch with that something more, maybe, even if for just an instant. That's heaven if you ask me. Heaven exists only on earth, only when we forget the fact that we're going to die. Life teaches us that we're going to die. When we learn that, we want things, like love, like heaven. And these things that we want most of all really don't exist, are mere flights of our imagination – while the one thing we don't want, death, is the only certainty. If we didn't know we were going to die, if we didn't care, we could live happily. We wouldn't need love, we wouldn't dream of heaven. But we're too smart for that. Or too scared. Love is fear of death in a way. It's more than that, but we want it because it's something we think will last. That's what we want most in life, something to last. When we realize that can't happen, we ache, and at the bottom of the ache is our loneliness, our admission of absolute isolation in time and space, our acknowledgement that the world is so big

and we're so small, that there's so much we'll never see, never know, never say, because time is passing, because time won't stop, and we are powerless to do anything about it. That's why all life is suffering, right?

Sometimes I think it's simply a matter of not caring anymore, but I know that's not non-attachment, but surrender, denial, that that's not living, and life, hard as it may be, is all we've got. So Bob I guess I'm writing this because Victoria's Secret ads have always made me sad, but this one that you're in doesn't, it doesn't leave me feeling quite as gloomy anyway because your lovesick scowl tells me that I'm not quite alone, that your anguish is the same as mine, and now when I hear you sing I know you're saying that life's impossible, that we're mortal, destined to lose everything, and suffer in the meantime. I've felt this under my skin for a long time but now that I've tried to spell it out I feel a little better about things. It's like when there's a stink in a room and you don't know where it's coming from, you're uneasy. When you discover the source, though it still smells the same, it's not as bad anymore, because you can deal with it. So I guess this is to thank you for helping me deal with this. I feel a little better about things now and next time I see a Victoria's Secret ad and can't look away at least I'll understand why I ache like I do – because I'm alive, right, because I'm feeling the ache of life. It's no great feeling, but better than death anyway. Because death is darkness. Because when you die, you're gone. And even though life is doomed, we can still forget about that once in a while, we can wrap ourselves up with angels and forget about it, right? Is this what you've been trying to tell me Bob? Well, this is what I'm getting.

# Photo

# Gathered from Coincidence

## *Making Sense of Dylan: A Subjective Perspective*

by Bjorn Waller

*'Is it all just a bunch of words?'*

- Bob Dylan, 1997

You know, it's funny, the places Dylan takes us. And I don't mean tours. For instance, I used to listen to 'Love Sick' and ponder that line at the beginning of the second verse:

*Did I hear someone tell a lie?*

*Did I hear someone's jester cry?*

At first, it didn't make any sense to me. Not that I expect all of Dylan's lyrics to make sense, but this one caught me by surprise, coming as it does in the middle of a song that seems to be about a failed romance. Clowns weep, sure, but what does that have to do with anything? 'Lies made baby Jesus cry', but why a jester?

Then I thought about it some more, and started interpreting and speculating – not really sure why, for some reason Dylan's lyrics do seem to bring that out in some of us. Here's one way of looking at it: what is a jester anyway? A clown, now that's one thing: a clown laughs (or cries) to amuse children and their parents. It's a selfless act; he allows himself to be ridiculed for the amusement of innocents. A jester, on the other hand, has an employer, a purpose, a sense of loyalty. His job is to keep his king amused while the king rules his country – hopefully benignly, but then again 'benign ruler' tends to be an oxymoron. So what kind of office would make a jester cry? And is he weeping silently in his room after amusing his boss all day, or is he crying publicly to avert the subjects' attention from what the king is really doing while everyone is laughing at the pathetic jester?

So just for a laugh, I wanted to see how far I could take this train of thought. I thought of the politicians, businessmen, journalists, and by all means 'regular-folks' who daily tell lies, cheat, apologise, and then keep doing the same thing. I got to the line:

|              |                  |           |             |          |                 |
|--------------|------------------|-----------|-------------|----------|-----------------|
| <i>You</i>   | <i>destroyed</i> | <i>me</i> | <i>with</i> | <i>a</i> | <i>smile</i>    |
| <i>While</i> |                  | <i>I</i>  | <i>was</i>  |          | <i>sleeping</i> |



and I thought about late great comedian Bill Hicks ranting from the stage in his last performance.

*Here, here's American Gladiators. Watch this, shut up! Here's 56 channels of it. Watch these pituitary retards bang their fuckin' skulls together and congratulate you on living in the land of freedom. Here you go America, you are free to do as we tell you...*

Nothing new about that, Bill. Roman satirist Juvenal wrote the same thing 2000 years ago.

*Two things only the people anxiously desire – bread and circuses.*

So you've got the jester/entertainer, keeping the people (the supposed rulers in a democracy) amused – 'sleeping' if you will – while something is going on behind their backs. That would be the lie. But who is he? There are various characters that keep popping up in Dylan's lyrics, and the Clown (ragged or not)/Jokerman/Fool/Jester does seem to be one of the most common ones. Then I would listen to Don McLean's 'American Pie', where Dylan is the jester, in a 'coat he borrowed from James Dean and a voice that came from you and me' who by the end of the 60s ends up 'on the sidelines in a cast'. Surely, Dylan must have heard that song and come to the same conclusion. So is Dylan is saying he is the jester? And if so, could 'Love Sick' on some level be about him doubting himself and his role as an entertainer? Has the voice of the promise of the 60s counterculture, the kid who sang about the times a-changin', become

another piece of glue in the machinery—that's geared towards maintaining status quo? Harmless entertainment for the baby boomers and some of their kids. Sick of love songs, wishing he'd never met us. Enough to make one cry, isn't it? And the image of Dylan as a crying jester fits nicely with some of the other lyrics on the album as well.

*She says, 'You must be joking!'  
I say, 'I wish I was.'*

So did I hear someone tell a lie? Sure. Dylan, like many of us, has never been one to let facts get in the way of a good story. This one, for instance, because it's obviously based on a pure mistake. Five years after I first heard the song, I was sitting with a couple of friends with guitars and a printed copy of [dylanchords.com](http://dylanchords.com) and we decided to play 'Love Sick'.

Hey look, there's a typo here.  
No there isn't.  
Sure there is. It says '*Did I hear someone's distant cry*'  
Yeeeeeeesss...? That IS what Bob sings, you know.

So I go home and listen to *Time Out of Mind*. Whoops. I'd been hearing it wrong every time for five years. And my whole elaborate theory about jesters and kings and the lies we all tell went straight out the window. It's just a love song after all, that's all it ever was, and all that other stuff was just my imagination running away with me. Obviously, if I hadn't by pure coincidence been listening to Bill Hicks or Don McLean at that time, I would never have gotten to the same ideas.

But then again, there's something about another line of Dylan's, I just can't get it out of my head. One of the most beautiful things he has ever written.

*At dawn my lover comes to me  
And tells me of her dreams  
With no attempt to shovel the glimpse  
Into the ditch of what each one means  
And at times, I think there are no words  
but these to tell what's true...*

This seems to be about as close as Dylan has ever come to explaining to us how to interpret his lyrics, and even as I type that line, I realise how ridiculous it sounds. He's a songwriter, for Bob's sake, not Moses or Marx. And that does seem to be what that line implies; why analyse, why not just let the words be words? Why search for deeper meanings in Dylan's lyrics, when he himself says there aren't any – and when we, as in the (admittedly far-fetched) jester example, obviously base it on our own ideas and (mis) conceptions? He's just a song and dance man, after all.

Yet I, and apparently many others, keep finding a lot of different interpretations of his songs, ranging from profound to silly, from terrifying to reassuring. I thought I'd take a brief look at what it is that makes me, for one, keep finding new angles on Dylan's songs. Why it is that it seems every single person has their view of who Dylan is and what his songs 'mean', why they seem to fit in so many situations including things he couldn't possibly have imagined. And to do that, I have to look outside Dylan's work. More on that in a minute.

'No attempt to shovel the glimpse into the ditch...' But there's another angle here. Our ears are not objective recording devices – they're connected to our brains, and brains are notoriously unreliable creatures. They have a tendency to draw their own conclusions, to drift, to sort through the flotsam and jetsam that is our memory. Scientists may have abolished the idea of *Horror Vacui* – nature's fear of nothingness – but the human mind still abhors blanks. We want things to make sense, to follow logical patterns. Show someone three cards – the eight of diamonds, the nine of clubs, the ten of spades, and he's bound to think the next is the jack of hearts. But the thing is, everyone's patterns are more or less different; one might call it the cultural backpack – all that stuff from knock-knock jokes to Bible quotes that we all, to some extent, share and that Dylan frequently draws upon in his lyrics, but which is a little different for everyone depending on various more or less coincidental factors – where you're raised, what books you've read, what people you've met etc – and also changes over time. Not only the contents of that backpack are different, but also their meanings; to some people, children's stories are just entertainment for the kiddies, while to others they say more about a culture than any 300-page thesis. All of this means that glimpses are bound to end up in different ditches every time, regardless of any conscious attempts at shoveling. Getting to one objectively 'true' meaning of a song becomes almost impossible – yes, Dylan wrote 'Blowin' in the Wind', he's the only one who knows

(or knew) for sure what was going through his head at that point, he's the only one who can say for sure what it's 'really' about. But other people have been listening to and singing that song for over 40 years now and it's far from unlikely that they will continue to do so long after Dylan is dead. At some point, Dylan's own intentions and opinions of what the song 'means' become, maybe not moot, but at least mostly of academic interest. To put it another way: Dylan can claim that 'Masters of War' is not an anti-war song until he's blue in the face, but if everyone else interprets it as one, then for all practical purposes it IS an anti-war song.

So anyway, did I hear someone tell a lie? Well, yeah. Dylan does lie to us. Joey Gallo was a cold-blooded killer, Lenny Bruce did rob a church, and I suppose the jury's still out on Hurricane Carter and William Zantzinger. But is it really that simple? Take one of the most obvious of Dylan's 'lies', the first words communicated to his audience after the by now near-mythical motorcycle crash and self-imposed exile.

*John Wesley Harding*  
*Was a friend to the poor.*

John Wesley Hardin, the real person behind Dylan's little ditty, was a mass murderer who was eventually tracked, chained and gunned down like a dog. That's the truth. Yet Dylan's JWH (and make of those initials and their similarities to JHVH what you will – it might just be a coincidence) is a kindly Robin Hood/Pretty Boy Floyd sort of fella. But listen again to how Dylan phrases, and

consider the beauty in this piece of poetic lie-sense.

*John Wesley HardinG*  
*Was a friend to the poor.*

Harding? Who's that? Oh, just some guy Dylan made up, loosely based on the 'true' story, but as that G clearly points out – not Hardin. (Of course, this is comin' from the same songwriter who for years had been very meticulous about leavin' the G:s off his gerunds.) Right off the bat Dylan is hinting that this isn't the truth, but it's not claiming to be either. There's a word for this, one that goes all the way back to Homer – not the slut, not Bart's dad, the real one (assuming he ever existed). It's called FICTION.

See, the beautiful thing about fiction is that the words 'truth' and 'lie', 'real' and 'fake' don't apply no more, you can't rely that anything being said to you is to be taken as *fact*. Is the statement 'Don Quijote fought windmills' true or false? Well, neither and both; it's false in the sense that Don Quijote never existed, and therefore cannot have fought anything. Yet at the same time it's true: just read the book, it's there in black and white, indisputable – in that sense, a lot truer than the statement 'Bob Dylan was badly hurt when he fell off his motorcycle in 1966'.

Which isn't to say that everything is necessarily made up out of thin air. The Trojan war happened – maybe not exactly as Homer described it, but still. Kurt Vonnegut did witness the bombing of Dresden as he describes it in 'Slaughterhouse-Five', even if he does add a plot involving time travel and aliens.

*Mulholland Drive* is based on David Lynch's experiences in Hollywood, even if Lynch himself never had his lesbian lover murdered. In fiction, you get to tell truths without being required to tell THE truth. Everything is one step removed from the truth.

Why, 'Bob Dylan' is, in a sense, a fictional character himself, and I'm not just talking about those wild stories he spread in his early days. His double dose of 'autobiography' – *Masked And Anonymous* and *Chronicles* – only serves to underline that. Compare the Harding example to Dylan's own continuing claim that he's just a song and dance man who

*...really was never any more than what I was – a folk musician who gazed into the gray mist with tear-blinded eyes and made up songs that floated in aluminous haze (Chronicles, pp116)*

and yet continues to use that 'The Poet Laureate Of Rock' intro for his concerts. Welcome to the Bob Dylan show. Blues! Folk! Jazz! Rock 'n' roll! Bring the wife and family, bring the whole kids... Basically, it's opening the curtain on a *show*, entertainment, something not quite real.

*Alias anything you please!*

Dylan is obviously playing on the whole myth surrounding him – Dylan the icon, the prophet, the spokesperson. He may deny it, poke fun at it, rant against it, yet he still uses it to maintain his career. It could be seen as quite cynical, but it seems to me that the issue of what is 'real' have been given a far greater emphasis in music than it deserves, so let me just make this

clear: I'm not saying Bob Dylan is a 'fake' (whatever that word implies). I am, however, saying it's obvious that he (and just about every other performer) chooses an image to present to the public which is to some extent made up, or at least not the complete truth – just like the image others have of who and what Dylan is doesn't match the one he himself sees when he looks in the mirror. Why is this a big deal? No one would claim that Robert De Niro is a bad actor because he never actually shot up a whorehouse as in *Taxi Driver*, yet some still seem disappointed with Dylan because he never really hobo'd around New Mexico as a kid, because he won't make political statements today or because he sells ladies' underwear.

In a song and dance man, it has to come back to the songs. And so a lot of the discussion on Dylan's music concerns what the songs are 'about'. People have argued that all of his songs are about drugs, or religion, or women, or society (from whichever ideological viewpoint). Which ones are about Joan, Sara, Edie or Jesus? Is 'Slow Train' Christian or Marxist? Is 'Lenny Bruce' really about John Lennon? Shouldn't that be 'split up on the docks at night'? Just how much of *under the red sky* is about the apocalypse, and how much is recycled Mother Goose rhymes, and is there a difference? And let's not even start on 'Mr. Tambourine Man' ('Drugs!' 'Love!' 'Just some guy with a tambourine!'), 'Hard Rain' or 'Desolation Row'. I've heard people claim – convincingly – that '2x2' is about the holocaust, and I remember one discussion in which someone connected 'Things Have Changed' to the anti-global-

isation movement. Of course it's not about that stuff; he wrote it for a movie, right? Yeah, and 'Love Sick' is just about the end of an affair. It seems there's not a single Dylan lyric that cannot be interpreted in at least two mutually exclusive ways. How the catsinthewell does Dylan fit all this in?

Let's see. Interpret – interesting word. It does mean to analyse, translate, to find the meaning of something; but it also means creating one's own version of something – as in 'Dylan's interpretation of 'Moon River' gives the song a completely different tone than Sinatra's.' In other words, when I'm interpreting Dylan, I am to a certain extent creating MY version of what I'm hearing. It's not Dylan doing the fitting-in – at least not all, if even half, of it – but the listener, based on his or her various experiences, knowledge, opinions and moods. Dylan's lyrics are (occasionally over-) interpreted and analysed and autopsied and used to hit people over the head with because they beg interpretation. Whether this is intentional on his part or not I have no idea, nor do I really care. Point is, it works.

Here's one parallel from the non-Dylan world to give an idea of what I mean. A while back, I went to a Q&A with Umberto Eco, whom I consider one of the greatest living novelists – you might know him from *The Name Of The Rose*. Let's just say that he is to Dan Brown what Bob Dylan is to the Backstreet Boys. Anyway, he spoke of his readers as 'intelligent machines'; the idea is, basically, that a book is just a useless hunk of cellulose and ink until someone picks it up, opens it and starts reading. Literature isn't created by a

writer, all alone in his room with a typewriter and a muse; it's created in the interaction between the written word and the reader, the reader's own experiences and thoughts are just as important in the finished product. I think Dylan is one of very few popular songwriters to actively use this – consciously or not. Dylan's fiction may be one step removed from the real world (much to the chagrin of those who still expect him to be a political spokesperson for something) but they still relate to it in ways that most introspective singer/songwriters do not.

What Eco does to feed his intelligent machines is to more or less purposefully add a lot of subplots and obscure references that don't really seem important to the story – layers upon layers of everything from Donald Duck to Aristotle. *The Name Of The Rose*, for instance, is on one level a detective story, a good old whodunnit. However, it's also chock full of various discussions on philosophy, theology and history that are not strictly necessary to tell the story of who killed whom. To some readers, this makes no sense whatsoever, and it probably doesn't help that much of it is in Latin, either. What does Aristotle have to do with the murder of a monk in 14th century Italy? About as much as Einstein has to do with Robin Hood, I guess. I once had a discussion with a non-Bob-worshipping friend about 'Changing of the Guards'.

*Hey, that's not a bad tune. Like the sax.  
But what's it about?*

*Well, my idea is that it's about Dylan himself. He's recently divorced and not*

*exactly happy about it, he's been in the business for a number of years, he's disillusioned with the whole thing and he's looking to make some kind of change, but he doesn't yet know exactly what.*

*Uh-huh. So why doesn't he just say that?*

Why indeed? Why make things more complicated than they need to be? Hey, I bet I can reduce every single novel ever written to no more than three short sentences without sacrificing any of the basic plot. But there's a point to *making*, as in creating, sense of why something is said in a certain way. The point isn't that the listener should 'get' every single reference in 'Desolation Row'; the point is that 'Desolation Row' is a great song because it forces us to (re)create it ourselves when we hear it.

There are a couple of reasons for this, I think. Obviously, you can't overlook the fact that Dylan (and his songs) have been around for a while, and himself has become a part of the backpack. You can't really listen to him with fresh ears, overlooking everything he's ever done and everything that's been said about him as if *Freewheelin'* were a brand new MP3 release from a young unknown songwriter. We expect Dylan to be profound. Whether he likes it or not, in so many eyes he's The Voice Of A Generation™, an icon more or less on a par with Warhol, Elvis, Lennon and Dean. He, and we, may like or dislike it, but it's hard to ignore it. Would someone even give the lyrics of '2x2' a second glance if they had been written by

John Mellencamp? (Cue all *under the red sky* fans screaming 'John Mellencamp could NEVER write something that good!' Well, just humour me, guys.)

So what I know (and think I know) about Dylan will always influence what I hear in his music. Take 'Like a Rolling Stone', for instance – a song that has been in steady rotation in Dylan's setlist longer and more regularly than perhaps any other song he's written. Save the occasional lyrical slip or left-out verse, the song has hardly changed a bit in 40 years. Same chord progression, same lyrics, same song. Yet the various versions are different, in execution but also in context. The bratty, gleefully defiant versions of '65 and '66, the heavy stadium rock versions of the late 70s and mid-80s, the messy and raging pseudo-punk versions of the early NET years... and then the almost tender takes from later years, where 'How does it feel?' no longer sounds like a taunt, but more like genuine affection and perhaps concern; the younger Dylan asking his older self 'Hey big guy, good show, you made it... was it worth it?' Same lyrics; yet the context they're put in and the person listening to them changes their meaning. Perhaps Dylan really doesn't intend for the diplomat with his Siamese cat to look like Andy Warhol, but once he's made his listeners use their imaginations, it's no wonder it takes them places.

Speaking of which, here's a parallel on the subject of context: in his biography on Andy Warhol, Wayne Koestenbaum discusses Warhol's life and career in a very deconstructive manner – it's basically a 200-page version of David Bowie's line:

*Andy Warhol - silver screen - can't  
tell'em apart at all*

(Incidentally, on Bowie's album *Hunky Dory* 'Andy Warhol' is followed by 'Song For Bob Dylan'.) Koestenbaum spends the whole book interpreting every part of Warhol's art in the light of what we know of his private life, and vice versa. And while this doesn't necessarily make for a very objective and informative biography, it does make for some interesting reading, as the interpretations become almost an end in themselves. For instance, Warhol's movie 'Paul Swan' ends on a long shot of a chair. Koestenbaum relates how at first it seems pointless – a film of an immobile object, and a mundane one at that – until he's stared at that chair for so long that his mind starts wandering and thinking of electric chairs, or the chairs at the last supper... Once you take an object and put it in a new context, the object can no longer be taken objectively. A film of a chair is not a chair, just like a painting of a pipe is not a pipe. When an artist films a chair – or, for that matter, sings a song called 'Wiggle Wiggle' and says it's about fish – he forces us to ask why in the hell he's doing that. And if we don't get an answer (of course, Dylan was never too generous with those) we start a-specu-latin'. And once we do that, we're bound to find *something*.

Take two more recent examples: *Time Out of Mind* and "*Love And Theft*". Both albums are often associated with Dylan's health scare in 1997 and 9/11, respectively. Which, of course, is rubbish – both albums were written and recorded well before

then. Unless Dylan really is a prophet, there's simply no way he could have known that those things would coincide with his new albums. And yet for me, and I think for many others, it's impossible to hear that line:

*Coffins droppin' in the street  
Like balloons made out of lead*

without flashing back to those TV images. It's blind coincidence, but at least for me it works better than any of the songs written about it after it actually happened. Obviously, Dylan didn't predict 9/11 anymore than Nostradamus did. But just like Nostradamus, and indeed anyone who has ever seemed to predict the future, Dylan manages to make us use our own experiences and connect the dots by keeping it just vague enough to be applicable to a lot of different situations, yet complex enough to constantly beg for new interpretations.

Dylan's storytelling technique, for instance, has always been a bit unorthodox, especially for someone coming out of folk music. He's rarely been one for easy matter-of-fact statements; his first big hit – you know, the one about the wind – could be condensed to three '?' and one '...'. And even when he appears to be telling a straight story – 'All Along the Watchtower' to 'Tweeter and the Monkey Man' and 'Tweedle Dee' – he leaves threads hanging, shifts perspective and chronology around and references characters in a way that forces the listener to think for him or herself. For instance, few artists (at least outside of hip-hop) namecheck as often as Dylan does – and

hardly anyone, except maybe Patti Smith, does it *like* he does. It's not 'Einstein discussing relativity', but 'Einstein disguised as Robin Hood'. Prince Philip is found not at Buckingham Palace, but at the Home of the Blues (the place or the song?). Napoleon is dressed in rags, Charles Darwin is being hunted by the sheriff and Ma Rainey and Beethoven are about to do Lord knows what together. Again, all lies. But there's a magic to names; all of us (including Dylan) connect names, features and aliases to certain people and certain ideas about those people – and again, we all do this differently, depending on our own more or less coincidental frames of reference. Ergo, you have some people seeing George Bush, Silvio Berlusconi and Ariel Sharon in 'George Lewis, the Italian and the Jew' or John Lennon in 'Lenny Bruce', and you have Dylan getting his Joans mixed up:

*Something was guiding the song. It was like Joan of Arc was out there. (Or Joan Armatrading.) (Chronicles, pp213)*

And obviously, anyone who knows anything about Dylan will want to add a third Joan to that list – giving her more emphasis than she would have had if he had mentioned her. Also, it's worth noting that most of the names that turn up in Dylan's songs are people – real or fictional – that do tend to be well-known, but have an air of myth about them. People who, much like Dylan himself, are ambiguous. Napoleon is a hero to some, a war criminal to others, as is Joan of Arc; Elvis is the king of rock'n'roll, but also a sad junkie; etc. We never quite know which aspect of the person Dylan is

invoking – or whether he even has the same opinion of them as the listener.

Same goes for place names and numbers, obviously. Regardless of whether the '61' in 'Highway 61 Revisited' is a nod not only to the road but also to the year Dylan started his career, or if he ever considered the fact that  $12 \times 35 = 420$ , or whatever the hell 'I'm Not There (1956)' signifies, or if they're all just made up because they sound good. There are really only 10 numbers, which gives us an infinite number of possible combinations and meanings – whether it be '4th Time Around' or '10,000 Men'. Just look at Douglas Adams' cult novel (and, sadly, the recent film version thereof) *The Hitch-Hiker's Guide To The Galaxy*. A wonderfully silly science fiction comedy/satire about the answer to the eternal question of life, the universe, and well, EVERYTHING. Which turns out to be '42' – so now we have to find out what the question is. (Incidentally, one of the questions suggested is 'How many roads must a man walk down?') Ever since the book came out, fans have been scouring the entirety of human knowledge trying to find appearances of the number 42. And they've found it – for instance, did you know that the natural vibration frequency of human DNA is 42? And that the chamber in the Cheops pyramid is 42 metres above ground? And have you counted the number of dots on a pair of dice? There are even references to 42 in Revelations (the Bible – not the Bill Hicks movie). Apparently, it seems, there is something special to that particular-number. So how did Adams find out?



*'It was a joke. It had to be a number, an ordinary, smallish number, and I chose that one. I sat at my desk, stared into the garden and thought "42 will do". I typed it out. End of story!'*

Coincidence, in other words. My, what are the odds? Thing is, obviously, had he come up with 37 – or if Dylan had opened 'Changing of the Guards' with the line '19 years' – somehow people would have made sense of that as well. As they will out of any coincidence, like Lincoln being shot in Ford's theatre, and Kennedy in a Ford Lincoln. It's that cultural backpack thing again; once we start looking at all the stuff we've got in it, we want to find similarities, patterns... sense. Take Greil Marcus' book *Double Trouble*, in which he draws what would seem to be a ridiculous number of parallels between Elvis Presley (who, incidentally, died age 42...) and Bill Clinton (the 42nd president of the US...). Reading that book, you might be excused for thinking that all of it is a novel where Marcus has invented fictional characters named things like Presley, Clinton, Dylan, Warhol and Christ to prove his points. But as Kurt Vonnegut prefaced his last novel *Timequake*:

*'All persons, living or dead, are purely-coincidental.'*

It's in the way we treat the various coincidences that we make sense of the world, and of ourselves.

OK, so what does all of this have to do with Dylan? Get to some kind of point already. Well, for me, part of Dylan's lasting appeal, even after I've heard and memorized and wondered at every single note on every single album he's recorded, is the way his music and his lyrics keep nestling themselves into new contexts. As my own experiences change, I keep hearing new things in Dylan even when the songs themselves don't change. Dylan's greatness as a lyricist, or at least part of it, lies not only in any one phrase or word he's written, but in the way they hook into everything and open up new possibilities for interpretations both of Dylan and other things – whether it be books, people, art, fairy tales or knock-knock jokes. That Dylan, for all his grumpy taciturnity and claims that what you see is what you get, still writes songs that seem designed to play with our imaginations. Between all the various ambiguities, references, half-truths and fictional realities he keeps dropping on us, all the more or less recognisable faces and places that turn up in his lyrics, they make a sense that might not necessarily be true, but is nonetheless fascinating.

So did I hear someone tell a lie?

Well, the answer, my friend...



**Judas!**

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# Songs From Another World

by Robert Forryan

The tape begins with a loud burst of applause – applause which sounds staccato, computerised almost. Oddly, at the same time it sounds otherworldly, ghostly even. Maybe that is what it is. The ghosts of another time, another place, frozen and bound forever on or by the magnetic tape so that they can be made manifest at my beckoning by the merest application of my thumb upon the ‘play’ button of my Walkman. I become the ghost-master, but the ghosts are all in my head.

A ghost whistles. Somewhere in the applause is the hint of a harmonica. And then the rhythmic acoustic guitar; briefly repetitive, then moving onto a higher note, a more delicate pattern; then rhythmic, then more urgent, more insistent and for a split second you anticipate the voice, but too soon. A return to delicacy, then insistence, then...

*She's got everything she needs,  
She's an artist, she don't look back.  
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 'time' in night-time is puffed out somehow. It's as if he's trying to blow a fly off the microphone – the T is both forceful and soft, a sort of spat whisper. Does that make any sense? Whatever ... it's pure Dylan. The 'paint' is expressed, held briefly, perhaps slightly elongated, but has that nasal, country-southernish (?) drawl – a way of expressing himself that so many have tried (and failed) to imitate. The voice is what I want to describe but I don't know where to find the words. I could say it is like a soft breeze blowing through a hillside conifer plantation, but I'm not sure if it is even like that. Paul Williams talks of 'thick textures of sweet mournfulness' but I'm looking for my own phrase. It does seem to possess a texture of something, as if you could touch it, but a texture of what? Of bitter honey? Can that be it? You see my difficulty. If you have the tape, listen to it. If you don't, the nearest I can suggest to you is 'Visions of Johanna' or 'Baby Blue' from *Biograph*. The voice is what makes this acoustic set special. The guitar playing does not seem to me to be at all out of the ordinary – it does not compare, for instance, with that on *Freewheelin'*. The harmonica, of course, is inspired: searing and keening, exploding in bursts of vibrant energy across the ethereal auditorium. But, for this time at least, it's the voice that matters.

And what is this 'time' to which I am referring? Well, if you haven't worked it out by now, this is the Royal Albert Hall, 27th May 1966. The last concert of what was to be the last tour for 7 and a half years. The beginning of the acoustic set. A beginning that creates imaginings in my mind –

imaginings of a small, frail, marionette lost in a stately pleasure dome. No, I wasn't there, so these are visions, not memories. Visions of a lost thinness, clothed in a...suit? Hard to believe that, but all the photos from that tour show it to be true. Was it a dogtooth suit? Is that what it's called? Anyway, it was a thousand miles from either the 'Huck Finn' tramp of 1961 or the comfortable scruffiness of today.

No, I wasn't there, and if you were then I'm sorry if these rambblings and visions of mine do not coincide with your memories. I was at the De Montfort Hall, Leicester, on 15th May 1966 but my memories of that are actually more vague than the images that this tape evokes in my mind. Nearly all that I can remember from the Leicester show is people walking out, seemingly (to my memory) in droves, and other people booing and slow-handclapping. Some cheered him, but I feel that they were a minority. I cannot claim that I was wise enough to know what he was doing at the time. I sat in silence (well, not exactly silence, the music was so LOUD – I had heard nothing like it before), dumbfounded, fence-sitting, not knowing whether to cheer or boo. Please forgive me.

Actually, there is a scene near the end of *Eat The Document* which was filmed outside the De Montfort Hall before the show. I've 'paused' every second of that piece of video trying to get a sight of a younger me, but in vain. The thing is I do remember waiting outside the hall with friends for the doors to open – it was a pleasant spring evening. There is the merest glimpse of the side of a bespectacled head

which I like to pretend is myself - but I don't really believe it. Ah, well. It would have been nice to have featured in a Bob Dylan movie!

A word of warning: this essay will add nothing to the sum total of knowledge about Dylan's art. It is not interpretative or literary critical. If you are looking for insight, search elsewhere. This is utterly subjective. It is an attempt at a hymn of praise – an appreciation – a eulogy – a shot at describing what it is in this performance that moves my heart and my very soul. If that sounds excessive, this is not for you. Why am I bothering writing this? Because I just love this concert and that makes me want to try to communicate the feelings I experience when I listen to it.

Wish me luck.

### *The Symmetry Of Innocence*

There are seven songs in this acoustic set (which is all I'm concentrating upon), a set which on my tape lasts approximately 61 minutes, including applause and guitar doodling between songs. This makes Hammersmith '93 seem pretty rapid-fire stuff, even though he then had a band to extend the songs for him! Anyway, the magnificent Seven are as follows:-

Royal Albert Hall – 27 May 1966

*She Belongs to Me*  
*Fourth Time Around*  
*Visions of Johanna*  
*It's All Over Now, Baby Blue*  
*Desolation Row*  
*Just Like a Woman*  
*Mr. Tambourine Man*

These seem, to me, to represent a deliberately structured acoustic concert. All are taken from the three awesome mid-sixties albums, the first three electric albums of his career. Has any artist produced three greater consecutive albums ever – let alone within such a short timespan? Consider this:-

Three songs from  
*Bringing It All Back Home*  
 One song from  
*Highway 61 Revisited*  
 Three songs from  
*Blonde on Blonde*

There is a certain characteristic idiosyncrasy in the fact that Dylan chose for his acoustic set, seven songs from his first three electric albums. Typical Dylan, don't you think? He also selected, I would suggest, one classic masterpiece from each album (*Tambourine Man*, *Desolation Row*, *Visions of Johanna* – though if you were to press the case for *Baby Blue* I would not argue with you). Symmetry is also present in the use of songs to his muse to both open and close the set – more of this later. When you consider where Dylan was, artistically speaking, at the time of this tour, the selection of these songs feels absolutely right. They are evidence, if any is needed, that this acoustic set was not, and was never intended to be, a re-run of the 1965 tour. This was a new Dylan with a new selection of songs (*Blonde on Blonde* had not been released in England, and would not be until August) and singing in a new style. It was light years away, in voice, guitar style, lyrics, even harmonica style, from the Woody Guthrie clone of

earlier years. Listen to the very good recording of Manchester 1965 back to back with any 1966 acoustic set and you will hear two very different performers. It is, therefore, a cryin' shame that these acoustic songs are so often overlooked – understandable because of the magnificence of the electric sets – but a desperate pity all the same.

Commentators often seem to present these 1966 acoustic sets as Dylan going through the motions; pandering to audience expectations even. The theory seems to be that he had become bored with acoustic performance and that he just wanted to get the first half of the concert over with so that he could plunge into the real, electric, business of the evening. Of course, the electric sets were seminal events in Rock History, but I don't think you can listen carefully to 1966 acoustic and honestly draw the conclusion that the first half of the show didn't matter to Dylan. These are some of the most magical acoustic performances of Dylan's career; possibly the best ever. Manifestly he MEANT this. It is no half-hearted throw-away performance; it is a creation of inspired intensity – even if it is partly chemical inspiration, there is clearly another, more mystical source from which these fertile waters spring.

Cameron Crowe in the *Biograph* booklet calls the 26th May *Visions of Johanna* 'otherworldly', and I cannot find a better word. Paul Williams (*Performing Artist, Volume 1*) describes the 1966 acoustic set as sounding as if Dylan 'is singing straight from dreamtime'. All of these words – otherworldly, ghost-like,

dreamtime, ethereal, foggy, – think about them. Put them all together. What sounds and visions does this combination of words evoke in your mind? Imagine that and you have some faint idea (if you don't have the tape) just what it is that I'm trying to convey.

Another point about these seven songs is that, unusually for Dylan, almost every word, every syllable, is clearly and precisely expressed – sometimes very slowly, as if he's been taking elocution lessons. Can you believe that? Nothing is slurred, nothing mumbled; which is quite remarkable given that he's undeniably drugged up to the gills!

### ***'For He On Honey-Dew Hath Fed'***

And so, I suppose, we must come to the issue of drugs. It is surely impossible to discuss this concert without doing so? Now, I have a problem here. My problem is that I am a total innocent where drugs are concerned – alcohol, yes, but drugs? Nothing. Zilch. No experience at all. I can remember the sixties, so I couldn't have been there, could I?

Paul Williams writes: 'amphetamines were Dylan's drug of choice', though he indicates that they were probably supplemented by a wide variety of other substances plus alcohol. A colleague of mine's husband is a medical consultant. I asked her to describe Dylan's performance in this concert to him and ask him if this was indicative of amphetamine use. I had read an article from a 'privately-circulated' fanzine which suggested that this singing in slow motion fitted with the effects of amphetamines – that they make you think

you are doing things at a rapid pace, whilst in fact they slow you down. He (the consultant) thought it more likely that this effect was caused by the drugs wearing off, i.e. that Dylan needed another shot to return him to normality!

Clinton Heylin (*Behind The Shades*) writes that the acoustic set sounds as if Dylan was on dope, whereas by the electric set he sounds like a speed-freak. The implication being that Dylan used drugs to enhance his performance (like an Olympic athlete) and changed chemicals at the interval.

To me, knowing nothing, it would be remarkable if Dylan was able to use drugs in this way. Nonetheless, I have to admit that, in this final 1966 concert, he seems to demonstrate by the quality of this eerie performance, that drugs do not detract from his achievement, at the very least. In fact, his ability to recall the many complex lyrics of these mystical songs shows that he was well able to control his mind, no matter what chemicals he ingested. Whatever the truth of this, the mixture of Dylan, drugs and adrenalin left us with a tape about which it is no over-statement to say that the sound is sublime; the very milk of paradise. I could not wish it to sound otherwise. It is inconceivable that it could be improved upon.

It is perhaps worth observing how much things have changed in 25 years. I believe that most readers of this magazine are accepting of the fact that Dylan was using drugs in 1966. And yet, by 1991, considerable controversy arose in *Isis* over allegations that he was going on stage during the Never Ending Tour either

under the influence of alcohol or drugs or both. I did not then, and still do not, understand why people find such behaviour acceptable in 1966 but not in 1991. Actually, the controversy seemed to divide into two camps – those who thought he was abusing his body and were therefore critical of him because of the effects upon his performance – and those who denied that he was using alcohol/drugs before concerts.

Now, I may be out on a limb here, but I would not wish to deny that he used something on occasions in 1991, nor would I wish to condemn him for it. In fact, for me, it all adds to the myth of the man. There is something romantic and compelling about Dylan's use of artificial stimulants. It's part of his history and if, at times, it is still part of his present, so be it. I don't have a problem with that. I don't wish him ill, quite the contrary, but I sort of like this side of him. It makes him more human. As a correspondent of mine wrote, if people want a clean-living hero, let them have Cliff Richard, not Dylan.

The same applies, for me, to his various appearances on Network TV. I'm quite happy that events like Live Aid or the Grammy Awards are widely perceived as sloppy, unprofessional efforts. It means that Dylan remains an acquired taste; very special to a few thousand of us, a total mystery to millions. I don't actually want to go to work one morning and find all my colleagues raving about Dylan. If that day comes I'm going to have to share him and then, not only won't he be special, I won't feel so special myself either. Let those who don't understand him remain in darkness, whilst we select few keep him to ourselves.



Is that desperately elitist and selfish? You needn't answer that!

So now let us return to that 27 May concert where we left Dylan, if you remember, painting the daytime black.

### *She Belongs to Me*

This seems an entirely appropriate opener if Stephen Scobie's reference (*Alias Bob Dylan*) to this as a song to his Muse is justified. It certainly sounds as if Dylan is struggling here to stay on the road, to keep on keepin' on and coming up with spell-binding performances. Scobie sees *She Belongs to Me* stressing the 'distance and demands of the muse, the degree to which he is at times at her mercy':-

*You will start out standing  
Proud to steal her anything she sees.  
But you will wind up peeking through  
her keyhole  
Down upon your knees.*

He also sees this as a position of humiliation rather than prayer. But in the situation Dylan faces as he walks out on that stage in that classical auditorium on 27th May 1966, I feel that this opening song is a prayer. Aidan Day (*Jokerman*) also sees this song exhibiting 'the darker aspects of daemonic energy'. I'm no performer myself so I don't know. I imagine that a performance is as much an act of creation as the writing of a song. Hence, Dylan must have been seeking inspiration afresh each evening to 'create' his live art. I don't imagine it is easy to build yourself up each night to present an inspired act. For this reason, a song to invoke his muse is intuitively understandable – it feels right. A

prayer to Her: 'be with me now when I need you' he seems to be singing, 'don't let me down now, not now, not at this moment. This is the last night in Europe. See me through just once more and I won't ask again – not for a while anyway.' And did she answer him? And was the price paid later with the Woodstock accident? Or was that another reward – the granting of peace and a respite?

On the evidence of this reading of the song, she surely answered him. This first song of the evening is every bit as misty, as foggy, as nebulous as were the next half-dozen acoustic dreams to be. It is as if Dylan was singing through a veil and yet, though these are mystical and bitter-sweet dreams, they ring with the clarity of a bell.

There are several highlights on this version of *She Belongs to Me*. At the end of the second verse 'down upon your knees' is as expressed, elongated and whispered as 'paint the daytime black' in verse one. 'Upon' is vocalised to match precisely the earlier 'paint'. There is a harmony to these last lines. Then there is the addition that makes it an 'Egyptian red ring', which marvellously does not interfere at all with the rhythm of the song. And finally – the harmonica ...oh, that harmonica...

In between this song and *Fourth Time Around* there is quite a bit of doodling on guitar and harmonica. This is something which happens between each song. This was not unusual in the sixties, it was something which serious rock musicians had to do – the fine tuning of their instruments being an affirmation of their musicianship. I do not accuse Dylan of pretentiousness, I simply remind you that this was not unusual.

### *Fourth Time Around*

Michael Gray (*Song and Dance Man*) says this 'begins as a cold mocking put-down of a girl and a relationship untouched by love', but soon switches to a 'second and love-tinged relationship'. But what really hits you, every time you hear it, is what Gray calls 'coarse sexual innuendo'.



Just listen to how Dylan pronounces 'and when she did come' – there is no doubting his meaning! This is a sexiness of a totally different order from that of Madonna or Right Said Fred. It's not brassy or cheeky. It is crude.

There is a beautiful harmonica intro to this one – and all the harp-playing in this set is just wonderful. I cannot say enough to do it justice. And when he gets to the line:-

*So I forced my hands in my pockets  
And felt with my thumbs*

– the way he sings 'thumbs' is unbelievable. He sort of holds the M, so that he elongates the word to sound like thummmmmmm. It seems like forever, and just when you think he is only using one thumb, you get a very deliberate hissed S.

This one incident shows, I think, the care and precision with which, through all the drugs, he approaches this performance. It is inimitable Dylan.

### *Visions of Johanna*

This complex, mysterious, involved and obscure masterpiece is one of the evening's highlights. If ever a song was made to sound exactly the way the lyrics feel, this is it. It is pure atmosphere – smoky, hazy, foggy, misty, druggy – and it lives as atmosphere. You can breathe it, inhale it, absorb it, imbibe it through your headphones. I can't believe that anyone has ever sung

like this – even Dylan has not attempted to recreate this performance. Why should he? It starts with this wonderful introduction. Strangely he actually starts to play the instrumental opening on his guitar and then, as if it were an afterthought, he starts to speak to the audience before he stops playing the guitar:-

*Ah...I'm not going to be playing any more concerts here in England. I just wanted to say...that er...that er...it's, er, it's, er, it's all wrong to...er...to, er...this is a typical example of probably one song that your English music newspapers, here, would call a drug song. I don't, I don't write druuuug songs. You know, like I never have. I wouldn't know how to go about it. But, you know...er...this is not a drug song (laughter, applause) I, I'm not saying this for any kind of defensive reason or anything like that. It's just not a drug song. It's just vulgar to think so.*

And then he goes into this indescribable, heavenly, ineffable performance. A performance that is all ether – where "harmonicas play the skeleton keys (what a phrase for this concert) in the rayayin" and these visions of Bob Dylan are now all that remain...

### ***It's All Over Now, Baby Blue***

Another eminently appropriate selection for this concert at this time in Dylan's career. *'This sky, too, is falling under you'* – isn't that exactly how it must have felt to this strung-out, totally wired young man, at the peak of his youthful fame and rock-star adulation? *'I accept chaos, I am not*

*sure whether it accepts me'*, Dylan had said in 1965. *It's All Over Now, Baby Blue* is a more poetic statement of similar emotions. As Aidan Day writes, it is a disconcerting 'usurpation of the known'. By May 1966 it must have felt that all was chaos, and maybe these structured and patterned acoustic sets were something of an attempt to impose order upon this chaos? Who knows? Certainly not me, I can only tell you how it feels when I listen to this tape.

And how does it feel, *Baby Blue*? It feels wistful; it feels desperately sad and lonesome. *'You must leave now, take what you need, you think will last'*. Surely this is Paul Williams' 'sweet mournfulness'? Once upon a time you dressed so fine but now something is happening and you don't know what it is, do you, *Baby Blue*? This is as evocative and poignant as it gets and I still can't find the words to describe it. Voices echo down the tape, down the years, but it's all so insubstantial. You want to catch it, bottle it, cradle it in your arms, but it's not there. You try to grab it, but your hand passes through it – it's pure spirit and the spectres loom again...

### ***Desolation Row***

Michael Gray likens this classical musical poem to *The Waste Land* and surely he is correct. He also, at another point, invokes *The Love Song Of J. Alfred Prufrock*; again, perfectly appropriately. Eliot must've been one of Dylan's influences at this time. And the way familiar characters are portrayed as standing inside someone else's shoes (*Einstein, disguised as Robin Hood. The Phantom of the Opera, a*

*perfect image of a priest*) gives the song, yet again, a peculiar affinity with Dylan's life situation, circa 9 o'clock on 27th May 1966. More circumstantial evidence that this acoustic set was not a throwaway routine but a carefully considered and preconceived drama.

Paul Williams writes that the last three songs of this acoustic set are 'good enough to stand next to the best work of any twentieth century artist' – a huge claim, but totally justified. But perhaps the most amazing thing is that he actually remembers the whole of *Desolation Row*!

### ***Just Like a Woman***

There is a little good-humoured interplay with the audience before this song. You hear a clink – though it's not possible to tell whether this relates to his interjection (and the audience is laughing already), but shortly after this he says: *'don't do that (laughs). That's terrible... (laughs)...that's terrible, terrible.'* It's as if he's caught a member of the audience masturbating. More audience amusement follows and lingers awhile.

And then...he begins the most sublime guitar intro you ever heard to any song. Forget what I said at the outset about his guitar-playing on this night not being out of the ordinary. I was wrong. On this song at least, it is divine – inspired – affecting – dazzling. Choose your own superlatives, they will still be inadequate. He seems to begin by picking out, faintly, the theme, then he moves more dominantly into the melody before using the harmonica briefly and then:

*Nobody feels any pain*

*Tonight as I stand inside the rain*

This time, this song is all expression. The way he vocalises certain words – 'curls' 'aches' 'came in hee-ere' 'curse, worse' 'ayaynt it clear' are among my favourites – is utterly unique. And the way he sings 'Hungry' is all aspirated H. It's lovely!

And, of course *'with her fog, her amphetamines and her pearls'* is just as weirdly apt as was the *'harmonicas play the skeleton keys'* on 'Visions'. Although a minor composition when placed alongside 'Tambourine Man', 'Visions' and 'Desolation Row', this is, I think, my second favourite performance of the evening. It may even be my favourite; it's so hard to be sure. And it finishes with yet another inspired harmonica solo.

### ***Mr. Tambourine Man***

Another invocation of the muse, and so we come full circle. 'She Belongs to Me' opening the set – a prayer for inspiration. 'Mr. Tambourine Man' closing it, a work which 'evidences an attainment of the creative moment which its speaker spends so much time anticipating' (Aidan Day). Eternal Circle indeed. That sense again that Dylan has carefully and specifically chosen to sing these seven songs in the precise order in which they are left to us.

This song includes within it (before the last verse) an exquisite harmonica break which lasts for 2 minutes and 22 seconds! 142 seconds of unbroken, heavenly harp-playing. And can you believe this? No-one, not a single soul, bursts into applause at the end of this harmonica break! If this

had been Hammersmith 1993 it would have brought the house down, you'd never have heard the next verse. I always want to applaud just sitting in my armchair. Sometimes I do. Were these polite ghosts all sitting on their hands or what? They must have been truly bloodless.

The song fades out before the last line of the chorus. It doesn't stop dead like when the tape runs out, it actually fades, gradually gets fainter, then vanishes away. Paul Williams sees this as an appropriate reminder 'that there are limits to our power to teleport ourselves to 1966, and of what a miracle it is that these performances survive at all'. To me it is equally appropriate. I see it as poetic, serendipitous somehow, exactly right. As if the ghostly singer has passed through the solid walls of our expectations never to materialise in this form again.

***'Aan The Only Sound That's  
Left...'***

There is a strangeness about this whole performance which I can find in no other tape in my collection. 'Otherworldly' is a phrase I've already borrowed and it is perfect. Is it just the drugs? I don't think so. Is it a unique interaction of the acoustics of the Albert Hall with Dylan's acoustic performance? Perhaps. It is

certainly mystical and magical – it should have been Hallowe'en.

The word that best describes Dylan's singing on this occasion is sublime – sweet sublimity. To me it does sound the way you might expect a ghost to sing. It is, in the truest sense of the words, out of this world. It is almost unbelievable that living, breathing, warm human flesh, blood and bone could produce a sound like this. There is something about the blend of acoustics, drugs and Dylan that creates an absolutely 'out of body' experience for the listener. I don't know how or why the chemistry(!) was so right. I only know that it is unrepeatable, other than by rolling that tape.

Those ghosts are still there, you know, at my fingertips and, if you're lucky, at yours. In fact, they multiply every time you copy the tape for a friend. I've consummated many a friendship with the reproduction of this concert. I've despatched ghosts to towns around England. There's a set of ghosts resting in a cassette case in South-West France – ghosts that I released. I don't want to exorcise these particular ghosts – ever. I've put my own set away now that I've finished this essay. But they'll be back one day. Applause ...harmonica...guitar...*'She's got everything she neeeds...'*