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Writers & Critics

by Alan Davis

'How do pictures become words? Or how do words become pictures? And how do they cause you to feel something? That's a miracle.'

Sam Shepard, *Rolling Thunder Logbook*

I was in one of my non-Bob phases when my copy of the first issue of *Judas!* arrived. (Contrary to expectations perhaps, the sensitive and liberal Editor of *Judas!* tells me that non-Bob phases are entirely healthy and necessary – though he was anxious to point out that in his case he was speaking purely theoretically.) Anyway - picture me standing here, stuck in a non-Bob phase, new magazine in hand. I leaf through it listlessly; I flick through the titles; I smile at Mark Carter's cartoon; I wonder momentarily about reading the Clinton Heylin interview; and then, thinking better of it, I lay it aside to wait for a better mood. For a non-non-Bob phase, in fact.

A couple of weeks later, starting to get just a little excited about Dylan's Spring UK tour, but feeling a bit under the weather and looking for something distracting to read, my gaze fell on the discarded *Judas!*, lying neglected in the middle of a little heap of books and papers on the table. Picking it up and turning to John Gibbens's article *Bow Down to Her on Sunday* (for no particular reason except that it had a few interesting pictures), I began to read – idly at first, and then with increasing interest. When I reached the end, I immediately started back at the beginning again and read it a second time with still greater fascination. It wasn't that I was particularly convinced by the argument that 'To Ramona' owed its title to Dylan's acquaintance with the Tarot; in truth, I found that on a purely rational level I couldn't decide one way or the other. But something significant had happened to me during my reading of the article. I knew that I'd probably never see 'To Ramona' in quite the same way again.

Sam Shepard, in the quotation at the head of this article, refers to the magical way in which words can generate pictures (and vice versa) and draws attention to the mystery of how that transforming ability makes us feel something. Similar observations can be made, not just about art (I use the word in its broadest sense), but about art criticism. What mysterious quality is it about the best critical writing which can help us to see art in a new light, and make us feel differently? For mystery it is. It isn't a rational thing. It's not just a matter of the critic's being informed, or being in command of the methods of scholarship.

Some of the most detailed and thorough critical analysis can have an entirely negative effect.

I found John Gibbens's article to be the best type of criticism. He's done some research; he knows about the Tarot; he knows about Dylan's interest in it. But the persuasive power of his article doesn't really lie there. It lies in the sense of enlightened companionship enjoyed by his reader. He's an engaging authorial presence. I found it very pleasant to be with him as he pointed at this, and pointed at that; as he asked me to consider such-and-such a possibility. I was sceptical, but enjoyed having my scepticism stretched, because John Gibbens has seen something, and was trying to help me to see it too. It isn't, ultimately, the facts he presents that are likely to transform my perception of Dylan's art. It's his vision. John Ruskin, perhaps the greatest of all critics and a powerful transformer of perception in his own right, wrote about this very thing back in 1856. His words are no less valuable, no less penetrating, today:

'The greatest thing a human soul can do in this world is to see something, and tell what it saw in a plain way. Hundreds of people can talk for one who can think, but thousands can think for one who can see.'

I've always found this to be at the heart of the most effective critical writing. *'I've seen this,'* says the helpful critic. *'Here's how you can see it too.'*

Let's return to John Gibbens's article. I'd never previously given any serious thought to Dylan's use – actual or hypothetical – of the Tarot, but Gibbens offers some interesting new ideas. It's not impossible for

Sara to be squeezed into the role of 'Ramona', and she just might have been the catalyst for Dylan's supposed early interest in the Tarot – but it seems to be a close run thing as far as dates are concerned. As Gibbens points out, it would be necessary for Dylan to have met Sara before the recording of 'To Ramona' in June '64. This isn't impossible as far as I'm aware, but we really don't know.

Still, Sara's involvement isn't essential to Gibbens's case – her presence just makes it more likely that Dylan was tinkering with the Tarot in '64. If he was (again, I know of no direct evidence for it), then he may well have responded in some significant way to the TORA/TARO configurations on the High Priestess and Wheel of Fortune cards. I think the real problem arises when we start talking about Dylan's intentions; when we ask whether Dylan deliberately chose the title of 'To Ramona' to make a link with the TORA of the Tarot cards. John Gibbens gives the impression that he thinks this 'TORA'/'To Ramona' link was a deliberate choice on Dylan's part. I'm not persuaded about this. (That doesn't mean he's wrong; just that I'm not persuaded.) Partly this is because, seen as deliberate, it strikes me as a particularly contrived, calculated, and obscurely unnecessary bit of word play; I'd actually think less of Dylan's artistry if I thought he'd done it deliberately. But also it's because I think another kind of origin is far more likely, and this calls for a digression.

I'm fascinated by the process of artistic creation – by the mysterious mingling of conscious and unconscious choice, the

intertwining of rational and instinctual thought that finds ultimate expression in the work of art. Bob Dylan's creative impulse is particularly intriguing, and particularly obscure. His descriptions of the origins of his songs are not usually very enlightening – I'm reminded of his comment in the *Hearts of Fire Omnibus* documentary made in the late eighties: 'I just write 'em.' If we turn from his song writing to his performance art we're no better off. He seems to be guided mainly by his own instinctive ability to discover or recreate meaning in a song at the moment of performance. I suppose most visionary artists are bound to be more concerned with the expression of their vision than with pondering the nature of the creative process, but happily there are exceptions. Ted Hughes was one such. In his delightful little book *Poetry in the Making* he has left us a particularly lucid account of the way a poem (that is, a real poem, in Hughes's sense – not a merely clever bit of versifying) can be created:

'Imagine what you are writing about. See it and live it. Do not think it up laboriously, as if you were working out mental arithmetic. Just look at it, touch it, smell it, listen to it, turn yourself into it. When you do this, the words look after themselves, like magic. If you do this you do not have to bother about commas or full-stops or that sort of thing. You do not look at the words either. You keep your eyes, your ears, your nose, your taste, your touch, your whole being on the thing you are turning into words. The minute you flinch, and take your mind off this thing, and begin to look at the words and worry about them ... then your

worry goes into them and they set about killing each other. So you keep going as long as you can, then look back and see what you have written. After a bit of practice, and after telling yourself a few times that you do not care how other people have written about this thing, this is the way you find it; and after telling yourself you are going to use any old word that comes into your head so long as it seems right at the moment of writing it down, you will surprise yourself. You will read back through what you have written and you will get a shock. You will have captured a spirit, a creature.'

This was obviously how Hughes himself wrote. He fixed his attention not on the words, but on his theme; then let the words bubble up out of some unconscious pool, and caught them as they flew. It's dangerous to apply Hughes's experience to any other artist's creative process, and yet I can't help feeling that a lot of Dylan's work must have been created in a similar way. His lyrics usually seem driven by an unconscious impulse; quite often the words make little literal sense, even though they are capable of evoking profound feelings.

Anyway, let's suppose that Dylan was indeed interested in the Tarot sometime during the first half of '64. He would absorb the flavour of it. The Tarot would be 'in the air', as it were; its archetypes, its symbols, would be inhabiting his unconscious – affecting, colouring to a greater or lesser degree his moods, ideas, and actions. And if, in choosing a title for a song, an inexplicable but beguiling resonance should be set up as the words 'To Ramona' form in Dylan's mind - that seems entirely appropriate,

even likely. There's no contrivance here, no contorted artifice. Just an unconscious resonance: TO RAMONA. And Dylan, ever alert to possibilities, probably not even aware of any connection on a conscious level, catches it as it flies, pins it down; makes art from it.

So Dylan himself may be unable to resolve the question of whether there is any link between his title and the Tarot. The idea that the artist may not be fully aware of the meaning of his work has been elegantly expressed by the abstract painter, Patrick Heron:

'A work of art is not just a telephone exchange which facilitates straightforward communication. The work of art is in some profound sense an independent, live entity. It has its own life. It draws nourishment from its creator that he was totally unaware of having put into it; and it redistributes nourishment to the spectator (including the artist himself, for he also is merely a spectator once the work is completed). What the work itself communicates is a transformation of all that the artist was conscious of investing in it.'

Paula Radice considers Gibbens's case to be 'unnecessary; indeed counter-productive', but that seems harsh. Armed now with a copy of *The Nightingale's Code*, I'm sufficiently intrigued by his idea to take a fresh look, not just at 'To Ramona', but at all the other songs written around that time; to approach them with the Tarot in the back of my mind, as, perhaps, it was in Dylan's. I don't know what I'll find. But if the best criticism is that which sends the reader back to the art – to the well-spring of vitality which stimulated the criticism in the first place –

then John Gibbens is writing good criticism. After all, the engagement of the individual with the work of art is what it's all about.

What about the listener who is simply turned off by the whole Tarot issue – who, along with Paula Radice, finds the whole thing too far-fetched, uninteresting, and counter-productive? Well, fine. There are no Dylanology Police entrusted with upholding the laws of critical right thinking. It's up to the individual to find his or her way through the Dylan critical labyrinth. I'd like to leave the last word with D.S. Savage, in a quotation from *The Personal Principle*, pointed out to me by Andy Muir (thanks be to him):

'Literature is scriptural in the sense that through it there is a communion between writer and reader in which the writer, searching for meaning in the private experience, communicates the resultant pattern to

the reader, who may then make use of this pattern, appropriating it to himself, to discover some aspects of his own personal meaning. The responsibility is always with the reader, the individual, to appropriate that which is valuable and to reject that which is useless. And only that which he makes his own, drawing it into the very substance of his being, can be of any use to him.'

Acknowledgements

This article would have been the poorer without the helpful comments of my wife Daphne and Ben Clayton on an earlier draft, and may never have been written at all without the encouragement of Andy Muir.

Singing The Lexicon:

A personal celebration of the covers collection

by Andrew Muir

‘Those old songs are my lexicon and my prayer book’ he adds. ‘All my beliefs come out of those old songs, literally, anything from ‘Let Me Rest on That Peaceful Mountain’ to ‘Keep on the Sunny Side.’ You can find all my philosophy in those old songs. I believe in a God of time and space, but if people ask me about that, my impulse is to point them back toward those songs. I believe in Hank Williams singing ‘I Saw the Light.’ I’ve seen the light, too.’

Bob Dylan, quoted by Jon Pareles
1997 *New York Times* News Service

I’d forgotten one of the great fun benefits of being the editor, that of sticking your oar in whenever you wish to. I’m taking advantage of that here to offer up a personal thanks for the *Genuine Never Ending Tour Covers Collection 1988-2000* set. Those looking for a proper, balanced and objective review are referred to our bootleg expert’s column: ‘*Pretty Good Stuff*’ on page 44. Here I am more concerned with simply celebrating the collection. How can I do otherwise, having written in *Razor’s Edge*:

‘All these covers transformed by Dylan’s interpretative powers year after year in the N.E.T. - somebody should gather them altogether and put them out as a multi-CD box set.’

Isn’t the world just full of coincidences? Here is exactly what I wanted, so I’m bound to be pleased. It is a treasure trove that I

revel in it because, as I continued in my book:

‘What Dylan has always known is that there is the strength in what we might roughly refer to as “popular music” to move men’s hearts, to shift mountains, to open up the better side of ourselves that we keep hidden away. In a way this sums up why the cover versions in the N.E.T. have had such a prominent place in this book. Despite my love of and admiration for Dylan’s magnificent lyrics, he never had to write a single one of all his phenomenal words to be the most influential artist in my life. His voice reaches higher and speaks even more deeply than all those linguistic triumphs.’

In addition to this core enjoyment, I also think that it is an important release for various other reasons I will come to later. Before that, though, it’s perhaps worth noting that while the collection offers a

range of fun, pleasure and enlightenment for the Dylan fan, it does not always lend itself to a comfortable, continuous listening experience. The breadth of years covered and variability in quality (both of performance and recording) means it does not always flow in the way an album or compilation made on narrower grounds does.

The compilers have compensated for this by placing the selections in nine separate categories and then ordering the tracks chronologically (with the exception of those songs available in poor quality only, which are tacked on to the end of each disc). This, and other elements, conscious or accidental, contribute to making it, here and there, as smooth a ride as is possible given the scale and range of the undertaking. Sometimes this is helped by circumstance, as on disc three, 'Rock Of Ages', where tracks 1-9 cover 11 years while selections 10-17 are from less than two years. The latter half of the disc is all culled from shows with the same line-up and at a time when smaller, higher quality recording devices had become widely available. Naturally the 'flow' here is smoother than elsewhere. The opening half of disc seven similarly hangs together, consisting of shots of rhythm and blues spanning but a few years, excerpts from the sublime Supper Club performances at its heart.

Sometimes the placing of certain tracks side-by-side aids a natural seeming 'run' for the listener. Whether deliberately or not, and I would like to think it was with a knowing grin, sometimes a track plays off the song that preceded it. 'Detroit City' followed by 'I'm Movin' On' is a neat touch, as is having 'Stone Walls And Steel

Bars' straight after 'Long Black Veil'. This last song is a personal favourite, which I would guess it is for many people. I even love versions of this by other artists (Nick Cave, The Band, Johnny Cash, BR5-49) so you can imagine what Dylan singing it does for me. Its place in 'the lexicon' is an interesting one because, although of the lexicon, it too is based entirely upon 'old songs'.

It absolutely sounds a genuinely old traditional classic, but instead was written by Danny Dill whose stated aim was '*to write an instant folksong*'. That instant-coffee-advert sounding claim may be unsettling but only until one has heard the song – especially as performed by any of the above, far less Dylan. Listening to this you can only be thoroughly captivated by the drama and emotion of this most authentic sounding folksong, instant or not.

These covers are culled from the mists of time right up to the contemporary, as disc four's title *Contemporary Competition* attests. Contemporary efforts do not reside only on that disc, however; 'Long Black Veil' is not the only example of a modern writer trying to create an 'old, traditional' song. The never far away from Never Ending Tour presence of the Dead can be found in this guise on various tracks. Dylan's interpretation of something like 'Black Muddy River' invests it with such grandeur and depth of human spirit that this listener is awed in a manner that probably could only rightly be described as spiritual.

Speaking of spirituality, human emotion and contemporary covers, the opening track of *Contemporary Competition*, Leonard Cohen's 'Hallelujah',

given a towering rendition here, shows the lexicon can be composed of new songs too. Though, in this case, 'timeless' would seem a more appropriate description. (It is on this disc too that one can hear 'I'm Not Supposed To Care', which prompted the lines from *Razor's Edge* quoted at the beginning of this article.)

I mentioned earlier that some songs seem to play off the one they follow, but it is not often possible for this to happen, due to the tracks appearing in chronological order. For example, 'I'll Not Be A Stranger' would make a neat reply to 'Rank Strangers To Me' were one ordering the songs to deliberately create such resonance. With the flexibility and wide availability of today's recording equipment you can soon make up your own tapes and CD-Rs from this vast store, and shine a light on the web of the lexicon from a different angle.

This can encourage you to make other compilations. For example, covers performed live on the NET that you also have studio versions of. You could kick off with 'Precious Memories' for example. That's worth doing if only to give yourself a reason to dust off *Knocked Out Loaded* and play a track you have not played since '-/-/--' (I envisage hundreds of similar dates being entered!)

Incidentally, if you are one of those who haven't played that track since the year it was released, pause to think that this was sixteen years ago; the same length of time that covered Dylan's eponymous debut album through to *Street-Legal*. I just mentioned that because I found that alarming – and so immediately wanted to spread said alarm.

So many ways you can approach this collection, so many ways it entices you to approach it. It makes you wonder, for example, what is really in Dylan's mind when he sings 'Old Rock 'n' Roller'? How seriously do you take his introduction? You forget this while you listen to something else, but later in the same disc it's enough to start you wondering if there's a personal inference to be taken from 'Stand By Me'.

One of the benefits of having all the covers in one place is that you find yourself listening to a mixture of old cover favourites ('Across The Borderline' and 'That Lucky Old Sun') with others rarely if ever played by me ('Stand By Me' and 'I'll Not Be A Stranger'). I pick those four because they are to be found in a four-song sequence. The reason I rarely play the last two mentioned is that I have one on a CD somewhere and one on a tape God alone knows where. I rarely play tapes nowadays, and by the time I looked up what CD I needed and searched the tape shelves and boxes I'd more than likely have uncovered something else intriguing and played that. It's good to know that for 1988-2000 I now have them all in one place. This is one of the most valuable things about the collection, but another is the gap it fills in Dylan's official career.

This takes us back to the quote at the head of the article, and the lexicon. The main strand of the web of the lexicon is in the 'old songs' though, working back from rhythm and blues and rockabilly through blues to the ancient folksongs. Songs of which Dylan once memorably said:

'Traditional music is based on hexa-

grams. It comes about from legends, Bibles, plagues, and it revolves around vegetables and death... All these songs about roses growing out of people's brains and lovers who are really geese and swans that turn into angels... I mean, you'd think that the traditional-music people could gather from their songs that mystery... is a fact, a traditional fact... I could give you descriptive detail of what they do to me, but some people would probably think my imagination had gone mad.¹

Traditional music has been with him from the beginning, as 'Man of Constant Sorrow' reminds us. It, like so many other tracks, shows the connecting threads of the Lexicon, creating a web of associations, picking up more and more by the minute, shedding more and more light on the power and influence of the songs through the years. As he said in 1997: 'I don't adhere to rabbis, preachers, evangelists, all of that. I've learned more from the songs than I've learned from any of this kind of entity. The songs are my lexicon. I believe the songs.'

And this brings me to my point regarding the collection's importance. I listen to 'Dust My Broom', which used to make me think of old bluesmen. It still does, but now it brings to mind 'Love And Theft' (as does disc six, 'Crooning 'Neath The Moon'), and it is followed by 'Sally Sue Brown', which takes me all the way back to *Down In The Groove*. This collection spans not only the Never Ending Tour but that period of Dylan's recorded life. It forms a crucial document in understanding the Dylan who got from the mid '80s to *Oh Mercy* and *under the red sky*, and more importantly the way the songs became the

bedrock he clung to during the long, long writing gap between the critically panned *under the red sky* and the lauded *Time Out Of Mind*. These are the kinds of songs that kept him going, that spawned two cover albums that could have lit up the MTV UNPLUGGED show if he had stuck to his guns:

'I would have liked to do old folk songs with acoustic instruments, but there was a lot of input from other sources as to what would be right for the MTV audience.' He even tells us the connection between his songs and them: '(My songs) are not disposable. Folk and blues songs aren't either.'²

This collection provides one of the reasons for Bob bootlegs continuing; it is an essential supplement to the official album releases, but one you can never imagine being added to that catalogue.

PS 'Moon River' is a gem.

1. 1966 *Playboy* interview by Nat Hentoff.

2. Both quotes from 1995 *USA Today* interview by Edna Gundersen.

‘Nobody Breathes Like Me’

December 1988 – November 1989

by Paul Williams

On December 6, 1988, two days after the Bridge School Benefit concert and seven weeks after the release of *Traveling Wilburys, Volume One*, Roy Orbison died of a heart attack. That pretty much ended any short-term consideration of a Wilburys tour or concert. In mid-January, Dylan reportedly rehearsed with Smith, Parker and Aaronson at Montana Studios in New York City, even though their first shows of the year would not be until the end of May.

February 6, 1989, the album *Dylan & the Dead* was released. On February 12th, Dylan made a surprise appearance at a Grateful Dead concert in Inglewood, California, playing guitar on eight songs and also sharing vocals on three, the encores, ‘Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again’, ‘Not Fade Away’, and ‘Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door’. According to biographer Howard Sounes,

‘Bob insisted he play only Grateful Dead songs. Unfortunately he did not know the words and he made a mess of five of their songs before the band forced him to sing his own.’ Sounes says Dylan called the Grateful Dead office the next day and said he wanted to join the band (*‘He made it clear that he was serious’*). He quotes Bob Weir: *‘I think we would have [taken him], if it hadn’t been for that one guy [a band member who voted against it]. We would have picked him up as a sort of temporary band member.’*

So it didn’t happen. But Bob Dylan came very close, at the beginning of 1989, to pulling off the most dramatic expression of his desire to free himself from his audience and his myth since his very public embrace of Jesus Christ as his Savior in 1979 (and subsequent tour asking his listeners to do the same). The 1970 album *Self Portrait* and even ‘going electric’ in 1965 can be seen as expressions of the same

impulse. *'There must be some way out of here!'* It's the exact opposite of *'I'm determined to stand!'* – but Dylan has often acknowledged his tendency to contradict himself. Before I knew of Dylan's Feb. '89 phone call, I wrote in chapter 3 of this book that Dylan in 1988 *'fantasized about somehow becoming the Grateful Dead'* the way he dreamed in high school of joining Little Richard. Creating 'Bob Dylan' in the first place, the voice, the fictional history, the persona, took a lot of imagination and courage, and for Bob Dylan with his actual history as of the end of 1988 to dissolve himself into being a musician member of America's most popular and idiosyncratic touring band would have been a related act of imagination and self-invention (or deconstruction). And surely would not have been a good fit, musically or otherwise, and not particularly beneficial to the Grateful Dead and their sense of purpose and identity. Dylan clearly coveted the Dead's audience, and was still having a hard time being at peace with his own audience, or his ideas and feelings about them and what he imagined they expected of him. How tempting it must have been for him to have a chance to gain one audience and escape the other in one bold act. Perhaps the boldness of the act (again like the 1979 conversion) was its most seductive aspect.

In any case, the roving gambler (as Dylan would later characterize himself, by opening concerts with that song) had another card up his sleeve: the strongest batch of songs he'd written in more than five years. In March 1989 he began recording them in New Orleans with his

new producer, Daniel Lanois. Lanois had coproduced two albums for U2, and when Dylan played some of the new songs for his friend Bono of U2, Bono suggested, according to Dylan, that *'Daniel could really record them right'*. Lanois, a Canadian living in England, was on an extended working visit to New Orleans in summer 1988, and when Dylan and his band played a show in the Big Easy in late September, Lanois *'came to see me,'* Dylan later recalled, in an interview to promote the Lanois-produced album, *Oh Mercy* (released in September 1989). *'We hit it off. He had an understanding of what my music was all about. It was thrilling to run into Daniel because he's a competent musician and he knows how to record with modern facilities... He managed to get my stage voice, something other people working with me never were quite able to achieve.'*

This last comment is very suggestive. It sounds as though (in 1989) Dylan thinks of his stage voice (presumably meaning what he hears and feels himself doing when he's up there) as his true voice as an artist, attainable most nights on the road but often elusive (it seems to him) in the recording studio. It also sounds as though he tends to think (understandably) that whether or not his 'stage voice' is captured on a recording is a function of technological considerations and of the producer's and recording engineer's knowledge of or approach to the equipment. No doubt this is true to some degree, but it is the premise of this series of books and, I believe, the consensus of a large community of listeners, that Bob Dylan's stage voice – and many remarkable examples of great and

enduring vocal artistry – can be heard on recordings made for the most part by amateurs with relatively simple recording equipment smuggled into concerts and used surreptitiously ('accidental art'). There are significant variations in the technical quality of these surreptitious recordings, of course, but again I believe that the consensus of the community of listeners is that the primary factor affecting the value of a particular (recorded) Dylan concert performance is the state of mind of the singer, the performing artist. Dylan acknowledges this to some extent in the interview quoted above (with Edna Gundersen of *USA Today* newspaper) when he says: '*Daniel just allowed the record to take place any old time, day or night. You didn't have to walk through secretaries, pinball machines and managers and hangers-on in the lobby and parking lots and elevators and arctic temperatures.*' Thus, Lanois's achievement was not just based on knowing how to record with modern facilities but also on knowing how to free a singer from the feeling of being imprisoned or oppressed by modern facilities and the distractions that go with the territory.

I like *Oh Mercy* very much, and consider it quite worthy of the status it is granted by many listeners and commentators as a solid example of, let's say, the second level of excellence among Dylan's albums, slightly below the exalted first rank (i.e., *Blonde on Blonde*, *Highway 61 Revisited*, *Blood on the Tracks*, *John Wesley Harding*, etc.) but still as likely to reward repeated listenings and to endure as a work of art beyond its creator's era as such albums as *Another Side of Bob Dylan* or *The*

Times They Are A-Changin' or *Planet Waves* or (the reader is invited to fill in the blank with another beloved if not superlative example of Bob Dylan's craft), and certainly far above *Knocked Out Loaded* or *Down in the Groove* or *Dylan & the Dead*, his album releases in the three years leading up to this one.

Oh Mercy, like, say, the amateur recording of Bob Dylan's September 1987 concert in Munich, Germany, is a (very aesthetically gratifying and stimulating) portrait of a moment when this artist truly felt inspired to perform. We have to move our minds outside of time a little to identify this moment. The unity of place and time that characterizes the plays of Sophocles and Euripides (according to Aristotle) is apparent in a concert recording, an auditory snapshot of a singer or a band on stage in a particular theater on a particular day for a certain number of minutes. *Oh Mercy*, on the other hand, was recorded over a period of six weeks in what Lanois called Studio on the Move ('*it's more a state of mind than a specific address*'), a portable recording studio set up wherever he and his artists decided to work. For the very first *Oh Mercy* sessions in early March '89, the Studio on the Move was located in an apartment in EMLAH Court on St. Charles Avenue in New Orleans where Lanois and the Neville Brothers had recorded their album *Yellow Moon* a few months earlier. 'Where Teardrops Fall' was probably recorded here. But soon Lanois and Dylan decided a change of venue was appropriate, and on March 7 Lanois relocated the Studio on the Move to a big blue house at 1305 Soniat Street in New Orleans. The rest of

the album and some portentous outtakes ('Series of Dreams', 'Dignity', 'Born in Time', 'God Knows') were recorded here between March 7 and 24. But, atypically, Dylan did some vocal overdubs (occasionally with new and revised lyrics) on some of these songs, and these were recorded at 1305 Soniat between April 3 and April 12, 1989.

The moment that *Oh Mercy* captures so powerfully also includes some days in summer 1988 when most of these songs were probably written. (Lanois reports that 'Dylan came in [to the sessions] with songs completed,' although 'Man in the Long Black Coat' was written in the studio and other songs, notably 'Shooting Star,' were rewritten and restructured during the sessions; Dylan has said, 'Yeah, those songs had come to me during that last year'.) 'I was thinking of a series of dreams,' Dylan wrote (and sang) sometime during this extended moment, 'where nothing comes up to the top. Everything stays down where it's wounded, and comes to a permanent stop. Wasn't thinking of anything specific, like in a dream when someone wakes up and screams. Nothing too very scientific. Just thinking of a series of dreams.' And living a series of dreams. And finding ways, with the help of a 'thrilling' new collaborator, to share those nonlinear dream-perceptions in an album of performed song-pictures as vital and alive and true to his artistry as a particularly good night out on the road.

Richard Williams (in his *London Times* review of *Oh Mercy*) has again articulated my own experience of a Dylan performance, by writing: 'Throughout *Oh Mercy*, Dylan's delivery is relaxed and confident. He

sounds like a Bob Dylan you could talk to [as opposed to other recent albums where "he sounds uncomfortable in his own skin"]. How did Lanois pull it off? At a guess, by enfolding the notoriously nervy Dylan in a sympathetic working environment.' Williams went on to point out, in a helpful insight, that Lanois's use of portable equipment in a converted house 'to escape the prefabricated studio-as-factory atmosphere... was how Dylan and the Band recorded the seminal *Basement Tapes* and *Music from Big Pink* in a Woodstock mansion twenty-two years ago.'

Nothing too very scientific. 'This last record here came out of nowhere, really,' Dylan told Adrian Deevoy in October '89. 'There certainly wasn't any plan on my part to make any statement.'

And, as often happens for me with the concert tapes: plan or no, I love the statement he did find himself making. Even the sequence is impeccable. 'We live in a political world...' Is this the only Dylan album that opens with the word 'we'? Yeah, and the first D. song that does since 'Tears of Rage', apart from 'Coming From The Heart', an unreleased collaboration with Helena Springs. How surprising that Bob Dylan, who has an allergy to being thought of as the voice of any generation, in 1989 feels like making a statement about the human condition to his audience, whoever they are, using an inclusive personal pronoun, as if he really does feel like he's speaking for someone, an 'us'. Unlike several of my peers (Michael Gray calls 'Political World' 'a bore' and says 'there's no heart in it'; Clinton Heylin describes Dylan as having achieved a breakthrough in his

songwriting in the *Oh Mercy* songs – ‘Dylan seems to be taking a single thought, shattering it and following each shard part of the way’ – but says, ‘On “Political World” the trick fails because the idea itself cannot sustain the song’), I enjoy ‘Political World’ almost every time I hear it, and consider it very successful at fulfilling its task as opening song of this album/performance (like ‘Subterranean Homesick Blues’ and ‘Gotta Serve Somebody’ and ‘Tangled Up in Blue,’ it reintroduces the singer/songwriter to his listeners: ‘Here I am, and this is who I am this time!’).

I like the sound of ‘Political World’ – the sound of the singer’s voice, certainly, and the feel of the musical accompaniment, starting with the 25-second synthesizer-bass & drums-guitars intro. For me the rising and never-relieved rock and roll tension of the instruments and the vocal together is very effective at setting up the entire 39-minute *Oh Mercy* experience. It’s a very bold opening, in fact, creating an expectation in the listener/observer (every time he or she listens) that something wonderful is about to be presented and shared. Tension/release. There’s no release in the song, no musical or lyrical bridge, or chorus. So the ‘message’ of the song is underlined again and again and release of the masterfully built-up tension is postponed to occur during other tracks... and those tracks don’t disappoint. As ‘It’s Alright, Ma’ is a belated payoff for ‘Subterranean Homesick Blues,’ and as ‘Slow Train’ and ‘Precious Angel’ and ‘When He Returns’ are for ‘Gotta Serve Somebody’ (and ‘Idiot Wind’ and ‘If You See Her, Say Hello’ for ‘Tangled Up in

Blue’), so ‘Ring Them Bells’ and ‘Man in the Long Black Coat’ and ‘Most of the Time’ and ultimately ‘Shooting Star’ are payoffs and delicious releases for tension built up in the album’s opening track, a tension sustained, arguably, in a more metaphysical way (‘When’s he gonna start being *Bob Dylan*?’) through the next two early tracks, ‘Where Teardrops Fall’ and ‘Everything Is Broken.’

When Heylin says (in his book *Bob Dylan: The Recording Sessions*), ‘the idea itself (“We live in a political world...”’) cannot sustain the song,’ he helps us understand why Gray was bored and why the song does not seem to have had much impact on the ‘we’ Dylan’s speaking for, even though similarly unsubtle litanies made their author a legend in another era. For Dylan, the observation ‘we live in a political world’ does indeed sustain his interest and passion throughout the song’s eleven verses. You can hear this in his voice, feel it in the earnestness of his performance (whether he planned to make a statement or not, he can’t hold himself back here, not when the track he’s singing to is such a splendid and stimulating realization of what he was hearing in his head when he wrote this tune). But the repeated phrase (‘...political world’) doesn’t work for Gray or Heylin or probably for very many listeners because it’s in a kind of private language that genuinely resonates for its author but isn’t an effective summation for many of the rest of ‘us’ of what’s out-of-kilter about this world or civilization we find ourselves living in. I think by ‘political world,’ Dylan means a human world that is dominated by the lust for and manipula-

tion of institutional power... and therefore empty of other values. The first time he sings, 'We live in a political world,' he follows it and explains his phrase by saying, 'Love don't have any place'. Something is wrong with a 'world' in which the latter statement is true. The next two lines, 'We're living in times where men commit crimes/And crime don't have a face,' I interpret as being a reference to crimes committed against the poor and powerless of the Earth by faceless corporate and governmental decision-makers (crimes that don't seem to be crimes like a murder or robbery committed by a person standing in front of the victim). There are moments in these verses quite worthy of Dylan the social commentator of 'It's Alright, Ma' and 'Masters of War': 'As soon as you're awake, you're trained to take/What looks like the easy way out.' In other words, you go to work and participate in activities with dire consequences for distant others in order to 'make a living,' as you've been trained to do. Because the Buddhist monk/peace activist whose writings I resonate with was exiled from his country (Vietnam) and saw his young students killed by both the Communist rebels and the Catholic government because he and they were advocating 'peace,' I recognize a succinct wisdom in: 'We live in a political world/Where peace is not welcome at all/It's turned away from the door to wander some more/Or put up against the wall.'

What Dylan expresses so passionately (but not resonantly for every listener) in this song is familiar to those of us who've read his interviews over the years. In the 1985 interview included in the box set

Biograph, he told Cameron Crowe: 'The truth about anything in this society, as you know, is too threatening. Gossip is King. It's like "conscience" is a dirty word. Whatever is truthful haunts you and don't let you sleep at night.' Compare this with 'We live in a political world/Wisdom is thrown into jail/It rots in a cell, is misguided as hell/Leaving no one to pick up a trail.' Or with these verses from the early 16-verse outtake version: 'Truth is the outlaw of life/It's hunted and slain, and there's no one to arraign/Or put under a doctor's knife.' 'Conscience don't have a clue/Climb into bed, talk out of your head/You're not even sure that it's you.'

So Dylan is telling/sharing his truth in 'Political World,' and the more I listen to it the more I'm struck by its language (along with the overall sound and the singer's timing and phrasing). 'We live in a political world/Where mercy walks the plank/Life is in mirrors, death disappears/Up the steps into the nearest bank.' This is rich, inspired language. 'Mercy' is clearly compassion, executed by the pirates who run this world because it interferes with the profitability of death. So we can understand the album's title as an expression of compassion with compassion itself, and its harsh fate in our 'political' world.

Commenting on how this 1989 protest song starts (and thus starts the album) with the word 'we', the Dylan album-opener that first came to my mind was 'The Times They Are A-Changin''. That song does not contain the word 'we,' although the feeling of the word is implicit in the balladeer's opening phrase 'Come gather round people', and is more strongly felt by the song's listeners when the speaker tells 'mothers

and fathers throughout the land' that 'your sons and daughters are beyond your command', because the structure of the song and its language suggest that the speaker is as one with those sons and daughters who are asking 'you' to get out of this new road 'if you can't lend a hand'. Because the implicit 'we' is so strong on this album, and at this historical moment, there is an enormous emotional payoff when Dylan sings 'When the Ship Comes In' much later on the record (another powerful anthem that strongly implies that there is a 'we' community that is on the ship and that is being spoken for here), because in the last verse of that song the speaker/singer finally confirms that he does indeed see himself as one of the ship's crew when he uses the first person plural pronoun to say (to the 'they' who are surrendering), 'We'll shout from the bow your days are numbered'.

From such subtleties the relationships between artists and audiences are built. And one would underrate Bob Dylan to think it is only by accident that a song that repeats the phrase 'we live in a political world' eleven times (heightening the claustrophobic quality of this awareness with every verse and every repetition) is followed immediately on his album by the words, 'Far away where the soft winds blow/Far away from it all/There is a place you go...' Clearly, the message is: there is some way out of here; there is another world, another place you can go.

The nature of that place is intentionally or accidentally masked by the title of the second song (and the final phrase in the verse just quoted), 'Where Teardrops Fall',

because 'teardrops' as a word belongs to the language of love songs, and so the easy assumption by the listener is that this must be a, possibly autobiographical, man-woman love song. And the 'place' must be their trysting place. But none of the other language in the song confirms this, although the peaceful beauty of the song's music, in contrast to the claustrophobic tension of the previous track in which we were intimate with the same voice but in a different mood (a mood of sympathetic urgency in the first song, one of blessed and delicate and richly textured relief in the second), could suggest a love song.

The transitions on this album are always stimulating and pleasing, particularly the transitions between the different voices and moods of the same vocalist, and the related differences in the sounds of each track, each recorded song and performance. Therefore, just as the phrase 'far away' is suggestive as the next words after a song about being trapped in an unpleasant world, it might be worth noticing that the last words of the previous song were: '...shout God's name/But you're not even sure what it is'. The sound of the new song and of the voice should be enough to help us recognize that the intimate friend addressed here, as in many Dylan songs, is a spiritual rather than a human love object. 'You are there in the flickering light.' The strongest clue might be the line 'Thinking of you when the sun comes up', which can bring us back to 'I believe in you even on the morning after/Oh, when the dawn is nearing/Oh, when the night is disappearing/Oh, this feeling's still here in my heart' ('I Believe in You,' 1979).

In this context ‘*We banged the drum slowly/And played the fife lowly*’ in the third verse could be a kind of communal invocation of the Holy Spirit, immediately leading to the I/Thou of ‘*You know the song in my heart*’ and the humble, prayerful ‘*You can show me a new place to start*’. It’s a beautiful song, though, like ‘*Political World*’, it has been scorned by some commentators.

The late Bert Cartwright, in the 1992 edition of his book *The Bible in the Lyrics of Bob Dylan*, rightly says there is something ‘*spiritually haunting*’ about ‘*Where Teardrops Fall*,’ and provides some interesting insights into how biblical language that Dylan is surely familiar with may have influenced the wording of the first line of the fourth verse. The entire verse is:

*I've torn my clothes and I've drained the
cup
Strippin' away at it all
Thinking of you when the sun comes up
Where teardrops fall.*

Cartwright comments:

“‘*I've torn my clothes*’ is a common Hebrew expression of profound grief as is illustrated in 2 Samuel 3:31: *Then David said to Joab and to all the people who were with him, “Rend your clothes and gird on sackcloth and mourn before Abner.” The phrase “I've drained the cup” possibly alludes to Psalms 75:8: For in the hand of the Lord there is a cup, with foaming wine, well mixed; and he will pour a draught from it, and all the wicked of the earth shall drain it down to the dregs.*’

Dylan’s interest in the aural as well as lyrical transitions between the songs (or movements) on this album is particularly

evident in the little saxophone concerto that surprisingly and very pleasingly concludes ‘*Where Teardrops Fall*,’ following the line, ‘*I just might have to come see you...*’ This is a pleasure to the listener – similar in form to Dylan’s long harmonica solos at the ends of many of his best recorded song-performances – regardless of what one supposes the song to be about; and when one tunes in, consciously or intuitively, to the spiritually haunting aspect of the song, it certainly becomes a powerful evocation of what Dylan in ‘*Every Grain of Sand*’ referred to as ‘*in the hour of my deepest need, the pool of tears beneath my feet*’.

Even if one feels one has been hearing a man-woman love song, this saxophone passage is so fulfilling, so rich in beauty and feeling, that it is striking (and, again, surprising) that the next sound one hears is kind of silly, a boogie riff reminiscent of hit television themes like ‘*Peter Gunn*’ and ‘*Batman*’. From the sublime to the ridiculous? Yes, but. But this remarkable composer/performer/album-builder had a moment earlier conveyed his listeners very skillfully from the seemingly ridiculous (‘*Roses are red, violets are blue*’) to the sublime (‘*Time is beginning to crawl*’) and now we are inclined to trust ourselves to his whims, and just let him call the shots. ‘*Roses are red...*’, it occurs to us, is poetic ‘*filler*’ used in amateur versifying such as Valentine messages, and thus just what a serious poet might want to say to express a subjective mind-state in which time is beginning to crawl (and so he can’t think of anything fresher to say here). This is song-writing as performance, juggling unlikely

and awkward objects in real time before our eyes (and ears) and not just getting away with it but creating powerful new meanings and aesthetics in the act, so cleverly that spontaneity seems brilliantly premeditated. This is actually the Bob Dylan we've always loved.

And this third song, 'Everything Is Broken', deftly manages to be less ridiculous than its boogie riff and seemingly predictable 'list' structure suggest, and, thanks to the charm and particular energy of the singer's delivery, might even sound sublime, depending on the mood and mind-state the listener happens to be in when he or she encounters it (again; albums, unlike concerts, are made to be experienced over and over).

What is delightful about 'Everything Is Broken' is, once more, the vocal performance and the sound of the track (its feel), and the stimulating effect of this sound and this vocal performance and this message alongside these other songs and their sounds and vocals and messages. On *Oh Mercy*, Lanois not only manages to get Dylan's 'stage voice', but also succeeds in reawakening, or anyway making a safe space for, Dylan's remarkable intuitive gift for album-building. The two probably go together. Dylan's stage voice and his ability to create wonderfully unitary assemblages and art objects like *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* and *Highway 61 Revisited* and *Blonde on Blonde* are expressions of his performer instincts, his sense of audience and his keen ability to create and communicate in a milieu separate from any fixed ideas and concepts about who's observing and what they expect or need from him. The

performer creates his listener like a lover invents and creates his or her beloved in the act of and at the moment of lovemaking. It's an inspired activity. Bob Dylan's artistry, his songs, his albums, his concerts, have always been muse-driven in the sense that his best results in every medium have always come when he's been able to allow himself to trust and follow and be guided by intuition, accident, and inspiration. His great albums have all been created at moments when, for whatever reasons, he felt himself standing on a stage in the recording studio (and at his typewriter or notebook) with '*a million faces at my feet*', a world-stage outside of time, allowing him to whisper sweet nothings in the ears of, and do his best to charm and surprise, a very worthy and intimate audience unrestricted by space or time. Feeling himself in this relationship to his imagined or felt listeners inspires him, and when this performer is inspired, he often breaks new ground in his chosen art forms – he gets extraordinary results.

Not to say that 'Everything Is Broken' is extraordinary, but that the particular charms of this recording and performance, following the two songs that come before it and preceding the three blockbusters that come next, do make a meaningful contribution to the extraordinary achievement of *Oh Mercy* as a whole, as the modest and delightful absurdities of 'From a Buick 6' contribute in their way, and thanks to their location in the listening sequence, to *Highway 61 Revisited*.

The particular energy of Bob Dylan's overdubbed (i.e., sung to a previously recorded track, not live in the studio while

the musicians are playing) vocal on 'Everything Is Broken' is the sound of happiness (in sharp contrast to the literal message of these lines). Because of the existence, and availability to fans and students, of an early take of this song with quite different lyrics, we know Dylan has recently rewritten these verses (even the chorus line has evolved, from *'everything broken'* to *'everything is broken'*; and it seems the working title of the song when it was first attempted in March was 'Broken Days'). I don't think Dylan is ad-libbing the new lines as he's singing this album version of the song, the way he ad-libbed much of 'Gotta Serve Somebody at the fall '87 shows (Lanois to an interviewer: *'Dylan's a very committed lyricist; he would walk into the studio and put his head into the pages of words that he had and not let up until it was done'*). But it's not easy to tell, because the singer at this moment is truly present with the fun he had following the flow of language suggested by the song's premise (start with the repeated word 'broken' and fill in the blanks, guided by considerations of meter and rhyme and of overall theme and narrative message). So he sings as though he were inventing these clever (and cheerfully disposable) lines at this moment.

It's not a great song but it is an exceptional performance, an opportunity for the listener to experience the joys of writing, inventing, rapping, collaborating with the Muse and the universe. Words come fast, sometimes, and often surprise and delight their speaker/author as they arrive. 'Everything Is Broken' begins *'Broken lines'*, which could almost be self-referen-

tial, since the form of this song is a pause, or break, after every two words. The next phrase is *'broken strings'*, retroactively changing 'lines' in the listener's mind to the sort of lines that belong in a group with strings, maybe fishing lines or clotheslines. Continuing in this group, the next phrase (beginning the second line of the song) is *'broken threads'*. The need for a rhyme determines that the next broken item is 'springs'. This is particularly satisfying, to the listener and the composer, when the fourth line of the verse turns out to be *'People sleeping in broken beds'*, because broken springs are traditionally (in recent centuries) the most common and unpleasant element in broken beds.

The third line of the verse is *'Broken idols, broken heads'*. The first part of this has its origins in the first draft of the song, 'Broken Days', where Dylan sings towards the end, *'Broken idols, broken heroes/Broken numbers, adding up to zeroes'*. Why *'Broken idols, broken heads'*? Dylan has described the *Oh Mercy* compositions as *'stream-of-consciousness songs'* (speaking of how he wrote them). If Dylan lifted his eyes from his scribbled-on pages of words in the Studio on the Move in April '89 and wondered why his mind followed 'idols' with 'heads', I'm sure he like me heard the phrase *'idol with the golden head'* come up in his mind – and probably more quickly than me recognized it as the title of a 1957 song by the rock and roll group the Coasters. When you listen to him sing 'Everything Is Broken' on *Oh Mercy*, you can share his amusement and sense of wonder at this process. My sense of Dylan as a songwriter, in the '60s and in this case

in the '80s, is that he'll notice an internal rhyme ('threads', 'heads') sometime after he's produced it, and notice an appropriate image match ('broken springs', 'broken beds') once it's already in place, and feel good about what he has almost unconsciously given birth to. Later, people will attribute all sorts of conscious intentions to his choices of words, and that will sometimes flatter him, sometimes irritate him. Mostly, though, I believe it's a joy for him when a place to start (in this case a single word, 'broken') results in a flow of language and a song to sing that satisfies his musician and performer needs and instincts. In the album version of 'Everything Is Broken', he expresses as a performer his delight in the very appropriate sound of the track these New Orleans musicians have laid down in collaboration with him for his song, and demonstrates the playful spirit aroused in him by the way this flow of language (jotted down months before, then recorded in March and rewritten in April) has gathered itself into a song to sing, now and on many future stages – *'my songs were not written with the idea in mind that anyone else would sing them, they were written for me to play live & that is the sort of end of it.'*

In 'Broken Days', there is a verse that starts, *'Broken lives hang by a thread/Broken bones in a broken bed'*. In 'Everything Is Broken,' this metamorphoses into the just-described verse, with thread now plural and also broken, and into the rather dire *'Broken bodies, broken bones'* of the third verse, which is marvelously followed by *'Broken voices on broken phones'*. Not a great song, perhaps, but certainly a great

songwriting experience, and thanks to this singer's gift for being present in a performance, an experience we all can share now (the fun of the writing, and the fun of singing these words to this accompaniment, at this moment in this house in New Orleans).

One last thing I want to point to in 'Everything Is Broken' is the deft manner in which the personal pronoun 'you' changes its identity between the first bridge and the second bridge. In the first bridge – *'Seem like every time you stop and turn around/Something else just hit the ground'* – it clearly means 'one', you or me or anybody. In the similarly worded second bridge – *'Every time you leave and go off someplace/Things fall to pieces in my face'* – the inclusion of the word 'my' indicates that 'you' is now a specific other person, probably a lover (possibly a personal assistant). So for this moment, 'Everything Is Broken' becomes a possible love song, instead of the complaint about the state of the world (*'Take a deep breath, feel like you're chokin'*) it can seem to be in its album position two tracks after *'We live in a political world/Love don't have any place'*. Amusingly, taken as an autobiographical statement, this second bridge directly contradicts the repeated boasts in the album's sixth track, 'Most of the Time' (*'I don't even notice she's gone'*)...

Returning again to Dylan's 1988 essay for the Hendrix exhibition, the triumph of *Oh Mercy* is that as a whole and track by track it serves as a splendid demonstration of what he meant when he wrote: *'my songs are different & i don't expect others to make attempts to sing them because you have to get*

somewhat inside & behind them & it's hard enough for me to do it sometimes & then obviously you have to be in the right frame of mind. but even then there would be a vague value to it because nobody breathes like me so they couldn't be expected to portray the meaning of a certain phrase in the correct way without bumping into other phrases & altering the mood, changing the understanding & just giving up so that they then become only verses strung together for no apparent reason.'

Nobody breathes like Bob Dylan. He seemed to be referring to this same basic principle of how his songs come to mean what they mean when he said to Paul Zollo (in a 1991 interview in which he was asked to talk about his songwriting and comment on specific songs) about 'Ring Them Bells': *'It stands up when you hear it played by me. But if another performer did it, you might find that it probably wouldn't have as much to do with bells as what the title proclaims.'* In other words, it is the nuance and totality of the vocal (or vocal-and-instruments) performance that gives the words of a song their meaning or semblance of meaning, their message, their sentiment.

'Ring Them Bells', the fourth track on *Oh Mercy*, is a superb performance, a terrific song which one can easily imagine having become the anthem of a historical moment (and a million personal moments) if some other performer had happened to rebreathe it at the right time as skillfully (and luckily) as Peter, Paul & Mary did 'Blowin' in the Wind' and the Byrds did 'Mr. Tambourine Man'. It is an excellent example of a singer/performer getting inside and behind a song and

portraying the meanings of certain phrases in the 'correct' way (i.e., a way that is powerful and effective for the listener, and that ultimately allows him or her to hear these verses as being strung together for an intuitively evident reason that is very satisfying and stimulating and uplifting). And if we listen carefully, it's not hard to see how this is accomplished by the way the singer breathes.

In every verse of 'Ring Them Bells', there is a breath structure as well as a meter and a rhyme scheme. In the first three verses, and the last, there is no pause after the first line or the third line and a pause (a breath) after the second and fourth lines. There are then pauses after the fifth and sixth lines and no pause after the seventh line (turning the seventh and eighth lines into one double-length line, which rhymes with the sixth and the seventh (in the first verse, this double line is *'And time is running backwards and so is the bride'*).

The fourth, bridging, verse becomes a bridge by changing this breath structure along with changes in the rhyme scheme and the lengths of lines. There are pauses at the end of every line, and also short (and very meaningful) pauses in the middles of the first three and the fifth lines, after the repeated phrase *'Ring them bells'* (which only occurs twice in each of the first three verses, with no breath after it in those).

Of course, there's more to this matter of how Bob Dylan breathes than the easily observed pauses for breath and absence of pauses. Especially because he's singing to his own rhythmic piano playing on this song, there is a powerful yet subtle respiratory pulse to the performance that is

remarkably expressive. In the first verse, this is present in every word, but most noticeable in his phrasing of ‘sanctuaries’ (the first syllables lightly and firmly stressed, as though it were sank/tchew/airies), and the depth and width of the words ‘deep’ and ‘wide’, and the emphasis on the word ‘time’ near the start of the seventh line and the open grace of the word ‘bride’ at the end of that line. In the fourth verse, it is present in the unusual shape he gives the repeated word ‘bells’ so that it seems to rhyme with itself.

Dylan's distinctive breathing of ‘Ring Them Bells’ climaxes (as it should) in the three evocative lines that end the song:

*Oh the lines are long
And the fighting is strong
And they're breaking down the distance
between right and wrong.*

We actually hear him gasping for breath while he sings this, with an urgency and intimacy that unmistakably communicate his sincerity, his conviction, his concern, his regret. (*Listen to the distance that Dylan puts here between right and wrong by his intake of breath between those crucial words.* – Christopher Ricks, in *The Telegraph*, 1994.) Finally it is up to each listener to have an idea about what the song ‘means’, what the bells might be saying and why the singer is calling on all the saints, and others, to keep ringing them. One thing that is said fairly clearly (*‘so the people will know’; ‘so the world will know that God is one’*) is that the bells convey knowledge, spiritual awareness, and (presumably) comfort. Mercy.

‘Ring Them Bells’, to me, is a very pretty song, a careful and moving and earnest

performance that manages to express some of the pain and beauty of being alive and awake (open to feelings) in the body and consciousness of a late-20th-century man, a man like so many others who has read the Bible, and some poetry, traveled a little, and has found himself hoping that symbols of human faith like monasteries and bells might somehow have the ability to offer relief, if only by being seen or heard, to the many who are suffering here.

Increasingly, and especially since the release of *‘Love And Theft’* a few months ago as I write this, I feel sure that most of Bob Dylan's songs are written in a ‘stream-of-consciousness’ manner (as he has said at least twice about the *Oh Mercy* songs and once about *‘Love And Theft’*) in which language and images and phrases flow freely rather than being directed by some kind of conscious intent to make a statement (*‘My approach is just to let it happen and then reject the things that don't work,’* he said in 2001). This throws a monkey wrench into the natural tendency of commentators like me to interpret songs – that is, to attempt to determine the author's precise intent via analysis of the text. And Dylan's declaration that *‘nobody breathes like me’* and thus another singer *‘couldn't be expected to portray the meaning of a certain phrase in the correct way,’* although it does imply that there is a ‘correct’ way, does seem to deny that the meaning of a song can be grasped simply by reading (or hearing, in the absence of the author's intonation) its lyrics. No, he says, it depends significantly on the way the singer or speaker breathes.

But since I love ‘Ring Them Bells’ so much, and am so genuinely interested in

gaining understanding for myself and shedding light for others on the question of how this artist's great works of composition and performance come into existence and what they signify and add up to as a body of work, as an enduring contribution to human experience, now and henceforth, time out of mind, I cannot resist sharing with you what I have learned from my study of the text of 'Ring Them Bells', while acknowledging that although this may tell us something about the consciousness through which these thoughts and words streamed, still the 'meaning' of the song depends completely on what I or you or other listeners experience as we hear these words sung by this artist who breathed in this particular way that early winter morning in New Orleans in 1989.

The first words of the song, after the excellent piano invocation, are '*Ring them bells, ye heathen, from the city that dreams*'. I first heard this as '*you hear them*' rather than '*ye heathen*' and still find it difficult to get that first phrase out of my mind as I listen. I'm fairly sure he does sing '*ye heathen*', as all the published lyrics indicate, but I also believe his failure to lean into the word as he might have at another moment in his life is expressive of an accepting and empathetic, albeit ironic, view of nonbelievers at this moment of composition and performance (presumably two different moments, but they become one in the act of singing into the studio microphone). I've searched for a biblical or other use of the phrase '*the city that dreams*' that I might not have been aware of, and although I was amused to find instances on the Internet of both

present-day Jerusalem and New Orleans (!) being given that moniker by someone, the only use of a related phrase that I found (via *Bartlett's Quotations*) that strikes me as something Bob Dylan might have once encountered, and that might thus have helped the phrase bubble up in the stream of his consciousness when he wrote these lyrics, is a well-known poem by Matthew Arnold ('Thyrsis,' 1866) that refers to Oxford, England as '*that sweet city with her dreaming spires*'. Thus (speculating about the subconscious, mind you, not any conscious linkage or intent) '*ye heathen, from the city that dreams*' could be nonbelieving university intellectuals, who are still urged to '*ring them bells*' because we need all the help we can get.

After this verse, the persons beseeched to ring bells are Saint Peter, sweet Martha and Saint Catherine. Sweet Martha is easily identified, especially in the context of that verse's lyrics, as the sister of Lazarus and friend and contemporary of Jesus Christ. But looking in my one-volume encyclopedia for Saint Catherine led me to the unexpected conclusion that she and Peter were chosen (by the unconscious mind, presumably) not for the characteristics of their sainthoods but for the bell-holding edifices that bear their names. The Basilica of St. Peter's, Rome, is '*the principal and largest church of the Christian world*'. St. Catherine's Monastery is located at the foot of Mount Moses in Sinai, Egypt and does indeed look like a fortress ('*Ring them from the fortress*'). Dylan has traveled in this part of the world more than once, and it seems likely that he has seen St. Catherine's. It also seems likely to me that the mysterious

and charming ‘*from the top of the room*’ is (in characteristic Dylan form) a workable replacement for ‘*from the top of the hill*’ or something like that, either because the rhyme that came up for ‘hill’ wasn’t to his liking and then the pleasing ‘*for the lilies that bloom*’ (itself possibly derivative of Christ’s ‘*consider the lilies of the field*’) arose and sought a retroactive rhyme... or perhaps Bob vaguely remembered that St. Catherine’s is at the foot of a hill, not the top, and cared enough to revise (not in the studio but at the time of first writing; the circulating early sessions recording of ‘Ring Them Bells’ has exactly the same lyrics as the finished version).

In the spirit of ‘*Love And Theft*’ (and of course Dylan’s ‘folk process’ technique of theft of tunes and titles and phrases goes back to his earliest work as a songwriter), it is not surprising to learn (as I did from Michael Gray’s *Song & Dance Man III*) that there is an old Negro spiritual called ‘Oh Peter Go Ring-a Dem Bells’. My sense of it is that both ‘Ring Them Bells’ and ‘What Good Am I?’ reflect Dylan rediscovering ‘Chimes of Freedom’ in 1987 at the prodding of the Grateful Dead and subsequently finding himself wishing he could write another song like that (‘*Tolling for the aching ones whose wounds cannot be nursed/For the countless confused, accused, misused, strung-out ones and worse*’).

‘*Ring them bells sweet Martha/For the poor man’s son*’ certainly sounds to me and perhaps to most listeners like a reference to Christ. I was surprised to find that the phrase ‘poor man’s son’ does not seem to occur in the Bible, nor, oddly enough, is it in *Bartlett’s*. But via an Internet search I

found it in Shakespeare (*The Merchant of Venice* and *King John*). It is worth noting that Bob Dylan, who has been a highly successful coiner of phrases, is also a very skillful phrase-borrower. See, for example, most of the lyrics of *Empire Burlesque* and of ‘*Love And Theft*’.

Of course there are also freshly-minted phrases in ‘Ring Them Bells’. The wonderful couplet ‘*Oh it’s rush hour now/On the wheel and the plow*’ always sounds to me like a description of our historical moment, an acknowledgment of the triumph of technology. In the next verse, ‘*the shepherd is asleep... and the mountains are filled with lost sheep*’ (partially borrowed from the Bible) is an evocative portrait of modern man out of touch with his spiritual guides or Caretaker. Some commentators have asked whether Dylan (since this is the ‘*poor man’s son*’/‘*God is one*’ verse) is here expressing ‘*impatience with Christ for not returning immediately to remedy a “world on its side”*’. Um, yeah his subconscious mind might be, but please also note that in the Book of Ezekiel the Lord asks Ezekiel to prophesy against the shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves and not the sheep, and tells him, ‘*(the flock) were scattered, because there is no shepherd:... My sheep wandered through all the mountains, and upon every high hill.*’ A footnote in the *New Oxford Annotated Bible* says these shepherds are the kings of Israel who had misused their people and scattered them. This interpretation is obviously very consistent with the album’s opening message of ‘*We live in a political world...*’

The next track on *Oh Mercy*, improb-

ably, is just as powerful a performance and as good an example of Bob Dylan's genius as a creator of fiercely original and poignant, unforgettable songs. As noted before, producer Lanois says 'Man in the Long Black Coat' was '*written in the studio and recorded in one take*'. It is a very impressive piece of writing. The song opens with an evocative description of a scene that at first feels very peaceful and in which every detail immediately seems significant ('*Crickets are chirpin', the water is high/There's a soft cotton dress on the line hangin' dry*') but soon incorporates some violent weather (even though there's a '*window wide open*'): '*African trees bent over backwards from a hurricane breeze*'. The equivalent AABB lines in the first half of the last verse are again descriptive, mostly of nature: '*There's smoke on the water, it's been there since June/Tree trunks uprooted, 'neath the high crescent moon*'. These are very effective bookends, since the repetition of 'the water' confirms we're observing the same place, as do the uprooted tree trunks which are certainly consistent with trees bent over backwards from a hurricane breeze. For another nice touch, 'it's been there since June' suggests that the dramatic events described in the song occur at the time of the first verse and that their fallout is still present and visible (and tangible – '*feel the pulse and vibration*') by the time of the closing scene, apparently months later.

The image of '*the man in the long black coat*' is so striking (and repeated in all five choruses) that it lures the listener to focus on this figure and wonder about him (who is he? what does he symbolize?) even though the primary subject of the song is

the devastating loss experienced by its viewpoint character, presumably the husband of the '*she*' who '*went with the man in the long black coat*'. He doesn't speak in the first person, but we are inside his mind as he reviews the data: '*Somebody seen him*', '*Somebody said...*', '*Not a word of goodbye, not even a note*' and bewails the mystery, not of the '*man in...*' but of her abrupt departure: '*She never said nothing, there was nothing she wrote*'. He is justifiably distressed, though he tries to find understanding by also reviewing pop psychology ('*there are no mistakes in life, some people say*') and the sermons of the local preacher regarding the errors men (and women) make trying to follow their consciences. But still, '*It ain't easy to swallow, it sticks in the throat*'. So one assumes (consciously or unconsciously; the song reaches its listeners on both levels) that the '*somebody [who] is out there beating on a dead horse*' in the last scene is the abandoned husband, still futilely asking, '*Why?*' It's a song about loss, a brilliant and powerful song on a big subject, and since the death of a loved one is probably the most universal, and devastating, experience of loss, it is appropriate that the man in the long black coat sounds as though he might be Death... not that I'm saying he is, in this narrative, but that the universal power of the song lies in its ability to employ the metaphor of a man whose wife has run off with a mysterious stranger (whom, it is said, she approached and asked to dance) to stand for any person's experience of devastating, and inexplicable, loss. And as the somebody beating on a dead horse in the last verse is the

husband, so we can be sure the *'soft cotton dress on the line hanging dry'* is the wife's, is what's left of her in her former home on the day she left without a word of goodbye. The day of the hurricane.

What I referred to as *'a powerful yet subtle respiratory pulse'* in 'Ring Them Bells' is not subtle in 'Man in the Long Black Coat'. The first thing any listener notices in this vocal is the way Dylan gives the narrative and the song a unique and bizarre shape and rhythm by leaning into every fourth or fifth word as if it were the whole point of the story and he doesn't want you to miss it. *'Crickets are chirpin', the water is high/There's a soft cotton dress on the line hangin' dry...'* In the third couplet of this verse – *'Not a word of goodbye, not even a note/She gone with the man in the long black coat'* – this has the intriguing effect of making *'gone'* rhyme with *'long'*. In the next couplets (start of the second verse) he manages to emphasize just the syllable *'out'* in *'outskirts'* and five words later just the *'in'* part of *'into'*. This highlighted *'out'* and *'in'* followed by a highlighted *'stopped'* does indeed feel like breathing. It's hypnotic, and no, nobody else breathes or sings quite like this. The tune is in waltz time, and at times Dylan, like the partner who *'leads'* in dancing, seems to be emphasizing the *'one'* of *'one, two, three'* by leaning into particular words. It feels as though he's conducting the music, the band, with his voice, while simultaneously calling attention to key elements in the story he's telling. His gift for phrasing puts a unique and rather spooky character into the (leaned-on) word *'dust'*, which is then echoed meaningfully in the

preacher's word *'must'* in the following verse. The singer is having a ball with his phrasing throughout the song, and somehow the pulse he creates by stressing every fourth or fifth word seems to give him the space for this; he takes charge of the story, the flow of language, and as a result gains enormous freedom to be present inside each vowel and consonant, to tell more of the story and paint more details into each scene via tiny expressive gestures of phrasing and breathing. The pulse isn't subtle nor meant to be, but the vocal effects it makes possible certainly are. None of this technique could possibly be communicated in transcription or a musical score, so we can understand Dylan saying he doesn't expect others to attempt to sing his songs... An example of how hard this song would be for any other singer to do *'without bumping into other phrases & altering the mood, changing the understanding'* is the vocal sleight of hand whereby the word *'sometimes'* manages to finish the phrase *'and it's true sometimes'* while simultaneously starting the phrase *'sometimes you can see it that way'* with a different nuance in each case, so that *'it's true sometimes'* is friendly and affirmative and *'sometimes you can see it that way'* is skeptical and close to hostile. We'll encounter more of this sort of trickery in the next performance, *'Most of the Time'*.

I find it intriguing that 'Man in the Long Black Coat' was (reportedly) recorded in one take. Listeners often speak of *Oh Mercy* (approvingly or critically) as an example of a producer's 'sound' dominating an artist's album. John Bauldie: *'It often seems as if it's as much a Daniel Lanois*

record as a Bob Dylan record.' Clinton Heylin: *'That Oh Mercy's alluringly subterranean sound was more a product of Lanois's sensibility than Dylan's seems indisputable. One listen to Lanois's own album Acadie should clinch the matter.'*

But surely the track on *Oh Mercy* that most conveys the 'swampy' sound and feeling of Lanois's *Acadie* and of the Lanois-produced Neville Brothers album *Yellow Moon* is 'Man in the Long Black Coat'. This is most striking in the haunting 69-second musical introduction to the track, which derives much of its sound and mood from Dylan's harmonica passages. According to the album sleeve, the only musicians playing on this song are Lanois on dobro (a resonator guitar often used in bluegrass and sometimes in folk blues), Lanois's production assistant Malcolm Burn on keyboards, and Bob Dylan on 6- and 12- string guitar and harmonica. Certainly Burn and Lanois as players and Lanois's unusual studio setup and the New Orleans locale are common links between *Oh Mercy* and *Acadie* and *Yellow Moon*, but if indeed 'Long Black Coat' was recorded in one take (one wonders if one of the two guitars Dylan is credited with having played might have been overdubbed), surely the unique and beautiful sound of the instrumental track must be primarily an expression of the personality and will power and presence of the de facto musical director of the take, who can only have been Bob Dylan during a live, one-take-only performance. He was attracted to the blend of music Lanois had been exploring during his Louisiana residency, and had been at a *Yellow Moon* session and had

probably already heard some of *Acadie* in some form, and very likely what he'd heard helped inspire his recent writing of this song. And then there's the fact, evident to any listener, that the 'feel' of this track is already present in Dylan's harmonica playing during the first moments of the take. So I argue (thus disputing Heylin) that the sound of 'Man in the Long Black Coat', and by extension *Oh Mercy* as a whole, while certainly characteristic of Lanois, can best be perceived as a collaboration between two (or three?) powerful personalities with strong and original (and convergent) musical ideas and ambitions at this particular moment in their lives and creative careers. I've spoken before of Dylan's evident ability to *'use the unwieldy gravitational pull of his presence to awaken the collective genius of a handful of musicians, in service to the music and the artist/bandleader's internal vision.'* Dylan as a creative artist works with the elements available to him and attractive to him at the moment, and often succeeds in inspiring his coworkers (the players he's with) to rise to the occasion in spite of or because of his usual inability or unwillingness to articulate what he wants them to do. I believe Aaron Neville was alluding to this sort of musical co-creation when he said (to a British music paper) about watching Dylan record *Oh Mercy*: *'He certainly knows how to achieve that intense chemistry that makes his work so unique.'*

The Heylin Interview

Clinton Heylin talks to Ellen Bernstein

Clinton Heylin: When did you first meet Dylan?

Ellen Bernstein: Tell me, when was the 'after the flood' tour with the Band – was that '74?

CH: '74.

EB: 1974.

CH: And you were working for Columbia at the time?

EB: Yes, I was. (pause) This is really going to stretch my powers of remembrance! Yes, I was working for Columbia. I was running the A&R office in San Francisco.

CH: This was at the end of the tour?

EB: Whenever the Oakland date was, I don't know when the Oakland date was...

CH: February 11th.

EB: Was it February 11th, seriously? (laughs)

CH: Yes, February 11th, 'Maggie's Farm' in the encore. I know all that stuff.

EB: OK, well this was just a few days before that then. I was living in Sausalito in a really great place, up in the hills. It was gorgeous, with a beautiful view of the bay. And Bill Graham had a party at the Trident for Bob, which was just down the hill from my house. I don't remember if Bill had invited me or not but somehow I got invited to the Trident. I had lived with Bill for, like, a year and a half when I first came to San Francisco in 1972, so it would have

surprised me if he had invited me, but somehow I got invited to this party at the Trident.

The Trident was this restaurant right down on Bridgeway which is the main street of Sausalito, it was kind of out on a pier and it was the quintessential flower-child restaurant, it was like, all this organic cuisine and all these beautiful waitresses in flowing dresses and long hair, everybody was beautiful. It was where the most beautiful women in Marin County went, they were just, you know, to die for.

So, I don't remember why I got invited to this party and I don't really remember much about the particulars of the party except for the fact there were more beautiful women there than I've ever seen at any party, every gorgeous woman in Marin County was there for this party for Bob Dylan. So I didn't figure I would even meet him that night. It's not that I thought I was an unattractive girl, but it was like, 'this is major league here, major league stuff'.

I remember getting a little bit drunk, not like plastered or anything, but I was sitting with some friends, you know. I can't remember what I was drinking, maybe wine or mixed drinks, who remembers that? And it was literally like he kind of just appeared sitting next to me, just kind of showed up. And I was a little out of it and so I didn't really realise that it was him sitting next to me. I just started talking with someone who was talking to me, but eventually – I wasn't so out of it that it didn't dawn on me that this was Dylan. I have no recollection whatsoever of what he said or I said or anything like that. All I know is that the next thing that happened is that we

were walking up to my house, which was up the hill. It was a beautiful night in Sausalito, it was cold, but it was nice. I do remember that we stayed up all night playing backgammon.

CH: Was he any good? (laughing)

EB: He was very good, yeah. Very good – but I was good too. He was great fun, lots of fun, much funnier than I thought he would be, and a really good backgammon player. Obviously – I was a single, 24 year old girl – the attention was very flattering. The next day was the concert at Oakland, and we'd literally stayed up all night, so I couldn't figure out how he was going to play a concert, and I don't remember how he got back into town, whether I took him or not – but he said, '*You should come, be with me at the show tonight*'. I don't remember the particulars of it but I do remember being onstage. Not, like, in centre-stage of course but at the side and it was great.

CH: And he played two shows that day.

EB: Yeah, and so I was there for both. I was onstage and it was fantastic. I can't remember what hotel it was in San Francisco that they were all staying at, but I went back there and I pretty much figured – I think they left the next day – that that would be it. That we'd just had one really fun time together. We'd had a great time together and I really liked him a lot but reality is reality.

But I heard from him fairly quickly, he called me about a week or so later.

CH: He knew you worked for Columbia at the time?

EB: Yeah, and later. When did *Blood on the Tracks* start recording? You wouldn't know that?

CH: September, so that was quite a big gap – about seven months.

EB: Wow, I guess we must have spent a lot of time together. This is the stuff I don't remember. I did at that point go and visit him. He wanted me to come to Minnesota, and I went and visited him in Minnesota. This was when all the kids were little, all running around, little children. I have pictures of all of them as babies, little young things, darlings, sweet kids, really really nice kids, all lots of fun.

CH: And Marie must have been there?

EB: She wasn't there.

CH: Oh, she wasn't there?

EB: No, there was Jessie, and Sara and Jake and Samuel.

CH: Just Dylan's kids.

EB: Yeah, those four. They were really good fun. I would cook and we would run around. He was really at his best then, there. He was at his most comfortable.

CH: This was the farm in Loretto?

EB: Yeah, with his brother's house just down the road, it was very 'in formation' at that point. He had a studio, a painting studio, out in the fields and the house was far from fancy. It was just lots of kids riding bikes around, in the middle of nowhere. Really, really fun and he was very relaxed there. And that's where and when he was writing *Blood on the Tracks*.

CH: And obviously Sara wasn't there, was there any sense of 'where's Sara'?

EB: No. It felt like 'don't ask don't tell', it just wasn't ever discussed and I was 24 years old, I was a very young 24 year old, not like today's 24 year olds. I mean kids of 24 today are grown up, I was 24 and it was still the remnants of the 60s, because it was just the

early 70s and I was very naive in a lot of ways. I was a girl from Ohio and I hadn't been around a lot, I had lived in San Francisco for two years, other than that – I grew up in Ohio so I was not terribly sophisticated and this was brand new stuff to me. I hadn't been around a lot at 24, so I never thought to ask: 'so what is going on with your wife?' First of all I didn't want to get married, or anything, I was certainly not interested in that, so there was no reason really to ask. And I wasn't being asked to leave and go any place.

CH: And David, his brother?

EB: Yes, he lived just down the road with his wife and they were very accepting. Very lovely, couldn't have been nicer.

CH: You say about the painting. Obviously, Dylan had been doing this work with this painter, Norman Raeben, in New York. Did he ever talk about that?

EB: Not that I recall, but it doesn't mean that it never happened, I just know that it was a really nice room and he would go out there and work in it occasionally, but mostly he would do his writing early, I think it was just early in the morning he would write. And then materialise around mid-day. Come downstairs and eventually, during the day, share what he had written.

CH: And when he shared the stuff – obviously I know about the notebook – it wasn't in the notebook at that point, was it?

EB: No, it was in the notebook, but he would play it and ask me what I thought. It was always different, every time he would just change it and change it and change it, constantly. You definitely had the sense of this mind that never stopped.

CH: Certainly there is that remarkable

thing in the notebook about the 'Idiot Wind' that goes through all these huge, huge changes.

EB: That was one I remember he changed a lot, all the time, whole verses would come and go. It was a real organic process for him.

CH: And what was your perception of what the material was about? I mean the material was very, very close to the bone. What was your perception of Dylan's state of mind at the time?

EB: I don't recall thinking about it, but that doesn't mean that I didn't, I mean I was more impressed with just the level, you know, the remarkable creative capacity of his mind. Since he was treating me really well and he was a very loving, very caring, loving person and lots of fun to be with, I didn't tend to analyse what his state of mind was or why he was doing this stuff. Clearly it came from someplace inside him and he was the creator of it. I was much more involved in the appreciation of knowing someone who had that kind of ability to express himself and how interesting it was to see it in process and be a part of the process, no matter how small. So I am sure, obviously – what do you write about? You write about what you know, you write about who you are.

CH: It is interesting that Dylan said, shortly after the album came out, about people enthusing about the album: *'I find it hard to understand people who can enjoy that kind of pain'*.

EB: Yeah, well, I think he is always in some measure of pain. It just depends how close to the surface it is at the time.

CH: You mean, just existence?

EB: Yeah, existence and being that creative. I mean I think that that kind of artistic genius goes hand in hand with demons. Have you seen any of the stuff about William Styron lately – these things about his depression? He wrote this really profound book about his depression, his experience with it and they did an HBO special on it too. He has spoken about the people throughout the history of art and music who have been tortured by depression and many, many deeply creative people. Van Gogh is just a tip of the iceberg, it seems to be coupled with demons.

CH: And the interesting thing also is the stage fright. People who are hugely creative are terrified to get in front of their audience and the shyness thing. People who are able to do and yet... My perception was that Dylan was a very shy person.

EB: I think he's shy, I think he is also generally uncomfortable in his own skin, I think he is uncomfortable. That is why when he was on the farm he was the most comfortable I have ever seen him because no-one is around that he probably felt was looking at him, or wanting from him or something. There was just me, the kids, his brother and this beautiful place and he was in a state where he felt comfortable with his paints, his guitar, some food and you know.

CH: Yeah.

EB: He would get so excited. I would make this homemade granola, you know it was the 70s, anyway I would make this homemade granola with apricots, he just loved that. He thought it was so great that I could make this stuff, he loved it when people made things. I think I sewed him a black vest when I was there, I was into all that at

the time. He thought that was just fantastic.

CH: ‘Can you cook and sew, make flowers grow?’

EB: Yeah

CH: You know that line?

EB: Yeah. I did all that, don’t do much anymore. Ha Ha.

CH: So, there is also Dylan’s re-signing to Columbia. Were you involved in that on any kind of a level?

EB: No, not as far as I know, maybe I was.

CH: It’s just that you were working for Columbia and you know... Dylan never expressed his unhappiness with the sales of *Planet Waves* or *Asylum* to you?

EB: No.

CH: Were you with Dylan in L.A. when it was announced that he had re-signed to Columbia?

EB: No, I was in San Francisco. He would come up and visit me or I would come down and visit him. He had a house somewhere out in Malibu Canyon in addition to his other house, but it didn’t have much in it, not much more than a couple of mattresses. This big house – but it was just like a crash pad. I would come down and we would stay there and stay at some little place on the coast of Malibu, I don’t remember where it was. Then he would come up and stay in the house I was living in with two other women in Mill Valley.

He would take mandolin lessons, with David Grisman, when he was up there. I would drive him up there because David Grisman lived up in the hills and I do remember one time, and this was really awful. He drove to San Francisco in a van, I think it was a VW of some kind, and he had this incredibly beautiful guitar that

someone had given him. A gorgeous acoustic guitar and I see the guy’s face in my mind but I can’t remember his name... David... he made some albums, he wore round glasses...

CH: Blue?

EB: No, real Jewish guy. I can’t remember his name, even though I can see him. Anyway he had given him this guitar, and it was stolen from his van one night when it was parked outside the front of my house and it was really upsetting to him. And I remember we went around putting up notices trying to recover it. But I remember it being very upsetting for him. It was an amazing guitar, really amazing. Why he left it in the van I have no idea. I guess in Mill Valley you don’t do that kind of stuff.

CH: Well, there’s a story I tell in there about leaving the master reels from *Planet Waves* in the back of the van when he went to a gig in L.A. Which was worth tens of thousands, completely irreplaceable.

EB: You just don’t think about these things I guess.

CH: One with windows, not a secure van...

EB: It was while we were up there that we went and saw Shel Silverstein on the boat.

CH: I was going to ask you about that.

EB: It was really great. Shel was an artist I worked with up there. And he became a friend and he’s another mad genius, you know, completely insane.

CH: Uncle Shelby.

EB: Uncle Shelby. He lived in a houseboat on Gate 5 road, really great houseboat. The real 60s, plants, fabrics and all this. Shel liked all his creature comforts, so this was not some funky little boat, this was quite wonderful. And I’m not sure, I don’t

remember initiating getting them together, but I am sure I must have or otherwise it wouldn't have happened. And I took Bob down there and he played Shel every song on *Blood on the Tracks*, every single one and Shel just loved every song. What's not to love? It was great. Just absolutely loved it.

CH: It would have been great, a meeting and a half, because, obviously, Dylan had tremendous respect for Shel.

EB: And vice versa, and Shel was one of those people who, anytime you were with him, he would be writing on a napkin or creating something, his brain never stopped, this is why he never learned to drive because he knew he would be a dangerous person on the road, so he hitch-hiked. You know what he looks like?

CH: Yeah

EB: So it is amazing that he used to get rides! It was interesting to have these two kinds of minds together.

CH: Dylan unfortunately did learn to drive. I believe he is an extraordinarily bad driver.

EB: Yes, he was a really, really, really really bad driver. That was my experience. Maybe he has gotten better. I haven't driven with him for a long time.

CH: Apparently not, because his eyesight is bad isn't it?

EB: Mm Mm,

CH: And he doesn't wear glasses a lot of the time

EB: I don't remember, I don't think so, I don't remember ever seeing him in glasses, maybe he did wear them, I don't recall.

CH: Yeah?

EB: He was smoking a lot at the time, I don't know if he still smokes

CH: Oh yeah, not as bad as Joni Mitchell...

EB: Bad. Even after his heart thing, he still smokes?

CH: Oh, I don't know about the last six months.

EB: I wonder.

CH: You know, he went through a phase in the early 90s when he stopped but...

EB: He smoked a lot, I remember that.

CH: His drinking as well, seems to come and go.

EB: He wasn't drinking at the time I was with him. Much. Not really it didn't seem to be...

CH: Just wine?

EB: Yeah, and not excessive there wasn't any like alcohol feel to it.

CH: He looks wonderful in the photos from that period and there aren't many photos from then but he looks...

EB: Yeah, he looked good, he was in good shape except for the smoking. He was eating well and he was not drinking excessively and he seemed to be in pretty good spirits for a man who was obviously in that much pain. We had fun.

CH: 'You're Going To Make Me Lonesome' which is written for you?

EB: I guess, I guess.

CH: 'Ashtabula' I believe is a reference?

EB: Yes, that is the town where I was born. He thought that was interesting. The other reference I remember was when we were walking, out in the field somewhere, and I found a Queen Anne's Lace and he didn't know that is what it was called. I remember that because it was growing somewhere in Ohio where I knew it, so I said it was called 'Queen Anne's Lace' and he put that in the song as well.

CH: Why is it called Queen Anne's Lace?

EB: I don't know, maybe because it looks like a round very tall – I think its a weed – but it's a flower as well. It's got a big flat top to it and it looks like a piece of lace – like a doily or something like that. So I said: '*oh, there is a piece of Queen Anne's Lace*'.

CH: This was in Minnesota?

EB: Yes.

CH: I don't know whether its me, being overly ingenuous or whatever, but 'You're Going To Make Me Lonesome When You Go' seems to imply...

EB: No. I think that was just because I would come up there for long weekends and then I would leave at the end of the weekend. But I remember—you know that reference to going to Honolulu. I was planning a trip to Hawaii and I was living in San Francisco. So it was: Honolulu, San Francisco, Ashtabula—to put that in a line is so ridiculous, but it was very touching.

CH: Right, right.

EB: It was really funny.

CH: Its a beautiful song, you know.

EB: Yeah, really. It was very sweet. Very, very sweet and I was quite flattered, and I remember him playing it for me. It was very touching to have that kind of thing happen, it was really nice. It made it hard for the men who came afterwards. 'So what have you written for me lately?' (Laughs)

CH: But that clearly is also part of my perception of Dylan, that 'I wrote a song for you' idea as a binding...

EB: I wouldn't doubt it, if that's what he does, if that's what he writes about. It was just nice that it was significant enough in his life and in mine that he wanted to write something about it. I thought that was very sweet.

CH: And *Blood on the Tracks*, the actual writing of... In what way was the passage between the summer on the farm and that? Was it just simply a matter one day of upping sticks and flying to New York or...?

EB: You know I don't remember it that well, this is where it gets a little foggy with trips to LA, Minnesota, I don't really remember how we made preparation to go and do that, I do know that we had arranged with Shel to use his apartment in New York.

CH: Oh, right.

EB: That is where we stayed, I don't really have any real recollection of planning the trip and it was done fairly quickly, and he took care of a lot of the details. Because he wanted certain things done in a certain way, he wanted to be in a certain studio and work with Phil Ramone, and he wanted to start at a certain time, so he pretty...

CH: So, it was his choice, Phil Ramone?

EB: Yeah, and I helped here and there and helped to put some things together, it was so simple and he knew he had the songs, he knew what he wanted to record so it was just a matter then of going and doing it.

CH: Were you there when he went up and played the material for Mike Bloomfield?

EB: I'm trying to remember – because I know I was working with Bloomfield as well – I don't remember, I think so, but I just don't remember.

CH: And he lived in San Francisco?

EB: He lived in Marin County. I think so, but I don't have any specific recollection of it. It's not one of those things... We went around and he played it for a lot of people. He loved playing the stuff for people.

CH: Yes, he played for Crosby and Nash, in St. Paul didn't he?

EB: Yes. He just loved to play the stuff for people, so it wasn't that he was shy about it, he was interested in people's reactions to it. I remember the one with Shel and this other one, was it in Crown Heights in New Jersey? This was the other, wonderful story. I don't know if I told you this story, or Joel did or what. This is like a very strange, strange, bizarre coincidence although they say 'there are no coincidences'.

CH: (Laughing) Somebody says that.

EB: So, just a little bit of background and you can follow this: My mother also grew up in Ohio and she also had a best, best, best friend, this woman was her best friend until the day this woman died. She had a son, and her son was this strange and smart tortured kid who is probably now in his mid 50s. He, at some point in his life became a Hassidic Jew, and called himself Eliziah. We knew him as Rusty. I never kept track of him, or what had happened to him, but I knew he had become an Hassidic Jew. When Bob and I went to New York to do *Blood on the Tracks* he wanted to go and visit this friend of his in some Hassidic neighbourhood, I think it was in Crown Heights. But I can't really remember. It was some place in New Jersey and we had to drive there. He was driving and it was really scary. Here we are going to some neighbourhood that we had never been there before and it was really hard to find. But he really wanted to go and see this friend of his, this guy, and we get in, I think it was a rental car, I don't remember if it was his car or a rental car..

Anyway we got in some vehicle, we drive, and we get lost and finally we come to this neighbourhood and we find this guy's

house, and I can't remember his name, but, we pull up into the driveway, and there are several people sitting in the front yard and this friend of his is there, with his sister and his sister's husband who happens to be my cousin!

CH: (Laughter)

EB: My cousin! My cousin is married to this guy's sister, and it was like: 'Rusty!' and he replies 'Eliziah'. Which was unbelievable to me. I thought 'Wow, this is a big coincidence'. So we go in and we have a big meal with this family of Hassidic Jews and this is when he was becoming fascinated with all that.

CH: He talked about it?

EB: Yes, he found it really interesting. It was very spiritual and very deep. The other thing I thought was interesting was that everything is prescribed, what you do at the same time every day, it's all laid out for you. After the meal we went out in the backyard and he played the songs for these friends of his. So there he is playing for this group of Hassidic Jews. It was great, it was really wonderful.

CH: And they thought?

EB: They loved it, it was great music. But it was a real unusual experience to have before the recording of the album, especially to run into this relative of mine, so that was the other story. It's funny how some things are so clear in my mind and other things I don't remember at all.

CH: The human memory is extremely selective, hence the reason you have to talk to five people about one event...

EB: ...and you get five different stories.

CH: Yeah, well you get 30 percent of the story from each of them hopefully.

EB: Right. Then you have 150%.

CH: And you have to take the 50% out.

EB: So what else can I tell you?

CH: There is this gap between the New York sessions and the new recording of the album. Did the relationship between you and Dylan – and I don't know if you want to answer this – fizzle out at that point?

EB: We became less involved.

CH: Right, did it seem natural or did it seem like external forces made that happen?

EB: You know, I didn't know, I was kind of clueless at that point as to what was going on. He was down here a bunch of the time and I was up there, trying to do my work and stuff and he wasn't terribly communicative. He wasn't real forthcoming with lots of information, you know. So I was left to do a lot of guessing, but it was definitely on the down swing, at that point.

CH: You weren't going down to Malibu?

EB: Not often, and when I did, it didn't have the same flavour as it did before.

CH: Do you think that actually recording the album was an exorcism?

EB: Oh God, I wouldn't have the vaguest idea, I think... I don't know

CH: It just seems that, having recorded this remarkable testimony to what was going on in his head at that point, things should start to...

EB: I do remember at some point the press had written about the names of the musicians who had come in and played on the record and that had made him very unhappy. He didn't want any information going out. And I remember him calling me, not coming up to me directly and saying to me did you give this information out,

which of course I didn't, I would never, if someone tells me don't give information, then I don't give information.

CH: Right, absolutely.

EB: But he kind of was in, trying to find out if I had without asking me.

CH: That's Dylanesque!

EB: I remember thinking this was really weird. 'He thinks that I've done this thing and I haven't'. I felt really bad about it because he didn't trust that I would do what I said, which is not talk to people about who played on the record. It was just too hard with the distance and I didn't know what was going on.

CH: And at that point it must have started to leak out that the songs were about the break-up?

EB: You know I didn't really pay much attention to that, but I always assumed that they were.

CH: But I meant in terms of the media, there must have been a certain...

EB: Yeah, I don't remember, I just remember this thing about the musicians, but everybody at that point still wanted to know what was in every song, what was in the words, what was the information, what were the details.

CH: But 'Idiot Wind' having that amazing: '*Someone's got it in for me, they're planting stories in the press*'. You wonder if that is actually a projection forward, is he actually thinking '*this is what is going to happen*'?...

EB: No, more of a reflection, you know they always had been, why wouldn't they continue to?

CH: Also the album, there is a lot of stuff about fate in the album. About, 'there is no such thing as a coincidence'. That clearly

seemed to be a whole thing. Did – this is a very off the wall question – you ever watch old movies with Dylan?

EB: I don't think so, I don't have any recollection of it, we didn't watch a lot of TV or anything.

CH: It's just that there are references in the album you know, I go, 'he's been watching a lot of old movies'.

EB: I don't think so, the TV wasn't a big presence.

CH: So when the Minneapolis recording happened were you – to use the expression – 'out of the picture' at that point?

EB: Pretty much.

CH: And you didn't know that that it had happened?

EB: I knew it was going to happen, and I felt bad, he was going to touch them. I hated it, hated it. It was really painful to me, because I thought they were perfect in all their imperfection.

CH: Absolutely. You didn't speak to Dylan at the time about recording it?

EB: No that was totally, that was something he just went off and did. When he wanted to do something and wanted something to be a certain way, he had achieved that place in his life where he could go and just do it and people didn't question, people didn't stop him and people didn't whatever. He was given free range to express his vision, and I think that means that you don't necessarily always have the best judgement. I think that I would have definitely advised against it. I'd have said 'There is no reason to do this because you're certainly are not going to make anything better'. Maybe he knew I would say that and he wasn't interested in my opinion. There is an old saying

that I love that says: *'if two people agree on everything then one of them is unnecessary'*.

(Laughter)

And I would not have agreed with that decision, I still don't.

CH: Well supposedly it was his brother that was very keen on it.

EB: Wanting to use the studio and all that? Well I don't know about that.

CH: Also, there was a masking process going on, re-writing things to hide some of the more naked...

EB: I don't know if it was maybe to hide, or whether it was just to rewrite it because he is always rewriting everything and who knows why? I don't know what that process is about, why you rewrite something. Maybe you like it better the other way, maybe you don't.

Its easy to always ascribe meaning to everything. But I do remember one time – it is a moment that sticks out – when he wrote 'Jack of Hearts', and he said: *'Everyone is going to wonder who the Jack of Hearts is'*, he says: *'I have no idea who it is.'* And he thought that was kind of amusing, I don't know if he was just joking with me, or whether this was really, you know... When you know everyone is going to analyse everything in what you write and wonder who everybody is, sometimes you just write about nobody.

CH: Well, the Jack of Hearts, have you ever seen the tarot cards? The Magus card, the magician, is holding in his hand two flowers, the lily and the rose.

EB: But you know he said: *'I have no idea who it is.'*

CH: And meeting up with Dylan after that? Joel said you did run into him at one point.

EB: We have run into each other more than once. He wrote me a series of letters from the farm that I still have. Someone offered me a lot of money, and I said: *'What, are you crazy? You don't sell personal letters, it's crazy. You must be insane. It would really be terrible.'*

And we have spoken on the phone, I think the last time I saw him was about a couple of years ago. I told Joel I'm going to go and see the concert here in May, I'm going to take my sons and I would really love him to meet my sons.

CH: Yes, that would be a kick

EB: I have a son going to college in September so, I think it would be really fun for me to introduce them to him.

CH: Yes, totally.

EB: Because my husband still refers to him, to my boys, as *'the man who was almost your father'*.

(Laughter)

EB: And I am like: *'I don't think so'*. I wasn't interested in having babies at that point.

CH: Yeah, I mean was there a sense at the time that you knew it was going to come to an end?

EB: Again I was so young, I didn't know, I didn't know from anything. I wasn't interested in permanent relationships, I knew I was having a wonderful time and that he was really interesting and fun and smart and creative and it was a great period in my life. I didn't think much beyond that.

CH: Is there a sense in which you feel that Dylan has changed, in the contact since?

EB: Probably not, no, my experience with human nature is that once you become... I think that your formative years are very, very early, and then you are who you are.

Certain modifications occur, but you are who you are. I would doubt that he has changed very much. I remember, I wouldn't say I became re-involved with him, but I do remember we did spend time together when he was rehearsing one of his tours, Rolling Thunder? It must have been, he was rehearsing in this building in Maine Street in Santa Monica.

CH: Right.

EB: And he had his own room set up upstairs, so I would go and visit him at the rehearsals then stay on afterwards. I don't remember what year that was though. I really don't.

CH: Well, Rundown could be anytime between '77 and '82.

EB: And I went out on a couple of those dates, as well. Then he sat at some event at the table behind me, it must have been six or seven years ago. One of these dressy events, that I couldn't figure out what he was doing there. And he was with some woman who had been sort of, B/C level star in, probably, the late 60s early 70s; some actress, but I don't remember who.

CH: Not Sally Kirkland?

EB: No. No, but someone like that you know. But someone who was a little bit over-weight, dressed a little tacky, not, not like a...

CH: Sylvia Miles

EB: No, not Sylvia Miles – it was younger.

CH: Yeah, I was going to say...

EB: I don't remember who it was. But it made me think that he hadn't grown up, you know. And at that point I had.

CH: It's interesting you saying that there has been a contact over the years. Again that seems to be a pattern, that Dylan

doesn't seem to drop off the face of the Earth for people that he has been close to, that there is this sporadic contact.

EB: But I also think that he has this pattern of not being able to forge purposeful, permanent relationships. I don't even know that it is serial monogamy, I don't think that in the period of time that him and me were together that there were other women, I think that he was definitely coming off of his marriage. And I was young and he was young too, in 1974. Then I think that he really has had a lot of relationships with a lot of woman over the years, but there seem to have been some that have been around through others, and things like that... now that kind of thing would never interest me.

CH: But we all like to think that someone carries a torch – for want of a better phrase – for a while, do you think that there is that kind of residue?

EB: I think that anyone who has ever had an intimate relationship with anyone, likes to know that that person still thinks about them, or that they had a real impact in that person's life.

CH: Do you also think that that was a period when Dylan was, well 'happy' is maybe not the word...

EB: God, I like to think so... (Laughs)

CH: That he thinks of that spring and summer as...

EB: I don't know, I really don't know. We had a lot of fun and it was a good creative period for him.

CH: An extraordinarily creative period.

EB: And he seemed to be very close with his children and so I guess if you have a good relationship, and a good relationship with

your family and you're doing good creative work, why wouldn't you think of it as a good time? That is a lot of good stuff, that's a lot of good things.

So it seemed to be a time when he was renewing himself and I was happy to have been a part of it, because it was a good time for me too, a really good time for me.

CH: You said, when we were talking about the sessions, about meeting Mick Jagger.

EB: And staying up all night with him?

CH: Yes, that.

EB: You would think that I had died and gone to Rock and Roll heaven, drinking with him all night. That was fun, it really was – and heady stuff for a 24 year old.

CH: When you were in New York, I just wondered whether... up to that point - because you had been away from everyone then coming to New York - did you notice, obviously Dylan was a centre of attention ...

EB: Yes, but it was really great, he was very comfortable in New York. He had lived there so much and knew so many people. I remember he did take me to Gerde's City and we were staying down in The Village and it was fun really, really great fun.

CH: And, yeah, Shel's place was in The Village.

EB: Yeah.

CH: I wonder why he didn't stay at his own place because he still had it then?

EB: I don't know, I think we went by there, I have some remembrance sense of going by there, neighbours that I met. But again this was a really long time ago. I'm now about to be 48 and this happened when I was 24, so...

CH: One last question then, just a general question about your sense of who Dylan

was or is. What do you think are the good and the bad sides?

EB: Well the good side I think speaks for everybody, they see the good side, they see the work. When you become an adult, your work is important to you. What you produce is important to you, whether it's you or me or him. I think he was given a gift and he has given the gift back, so that certainly is the best part.

The only bad, I have nothing bad to say about him personally. I hope that he is happy, and finds some peace in his life. But I think, for him, that there has always been a struggle to reconcile who he is, personally, with who he is creatively and to try and find some kind of peace and happiness in his life, some kind of quiet place and I don't think he has allowed himself that. I don't know that he has now because as, I said, we have been out of touch for a long time now. But I would like to think that it is never too late. Someone said that it is never too late to have a happy childhood, and I think that is not necessarily true, but he can be so enormously proud of what he has done and hopefully slow down enough to appreciate it.

CH: And the spiritual quest, do you think he has ever found answers?

EB: No, I think that the spiritual quest... it isn't ever about finding answers, it is again about finding some kind of peace in your life. Although it is something that is very common when you look at people who have gone on this type of path. Certainly in the prominent people we know, it is people who have everything they thought they needed to make them happy, they have fame, money, success and they have all

these things and they are still not happy. They can't figure out why, the answer can't be in going after, more fame, more money and more success so they have to look somewhere else. So, 'where is that somewhere else'?

There can be this attempt to find it in something that is just about continuing to search, to grow. And I think it is very healthy. I'm one of those people who doesn't laugh and trivialise it when Madonna starts to study the Cabala. I think 'why not, why shouldn't she?' She most probably needs to learn some of the lessons in there and whether she studies the deep version and studies with a Rabbi every day for months or whether she goes to classes once a week – at least she is not just looking to buy her next Versace dress, she is trying to figure something out and I like that. I think that's very good and I think that is a part of Bob that... He is always very smart and very curious, very analytical. To go after that, I think that is most probably one of the most healthy things he can do, just to continue that.

And I hope I get to see him at a show, it'd be really fun.

CH: Well, *'if you see him, say hello'*.

by Manuel Vardavas

'Pretty Good Stuff'



The Genuine Never Ending Tour Covers Collection 1988-2000

As soon as one sees the sticker on the front of the box proclaiming '162 performances and 138 songs' it is clear that this is exactly the kind of mammoth project that could never be conceived and executed by an official label. Sony would never have entertained the thought that such a concept could be viable and, to be fair, for an official release this would have been tantamount to commercial suicide.

Yet this is exactly the kind of project guaranteed to send committed Dylan fans into ecstasy. In one lavish release the Scorpio label has collected and released a body of work which not only gives the listener the chance to hear all those songs which Dylan has performed which would otherwise have slipped through the net, but also provides tremendous insight into the nature of Dylan's travelling roadshow since the summer of '88.

Touring is the result of one of two options. Either you have 'new product' to promote, or you have a genuine desire to play music to people. Obviously the two may sometimes overlap because of the relationship between album sales and media exposure: the higher the profile of the artist at the time of an album release, the more the chances of sales taking off beyond the level of the hardcore fan base who would have handed over the cash whatever the 'product' was. In Dylan's case, the motivation is easy to comprehend. No one tours regularly for fourteen years (with no sign of

calling a halt) without wishing to be on the road; certainly no artist of Dylan's stature. However, some degree of change and spontaneity to the never-ending live performances must be injected over time, or else the performer will surely lose interest; and the audience will inevitably lose theirs soon after.

As evidence of this relationship, it has been the inevitable course of events that, after the fans came to realise that Dylan on the road would not now be a rare occurrence, much of the post-gig chat amongst fans has concerned the appearance in the set-list of whatever rare cover it was that the man sang that night. As boredom set in to the shows, so it was mirrored by the fans' reaction. The exodus of weary fans in the direction of the bar that coincides with the opening lines to 'Tangled Up in Blue' will be halted not by 'Like a Rolling Stone' but by the likes of 'She's About a Mover' or 'Big River'. Dissenting voices would not be heard as Dylan proceeded to endlessly crucify 'All Along the Watchtower' throughout the Nineties, but as soon as 'Moon River' reared its ugly head everyone had an opinion which had to be made public. Accordingly, when rumours began to circulate in early 2000 that a cover versions box was to be delivered by the Scorpio label, whose reputation was at an all-time high following the three Genuine Bootleg Series releases and the Genuine 66 box, Dylan fans were ecstatic that no longer would they have to make their own compilations of this rare material. Record company market analysts would no doubt consider the venture a total folly, but then again, what do they know about music with intelligence?

The vast size, and time-frame, of the material precludes a detailed track-by-track breakdown of the nine discs. It is worth noting however that, although only a handful of songs have not appeared on Dylan bootleg cds previously, some 38 performances in total are newly released. In every instance the best quality recording has been utilised, though some exist only in such poor quality that they are added at the end of the theme-organised discs for completeness only. Needless to say, some performances are stunning. Some can be labelled 'total crap'. Some will engage the listener because of the song's 'unknown' factor but will fade away without ever making much of a lasting impression, but this is not always Dylan's fault. Since G.E. Smith departed it has often been the case that the band has been no more than a functional group of musicians, whose contribution to the shows has merely been to provide an all-purpose safety net. Whether this is due to their own ineptitude, as one might have assumed in the Nineties, or whether Dylan's instructions preclude any moments of inspiration, is unclear. The relatively recent employment of Charlie Sexton, Larry Campbell and David Kemper should have provided a much-needed boost to the shows. They are musicians of a higher calibre than those they replaced, but the fact that their influence has usually been minimal leads one to conclude that they are only following instructions.

The idea behind the box set was to categorise the songs (country, folk, blues, lounge-singer, etc.) onto seven discs, with one for rehearsals and another for alternate performances where significantly different

versions of the same song had occurred. With one exception (which we'll come to shortly) the songs were arranged in chronological order on each themed disc from 1988 onwards. Since in some cases there are a number of 'one off' covers where even the best tape is of less than normally acceptable quality, these songs were placed at the end of the appropriate disc. Also included in the box are two booklets; one with most of the lyrics, and the other cataloguing the tracks.

It is therefore most unfortunate that, even taking into account the sheer logistical size of the project, a number of flaws mar what could have been an outstanding artefact. 'My Blue Bonnet Girl' is erroneously credited as being track 18 on disc 6 but actually appears as track 21 on disc 8. It appears that, as the project fell way behind schedule, the track was hurriedly added after the original set was compiled and, in the confusion, ended up in the wrong place. Those familiar with the chosen performance of 'Golden Vanity' will know that a big fight breaks out in the middle of the song, making one query why, since the song is not unique to the show, another version was not used.

However, it is with the packaging that the major faults can be found. The preponderance of photos from the wrong period is inexcusable; enough said. The lyric booklet is also a total mess. The absence of an index is shoddy, matched only by the inclusion of irrelevant lyrics and commentary for songs that do not appear on the discs. Obviously no one checked that the material had been properly assembled. Nor was it spotted that Dylan performs the traditional 'Don't Let

Your Deal Go Down' and not Jerry Garcia's 'Deal'. As if all that wasn't enough, all the discs are not in stereo, but in mono. It is doubtful that this is the result of some kind of audio-purist 'back to mono' stance. Logic indicates that a major cock-up went down when the discs were pressed; and again no one checked.

Despite these faults, the box remains an important release with much to commend it. Probably without even realising it, in unleashing *The Genuine Never Ending Tour Covers Collection 1988-2000* on the world, the Scorpio label has released the perfect overview of the 'Never-Ending Tour'. While periodically breathing moments of genuine emotion into tired and lifeless shows, Dylan's, and also importantly the band's, performances of these tracks illustrate exactly what happens after too many years on the road.

So journey with Dylan and his motley crew as they wade through a myriad of songs. Listen to the man pull off some amazing vocal performances on 'Across The Borderline', 'This World Can't Stand Long', 'Friend Of The Devil', 'Homeward Bound', 'House Of The Rising Sun' and 'I Can't Be Satisfied'. Be amazed as Dylan breathes life into Van Morrison's 'And It Stoned Me' and 'Moondance'. Share the joke as they all stumble through 'Hey Joe', 'Dolly Dagger' and 'Dancing In The Dark'. Laugh incessantly as they rock the house with the riff-fest of 'My Head's In Mississippi' and 'Nadine'. Cringe as they murder 'The Harder They Come', 'Big River', 'Dust My Broom', 'Matchbox' and 'Blue Suede Shoes'. Cry as Charlie Sexton valiantly tries to save the embarrassing

'Not Fade Away'. Wonder just why they even attempted the likes of 'Help Me Make It Through The Night', 'The Dock Of The Bay', 'I'm In The Mood For Love' and 'Moon River'.

That is all.



London/Paris 1990 Anthology

For those fans who weren't able to witness the glory of '66, it had been a long wait. A generation had grown up since Dylan last found the groove. They'd been to the cavern that is the Earls Court Arena and seen the set-pieces of '78 and '81. They'd sat through the interminable disaster that was '84, and been confronted by the surly figure that arrived in '87. It's not that all these experiences were completely devoid of any merit (indeed the '87 shows were challenging to say the least, even if the band of the moment were totally unsuited to the task) but merely that the environment was always unsympathetic to say the least.

And so it came to pass that, shortly after the enthusiastic anarchy of the Toad's shows, the N.E.T. came to Europe, with the bonus for the fans that Dylan would not just

be a speck on the horizon. Lambchop would be able to get his message across with little difficulty. Over four nights in Paris and six in London his Bobness and the band would entrance the audiences by changing the setlist every night to an extent beyond anyone's expectations. By the end of the final performance at Hammersmith, which provides the core show of this release, those who were there returned to their lives convinced that they had witnessed something special.

This five disc CD-r anthology from Doberman is in fact a repackaged reissue of its earlier release *Those Were The Days* which, undeservedly, sank virtually without trace when it appeared. Now we have a chance to re-evaluate the gigs. Was our judgement of the moment clouded by the euphoria of the occasion? No it bloody well wasn't!

Listening to these tracks again after many years it is clear that they provide the perfect example of performances which are far from note perfect but which succeed simply through hitting the groove on the nail time and time again. G.E. Smith and Chris Parker play their socks off. Despite Tony Garnier being his usual uninspired self (functional, sometimes irrelevant), guitarist and drummer fuel the shows with energy seldom seen at Dylan shows of recent years. It makes you wonder what could have been had Charlie Sexton had been recruited ten years sooner. It doesn't matter that G.E. momentarily plays in the wrong key during 'Positively 4th Street'. Dylan is still moved to attack his harmonica in a fashion which reminds one of Townshend effortlessly tossing off the

guitar solo on the 'I Can See For Miles' single. It is so simple yet totally in sync with the moment. By the time of a truly majestic 'I Want You', Dylan sings with such an intensity that the crowd can barely contain themselves. The garage-rock 'Political World' maintains the momentum. After pausing for breath slightly during the unexpected 'You Angel You', 'All Along the Watchtower' provides the killer climax to the opening electric set. In later years we would have to sit through endless renditions of this great song when it metamorphosed into the tedious and turgid snore-fest that would become the unwavering third song of every gig; an early opportunity to head for the bar. In 1990 it is simply just over two and a half minutes of raw perfection. Wham, bam, thank you ma'am! Did you blink? Your loss! By the time we get to the closing 'Highway 61 Revisited' Dylan sounds almost out of control as lyrics shoot forth at breakneck speed, as G.E. plays slide as though his life was on the line.

And so it goes, track after track, disc after disc. Over the years, the N.E.T. has transformed much of Dylan's 'classic' material into mind-numbing mush, and yet here the likes of 'Like a Rolling Stone', 'Forever Young', 'Knockin' on Heaven's Door' and 'Maggie's Farm' sound vibrant and alive. As songs draw to a close, cries erupt from the fans of such gay abandon that you feel they believe this is better than sex (no doubt my editor would agree). Even 'John Brown', a candidate for the most reviled Dylan composition, never sounded so good, even though it is performed to the arrangement for 'Ballad of Hollis Brown'!

I am reminded of a gig some years earlier, also at Hammersmith, when Muddy Waters was playing support to Eric Clapton. The pupil was repaying a debt to his teacher. It became transparently obvious very quickly as Muddy growled his way through 'I'm a Man' and 'Hoochie Coochie Man' that we were watching a man of rare talent; someone who understood that it's not the notes that you play that count. It's the way you play them which is crucial. Of course the teacher blew the pupil away. It wasn't really a fair contest. When Neil Young plays with Crazy Horse you know he understands. When you hear these versions of 'One More Cup of Coffee', 'It Takes a Lot to Laugh', 'In the Garden', 'I Believe in You' and 'Tears of Rage' you just know that Dylan gets it as well.

Dylan was truly motivated, and it shows in all aspects; in his vocals, his harmonica and also his guitar playing, his choice of songs and their placement within the set, but above all in his total commitment night after night. In an ideal world someone would release a box set containing these ten shows in their entirety. Until such a labour of love becomes a reality this overview of Dylan down and out in Paris and London will do just fine. These discs should be found on the shelves of true music lovers all over the world and Doberman should be congratulated for making these tracks available once again. It really was as good as I remembered it.

What was it you wanted Bob? Just to be a bluesman. I'll go with that every time.



The Rundown Rehearsal Tapes

Imagine if one was fortunate enough to have access to Da Vinci's working sketches for the Mona Lisa. Art historians would salivate at the prospect of gaining some understanding of how the artist arrived at the finished work. However, the interest for most 'ordinary' people would no doubt revolve around whether that nose was the same. In the world of CD bootlegs, rehearsal tapes fulfil the same need. Those of us who care about such things love to find out just how songs evolved into the finished article, but would concede that as a listening experience most rehearsal tapes are a waste of time.

Most rehearsal tapes are, if the truth be told, interminably boring. Songs tend to break down and fall apart, and there are many possible reasons for this. Maybe the main protagonist is trying to play new songs to the other, often unsympathetic, musicians. Sometimes the songs are, in reality, embryonic noodling which will be quickly shelved when a better idea comes along. Often the band are bored shitless

waiting for the prima donna vocalist who has not yet arrived. Or that perennial favourite; too many drugs have gone down. In the case of these tracks from Rundown Studios in Santa Monica, from where Dylan conceived the 1978 world tour, this basic premise does not apply in the usual way. Although there are a few exceptions, arrangements have been worked out and the whole thing feels more like a series of extended soundchecks, rather than eavesdropping on a chaotic rehearsal.

Much like it did with its previous releases, the White Bear label has compiled the four discs worth from the best available sources. *The Rundown Rehearsal Tapes* represent a significant leap forward from previous CD releases of this material (*Darkness At The Break Of Noon*, *Moving Violation* and *Rundown To Maggie*). Material which had only circulated in mediocre quality is significantly upgraded here. In addition, the January '78 tape which comprises disc two, and spills over into discs one and three as well, is mostly uncirculated.

The earliest session (30-12-77) displays a concept in place, but, with Denny Siewell on drums and Jesse Ed Davis on guitar, its execution is loose; even downright ragged in places. Nevertheless, the inclusion of songs destined to be dropped before the tour ('Most Likely You Go Your Way', 'Leopard-Skin Pill-Box Hat' and 'If Not For You') confirm the importance of the session to collectors. The three tracks that follow, from early January 1978 with Bruce Gary now on drums, continue in the same vein. The appearance of 'You're Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go' again

provides an important document of a song later to be discarded.

Further into January the band has become a lot tighter with the arrival of Billy Cross and Steve Douglas. The cover of 'My Babe' provides some light relief as the songs which would form the core of future set-lists become more developed, with Dylan now far more in tune with the backing vocalists. As February dawns Dylan's vocals now sound like performances rather than run-throughs; hence the stellar version of 'Tomorrow Is a Long Time'. The third disc concludes with the three song tape that includes 'Repossession Blues'. Long unavailable on CD, this is included here in pre-Dolby form, and is all the better for it.

The final disc sees session bassist Jerry Scheff replace Rob Stoner after the Far Eastern leg of the tour. This change in personnel again contributes to a further subtle shift towards a more tightly structured backing; a process which would eventually culminate in the awesome barrage that hit the Fox Warfield Theatre in November 1979. Compare the version of 'Maggie's Farm' from January to that of April and the effect becomes clear.

Concluding disc four are the various related odd tracks from the period: the two takes of 'Stop Now' from May and June, the complete 'Coming From The Heart' dating from after the *Street-Legal* sessions, a soundboard recording of 'Am I Your Stepchild?' from Oakland, and audience recordings of 'Do Right To Me Baby' (from the final gig of the tour) and 'Coming From The Heart'. Finally, although uncredited anywhere in the package, we are also

treated to 'More Than Flesh and Blood' as sung by Helena Springs with the *Street-Legal* band. Although planned as a single release, and copyrighted along with several other songs in October 1979, it never materialised. Its inclusion here is justified on the grounds that it was played at the sound-check of 17th September 1978.

Unfairly dubbed in some quarters 'the Alimony tour', this period in Dylan's career remains an important link between the musical camaraderie of the Rolling Thunder tour and the sonic broadside of the religious years. It may not be the most creative tour Dylan has ever undertaken, but it must be seen as a necessary consolidation before moving on. For those who wish to follow the journey, these four discs are invaluable.



Dear Andy,

Have finally had a chance to sit down and read the parts of *Judas!* I'm ever likely to tackle, skimming through the unidentified remnant. So, firstly, congratulations for publishing the first serious Dylanzine since *The Telegraph* #40. The presentation is excellent, and the content is generally good, and in one instance excellent (Mick Gold's delightfully evocative resumé of Dylan's personal import). I also greatly enjoyed the return of Nigel Hinton, a fine writer who conveys his meaning with immediacy and panache, even if I found his critical faculties disturbingly awry. I have no problem with his perfectly natural desire to elevate Dylan's current work to a status Posterity will ultimately designate misguided. But, hey, turning the good into the great, the great into the transcendent, is no critical felony,

However, where Nigel loses all sense of those faculties – in tandem with Gavin Martin, whose article I found disappointingly reverential and littered with fauxes pas (Sounes as the source for Maria Muldaur's post-Newport comment – which I have no doubt he lifted from p214 of *BTS2*, but which ultimately derives from *Baby Let Me Follow You Down* – spare me pleeeeee) – is in his dismissal of Dylan's work in the eighties.

Whence does this bizarre compulsion to champion Dylan's last two albums at the expense of *Shot of Love*, *Infidels* and *Oh Mercy* come? I mean, c'mon, are said advocates seriously championing 'Summer Days' over – top of my head, not picking obvious masterpieces – 'Summertime', 'I and I', the much under-rated 'Something's Burning' or 'Shooting Star'? In a jotting-down-notes-over-a-latte moment, I scribbled those songs from the eighties and the nineties (which here ends on 911) that – off the top of my head – I consider genuinely great compositions. My personal list runs thus:

Eighties – Ain't Gonna Go To Hell [1st version]; Caribbean Wind [ditto]*; Every Grain of Sand*; The Groom's Still Waiting At The Altar*; Angelina; Summertime; Jokerman*; I and I*; Blind Willie McTell*; Foot of Pride; Someone's Got A Hold of My Heart; When The Night Comes Falling From The Sky [1st version]; Something's Burning, Baby; New Danville Girl*; Ring Them Bells*; Man In A Long Black Coat; Shooting Star; Most of the Time*; Dignity; Series of Dreams*.

Nineties– Trying To Get To Heaven; Not Dark Yet; Mississippi; High Water; Sugar Babe.

Oh, the items from the eighties asterisked are those songs that are (i) true masterpieces (ii) superior to anything from the nineties. Now feel free to argue the toss, but frankly this rewriting recent history is an insult to the great work Dylan produced in a troubled decade, championing little more than Dylan's commendable work-ethic at a time when the man is too busy hiding from low-flying shadows to address the night. Time will tell.

C. (Clinton Heylin)

Many thanks for using what must be close on a decade worth's of compliments, albeit a touch back-handed in places. Your eighties v. nineties point is fascinating, and I hope it provokes a response from any of those who do 'champion Dylan's last two albums at the expense of Shot of Love, Infidels and Oh Mercy'. Since I only partially fall into that camp, by (to crudely approximate what would be a lengthy explanation) thinking 'Love And Theft' of a similar quality to those you mention, though feeling no need to 'champion it at their expense' - I cannot really enter into the debate as you propose it. However, responses from the 100% 'advocates' are encouraged, as indeed are comments generally.

Dear Andrew,

I'd like to thank you for writing *Razor's Edge*, the first book to focus on the Never Ending Tour in detail. It was highly entertaining, and all the better for coming from the heart. The Never Ending Tour has been frustratingly overlooked in terms of published analysis thus far and the balance needs to be redressed. Artistically, the Never Ending Tour has been the most pioneering and rich experiment of Dylan's career to date, and the disdain which some of Bob's more high profile critics have shown for his recent efforts in the live arena has not helped. I hope *Judas!* may in some way contribute to furthering the appreciation of Dylan's latest live shows (especially post-1997), by people who don't have axes to grind.

The first issue of *Judas!* was, on the whole, a good read, and beautifully presented. There are two pieces of advice I would like to offer, however. What was so off-putting about *Freewheelin'* was its elitist clique-iness. There was far too much of who was friends with whom, how people got to shows, what they ate, where they sat etc. etc. None of this has anything to do with Dylan. If, as you claim in your editorial, it is the purpose of *Judas!* to be 'durable and authoritative' and 'more like a book than a fanzine', I hope all the back-slapping will be cut out. For example, if you want to escape the fanzine mentality, why print Glen Dundas's article 'On The Road Again', in which he admits the main reason he still goes to shows is to see his mates, not to see Dylan? If he's not interested in Dylan, your readers won't be interested in him. How can we respect the opinion about a Dylan show of someone who's only there to see his friends? It doesn't do Bob justice.

The second point I would make, is simply that the name of the magazine needs changing. Whatever the reasoning behind it, every issue will have a picture of Dylan on the front with the word 'Judas' printed above it. This implies Dylan is a 'Judas', since the title inevitably captions the picture. I find this implication offensive and wrong. The title undermines an otherwise valuable magazine.

Toby Richards-Carpenter

Thanks for your thanks, and for your letter. Given that you have already contributed an article to us, featured in this very issue, my next suggestion will seem very impertinent. Still, 'cheeky' is one of the nicest things I tend to be called, so I will press ahead regardless, and propose that if you think that: 'Artistically, the Never Ending Tour has been the most pioneering and rich experiment of Dylan's career to date' and that this has been 'frustratingly overlooked' (and the following goes for all who agree with your assessment) the best way to 'redress the balance' would be by sending appropriate pieces to Judas! for publication.

My never ending quest for contributions aside, your letter highlights an area of constant debate in the Dylan world. I refer to your follow up claim re those 'with axes to grind'. I have to say straight away that I am a bit concerned by that claim in any case and how similar views have been put to me verbally recently. So, I am going to use your letter for a launching pad to express a number of views of my own. Sorry about that, Ed's prerogative and all that; plus hopefully I will be kicking off a bit of a debate in these pages

What I referred to as 'the Dylan world' has grown increasingly intolerant in the last five years (since his illness, as it happens – though the subsequent release of Time Out Of Mind may make that only a coincidence) of anyone who does not write in admiration of everything the man does. (And it wasn't exactly tolerant of this to begin with!)

I noticed a backlash myself when I 'only' highly rated four songs on Time Out Of Mind and was not bowled over by the 1998 European tour. Perhaps it is because I have received such similar criticism to that others are now experiencing, or perhaps because I suspect I know and talk to the people you are referring to, but I think that the criticism is merely people honestly answering that question 'How Does It Feel?' They are reporting on how it feels for them and it so happens some of their opinions on some performances and recordings differ from that of you and many others.

Now this divergence of opinion may seem odd to some, but I don't find it surprising. Apart from anything else the subjectivity of the response to music itself makes it highly likely, but once you add the immediacy involved on commenting on a new release or the last show one attended or heard it becomes almost inevitable. The best way forward is to describe why you so rate the performances in question, rather than presume others are adversely critical because they have 'axes to grind', they may well just be relaying to you how they feel.

I have friends and indeed know some known Dylan commentators who do not rate 'Love And Theft' nearly as highly as I do. This doesn't upset me; I like to hear what their opinions are based on, I take on board why they don't enjoy it as much as myself. However, I kid you not, some people I know deliberately keep their non- or lesser admiration of it quiet because of the unsympathetic reaction expressing their opinions provokes. This cannot be healthy.

Actually, come to think of it, I know others who rate it even more than I do (which I'd have thought pretty difficult) but then that is 'allowed', no-one seems to get criticised for 'overliking' a new release or recent performance, but fail to be impressed at your peril! Notwithstanding that bias, there is always a danger both ways in instant critical judgements;

one can be too slow to appreciate the new path a familiar artist is treading, on the other hand – and we are all fans here, remember – we can get carried away in our enthusiasm.

I find the latter particularly true of live shows. Time after time I used to read the reviews on Bill Pagel's excellent tour site, and nearly every time was confronted with things like 'last night I saw the greatest performance ever by the greatest live performer ever'. Later, on hearing the shows, they did not sound anything out of the ordinary (if one can so describe so extraordinary an event as a Dylan show) compared to others from that particular leg or year, far less from throughout his career. The repetitive nature of this experience can lead to a kind of in-built resistance so that the next time one hears or reads: 'that was one of the best ever Dylan shows' one's immediate thought is: 'surely not'. This is not only because, by the very definition of the word, they cannot all be 'the greatest'.

Now, I admit to a great deal of hypocrisy here. 'Pot', 'kettle' and black truly spring to mind, as I have often been ridiculed for a similar if less extreme attitude in this household. (Incidentally, I mean no criticism of the reviewers or of Bill's site – it is after all a site for and by fans and the excitement of seeing Dylan live can be overwhelming.) Going to concerts causes an immediate reaction – be it pro or anti, in these days of almost universal praise and enthusiasm for what Dylan is doing, surely we can afford room for those who do not go along with that view to be heard without fear of vituperation?

Anyway, I have allowed myself to get carried away and have strayed into things you hadn't specifically said but reminded me of. So, before this becomes even more wide-ranging a reply, I'll return to your next, more specific, criticisms.

(Just before that though, while assuring you that we will try to avoid any 'back slapping' or so forth, I feel I should point out on behalf of the people behind Freewheelin' that to be thought of as 'elitist' would horrify them, I'm sure. This isn't the - nor is it my - place to debate that point in detail but I know that this isn't their intention.)

I am sorry you were against the inclusion of Glen Dundas's article. I don't think, though, Glen was saying he was not interested in Dylan per se, more that he wasn't as interested in all the travelling etc. that goes with touring at this particular time.

Now, I do not know how many years you have been following Dylan but I gather from the e-mails we have been exchanging that you are considerably younger than myself – by a generation's worth I'd guess! Without knowing either of your ages exactly, I know that you are much younger than Glen or myself in this following Dylan on tour experience. The reason I include myself is that I have to admit to you that meeting friends and non-Bob specific reasons are all major factors in deciding which shows I attend too. They never used to be, but over time they have grown to be all but the deciding factors.

For example, if I am going to watch a handful of dates on a European leg I try to go to ones which allow me to either meet or accompany friends. Or I go to a city I've never seen before and try to build in some time for sight-seeing or just hanging around, having a good meal or whatever. In the old days, when Dylan's touring either wasn't or wasn't expected to be so common a

happening, none of these things would have occurred to me. Now whether I am just getting old and stale ('yes' shouts the world) or whether the change is down to the 'never ending' aspect of the touring is hard to tell. Whichever, or, more likely, whatever mixture of them is the cause, Glen's reactions when faced with the last 'pre "Love And Theft -songs-being-featured' tour surely struck a chord with many who have followed Dylan through more than a decade of continuous touring.

As such, I felt it was of interest to Dylan fans, especially as many of our readers will know Glen through meeting him on tours, at conventions or from his splendid Tangled Up In Tapes tour books.

Your final point re the name Judas! is a most interesting one. As you'll no doubt be unsurprised to learn you are not alone in disliking it. A vocal minority strongly agree with you. It certainly wasn't our intention to 'offend' anyone with the name. Instead we thought/think it rather funny – and on at least one level it is clearly a dig at ourselves as Dylan fans doing something Dylan would disapprove of. The introduction to issue one made it clear we were referring primarily to the infamous and much derided shout of 'Judas' from the Manchester Free Trade Hall, 1966 show. 'The fan who got it wrong' in other words.

I conducted a poll before launch asking a number of people to vote on five possible titles and Judas! was the runaway winner with some 80% approval, and provoked more than one person to comment that it was 'the perfect name' for a Dylan fanzine. Admittedly the 20% who voted for other titles almost all mentioned they disliked the name Judas! This, and comments like yours since launch, leave us in a bit of a quandary and we will continue to seek advice on this – but for now it'll have to stay unless we hear it offends Dylan!

Dear Andrew,

I thought I'd write to you with some thoughts engendered by Dylan's performance of 'Cry A While' after two remarkably enlightening conversations: one with my wife Daphne and the other with Ben Clayton. My thanks to them both.

I wouldn't normally choose to watch the Grammy Award ceremony, so I videotaped the whole thing and then fast-forwarded early the next morning until I found Bob's bit. In the middle of all that glossy Hollywood-style stage set someone had constructed what seemed to be the back end of somebody's garage. Or maybe it was the town jail: after all, we know the guy inside is an outlaw. Well whatever it was, it contained Bob Dylan, 'all boxed in, nowhere to escape'. And it was here, history will record, in the gloom of this garage or jail, that Dylan and the band performed – no, not 'Mississippi', despite being boxed in – but a not very convincing version of 'Cry A While'. I wasn't surprised by the mediocre quality of the performance, and it didn't really seem to matter much; it was good just to see him have a go at it. After a few minutes it was over – back to the glitz and the forced bonhomie. I switched off.

I'm not the first person and I certainly won't be the last, to feel uneasy about Dylan's appearances at events like this. But why? It was a music award ceremony; 'Love and Theft'

is music; Bob Dylan is a musician. But he doesn't fit. He never fits. Dammit, I don't want him to fit, and I'd be very unhappy if I ever found that he did! But why? Why doesn't he fit? I chewed at the question all through my breakfast, arguing with myself until I realised that the answer was as obvious as my porridge. It went something like this:

He doesn't fit because he isn't like the others.

Why isn't he like the others?

Because he doesn't do what they do.

You mean he doesn't sing and play?

Oh yes, he's a song and dance man alright.

So what does he do that they don't?

Well, I didn't see much else of the Grammys, but what little I did see was polished until you could see your face in it. Everything was rehearsed and slick to perfection; everyone knew exactly what they were going to do and how they were going to do it. And that's one reason why Bob Dylan doesn't fit. He wasn't slick to perfection, and he didn't know exactly what he was going to do, nor how he was going to do it. In fact, as Ben Clayton observed when we talked about this recently, Dylan doesn't seem to see any point in chasing perfection at all.

Bob Dylan doesn't chase perfection because as well as being a song and dance man, he's an outlaw; an explorer; a treasure-seeker. He's on the lookout for something. You tend to find him out there on the razor's edge, probing the limits, because that's where you have to be if you're to have any chance of finding the special kind of treasure that makes great art. There are no guarantees; the casket may prove to be empty. But you can't know until you try.

Don't take my word for it – all the greatest artists are explorers in this sense. Listen to Terry Frost, one of the finest abstract artists of our day: 'If you know before you look, you cannot see for knowing.' There's a whole philosophy of creative living encapsulated in those words. It's a philosophy of perception: presupposed knowledge can blind you to new insights and deaden your life. It's a philosophy of action: if you're certain of the outcome in advance, if the action is so tightly planned that the venture is just a matter of going through the motions ... then why bother to go through the motions? And, of course, it's a philosophy of art – and particularly, a philosophy at the core of Bob Dylan's art.

Another great abstract painter, Patrick Heron, said much the same thing: 'Art is literally an act of discovery. Art reveals aspects of reality we have never consciously known before.' And yet another major contemporary artist, Sandra Blow: 'I can remember that extraordinary sense of shedding everything, of leaving all the known tracks.' The idea isn't merely modern. J.M.W. Turner knew about it over a century and a half ago. 'But what are you in search of?' he asked a fellow painter who approached him for advice about a problem he was having with one of his paintings.

John Ruskin discovered it with life-changing impact in 1840. Already an accomplished

painter, with a sufficient mastery of the technical skills to turn out any number of highly respectable and accomplished watercolour landscapes in a range of fashionable styles, he happened to lie by a roadside one day and begin to draw an aspen tree – and somehow managed to shed all his preconceptions. The lines of the tree and branches 'insisted on being traced ... I saw that they 'composed' themselves, by finer laws than any known of men. At last, the tree was there, and everything I had thought before about trees, nowhere.'

His drawings ceased to be respectable, decorative objects, and became instead penetrating experiments in perception. If you compare two of Ruskin's drawings, one made before and one after 1840, the impact is very similar to the experience of watching Dylan at the Grammys. The one is a slick, highly polished piece of watercolour craftsmanship, honed close to technical perfection; the other may be unfinished, and in a traditional pictorial sense, a failure; yet it's a piece of living art – rough gold lifted straight from the casket. After 1840, Ruskin's drawings are, quite simply, no longer the same kind of thing.

I think this helps us – well, it helps me – to put Bob Dylan into a bigger context; a context of genuine artistic endeavour, full of risks. He doesn't know what this song 'Cry A While', performed here, now, will mean; he doesn't know what discoveries he can make within it, what gold he can tease out. Neither do we; and that's why we don't really mind if 'Cry A While' didn't come off at the Grammys. There will be another time, another song, another performance – another tomb to ransack, with another casket to open. The search will go on, because the alternative, for an outlaw song and dance man, is a kind of artistic death. If you know before you play, then you cannot sing for knowing.

Alan Davis

Thanks for this Alan, very thought provoking. I too recorded the show and only watched the Dylan bit. I caught about 30 seconds of the beginning of the presentation of the next item and it was more than enough, made worse than normal by seeing the once cutting Elvis Costello as part of the phony parade.

I was not impressed with Dylan's performance at all, but on speaking to other Dylan fans found a split reaction. Mostly those who liked it had watched the entire show. Not only must they have felt almost obliged to enjoy Dylan as reward for their lengthy suffering but, I am sure, seeing him so out of context with the others' 'polished perfection' was uplifting in itself. I do worry though that this sometimes becomes almost a cop-out; praising somebody for being shoddy rather than smooth.

I had a similar feeling way back in early 1991 when watching him live, massacring 'Masters Of War'. I didn't like the performance per se, but I sure enjoyed the bemused glitzy ranks led by the done-up-to-the-nines Diana Ross who gave him a standing ovation for they knew not what. On that occasion we had a wonderful speech too, but this time I felt there was nothing to really praise other than that he does not fit in with that crowd. You have expanded on that and underlined the importance behind it. I strongly believe in your conclusion that 'The search will go on, because the alternative, for an outlaw song and dance man, is a kind of artistic death.' And I

Judas!

believe Dylan does too, as he has always demonstrated, not only in his live performances but also in many important lyrics, something I go on about at some length in my it-will-be-finished-one-day-honest second book, Troubadour.

Congratulations on your first issue of Judas!. I really enjoyed all the articles and even though a subscriber to Isis and Dignity, I found that Judas! filled a niche that the sadly lamented John Bauldie's Telegraph had left open. On the basis of the first issue I think you have achieved your aims as explained in the foreword of that issue.

On this basis I wish to subscribe to the next three issues to take me to April next year. Good luck with the enterprise.

Rob Bostock

Many thanks, Rob, just the response we were aiming to engender. Your letter also reminds me to thank all who sent good wishes and 'well done' messages by e-mail too. Many of those, like yourself, subscribe to other Dylan fanzines. In fact I had presumed all our target audience would, something that was not true of the next correspondent who contacted us via the website (www.judasmagazine.com) feedback form :

I received the magazine. Cover art is nice. Looks professional. Congratulations! Needs fewer essays and more diversification of content. Need to be stronger on recent live shows, live CDs, videos, etc. The content's pretty flat. Needs a cutting edge. Be less sacred. Have more fun with it.

Gary Stoller

To which I replied: Thanks very much for your feedback. Re : 'Need to be stronger on recent live shows, live CDs, videos, etc' you will find some of this in issue 2 – especially the live CDs bit, but we are deliberately not covering them all the time, nor concentrating on the recent ones, because they are already covered in Isis, Dignity, On The Tracks and The Bridge, as well as the foreign language fanzines and all the websites. We are trying to be a bit different and serious, though not sacred - however we do hope to have fun along the way too. Gary's response was that he did not take the other magazines – which was not something we had or have taken into account. Like the magazine name, it is something we will keep under consideration for now. We are taking our first steps; once we have travelled a little further we'll take stock of where we have got to and where we need to be heading.

Thanks to all who wrote, please keep the letters coming via postal services, e-mail or the website.

Cheers for now.

Equality In School

The Academic and Aesthetic Significance of Bob Dylan

by Andrew Davies

*'Come writers and critics
Who prophesize with your pen
And keep your eyes wide open
The chance won't come again
And don't speak too soon
And there's no tellin' who
That it's namin'.
For the loser now
Will be later to win
For the times they are a-changin'.'*¹

*'The distinctions between the higher and popular arts are meaningless. Bob Dylan is as artistically relevant as Keats.'*²

This now famous and academically bold statement by the British government's then Culture Secretary, Chris Smith, was met with mixed receptions when enthusiastically expressed in the summer of 1998. Scholars of popular music and the art of Dylanology may have been delighted that their leading man was finally seeming to get a little of the recognition they felt he deserved. Academics, however, exercised a little more caution. Richard Middleton, a professor at Newcastle University, quoted in the same *Spectator* article, was reluctant to join in the debate, calling Dylan and Keats *'incomparable'*. However, Professor Middleton did claim to understand what Chris Smith was aiming to achieve in his speech: *'He's trying to say that pop music shouldn't be considered as below culture'*.

This whole business, of course, leans back to the age-old argument about the divide between so-called higher and popular culture. If there is to be a discussion as to whether contemporary culture is of an equal merit to its more highly academically respected ancestry, then Bob Dylan can certainly be considered a glittering jewel in the popular crown. Dylan is, at the very least, the best ammunition that the contemporaries can arm themselves with when preparing their case.

Whichever way you look at it or whichever side receives your backing, the fact that Dylan is one of the most important cultural icons of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first is difficult to argue against. Just as cultural historians refer to the Romantic period with the names of Wordsworth, Shelley et al, they will be unable to tell future generations of the vibrant and innovative twentieth century without mentioning Dylan's name. The man himself may be reluctant to accept the accolade, but for many Dylan was and is the hypnotic leader of the post-war Cultural Revolution that they had been waiting for. During the twentieth century, the cultural balance was inevitably to change as technology became more advanced. The arts needed to evolve also. Though it remained important, the novel was now not the only medium with which to express a certain type of creativity. There were major advances in moving pictures and recorded sound that opened up new doors to the artist of the new age.

There are, of course, arguments as to whether contemporary lyricists merit the title of poet. Dylan still tends to be ignorantly ignored in academic circles as a serious writer of poetic verse for the crime of being a songwriter. However, J.A. Cuddon's *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* says '*in the early stages of civilisation, much of the poetry created was designed to be sung or chanted. In fact, up until the sixteenth century, poet and composer/musician were often one and the same*'.³

With artists such as Dylan, then, poetry is going back to its roots. As to whether or not the lyrics can be separated from their musical accompaniment, this is a topic for

discussion. Certainly, in the case of his *John Wesley Harding* album, Dylan's prime emphasis was on his words:

*'The songs were all written out on paper and I found tunes for them later. I didn't do it before, and I haven't since. That may account for the specialness of that album.'*⁴

On the subject, literary critic and Dylan fan Christopher Ricks offers that '*if a great song of Bob Dylan's is not literature then that is because its medium is not words alone*'.⁵ He is talking, in this case, with specific reference to 'One Too Many Mornings'. The interesting (and slightly apologetic) 'if' at the beginning of this statement perhaps suggests on which side of the fence Ricks is, but as a literary critic he is reluctant to fully and boldly give Dylan his due, anticipating maybe the academic scrutiny his paper will receive. Nonetheless, this statement by Ricks provides a feast of interest in a study such as this. Ricks clearly has an enduring affection for Dylan and this is evident throughout his essay. However, it could be interpreted that the critic is stalling on the notion that Dylan's material could be described as literature. His reason for doing this is that there are factors involved in the song other than the lyrics. However, when the performance element of 'One Too Many Mornings' is taken out and the words solely appear on the page, surely it is not being too generous to call it poetry. Let us think about the most scholarly acclaimed of all texts, the plays of William Shakespeare, with these words in mind. These academically accepted plays are not themselves purely made up of words, yet they are still considered suitable for literary studies. Words are certainly not the only medium involved in the construction of a

stage play. Try telling the director and the actors at the RSC that all the artistic content of the production they are currently staging is to be found in the words and nowhere else. They would probably suggest that you leave and rightly so because, like Dylan's songs, Shakespeare's plays have the distinct performance element, which is an important part of the whole. To take out that element and write the plays down on paper is the same act as to remove Dylan's musical performance and write his songs down as verse.

In another example of factors involved other than writing, William Blake's *Songs Of Innocence* and *Songs Of Experience* were both originally published with illustrations that Blake thought vital to the overall understanding of his work. Again, the later removal of the drawings and pictures before publishing the lyrics as plain poetry was an act not authorised by Blake, and it subtracts from the desired effect. Literary critics are happy to take out the other elements of the whole and keep just the words if that is what it takes to render the work of Blake and Shakespeare poetry, but seem unwilling to do the same for Dylan.

As far as poetic language is concerned, at his enigmatic best Dylan's words can prove as exhilarating and challenging as those of any of his 'classic' fathers. This is a matter of personal taste, of course, but the subject must be taken seriously in debate. If the existence of the literary canon is currently playing a significant role at the present time, then it is a negative one. Its authority - directly or otherwise - continues to deny the likes of Dylan a place in respected academic consciousness and consequently helps keep supposed higher

culture 'pure'. Contemporary artists and writers can have no hope of joining this school, as the chosen elite has already been determined. This way of thinking will only suffocate and stifle the contemporary artist because if creativity is renowned for one thing, it is its unwillingness to conform. Pushing the boundaries of genre and imagination to limitless extents is what creativity is all about. The most successful artists (this term used in the general sense) have often proved to be the ones who have gone against the grain, and it is surprising that many critics insist upon upholding categories and conventions while simultaneously championing innovators. Such artistic innovation, it seems, is appreciated only in theory.

The prickly subject of what a literary and cultural critic is supposed to find artistically satisfying is also tackled in Tom Stoppard's play *The Real Thing*:

*I'm supposed to be one of your intellectual playwrights. I'm going to look a total prick, aren't I, announcing that while I was telling Jean-Paul Sartre and the post-war French existentialists where they had got it wrong, I was spending the whole time listening to the Crystals singing "Da Doo Ron Ron".*⁶

Again, it is this insistent concern about what is intellectually expected that enables Leavis's literary canon to dominate English Studies. Such a concern is, consciously or not, heavily supporting this divide between high and popular culture. In this above example, we meet the pretentious playwright who is questioning his own musical preferences for their not being sufficiently intellectual. Henry - the speaker of these lines - is on the verge of doctoring his

Desert Island Discs so that he keeps his academic reputation. He is so concerned that his tastes are not suitable that he even tries at one point to 'cure' himself of liking pop music by going to listen to a concert of 'real' music.

What we have in this situation is not just the slightly neurotic playwright but his understanding of what exactly he must do in order to impress the necessary people. It is the latter that is of importance here. Henry feels the need to pretend to like symphonies (which he hates) and *Finnegan's Wake* (which he hasn't read) instead of The Supremes, The Everly Brothers, Brenda Lee and Bob Dylan.

It is interesting here to mention the ideas of Leslie Fiedler and particularly his essay *Cross the Border – Close the Gap*. In his paper, Fiedler challenges the Modernist critics' poor approaches to evaluating contemporary art and in many cases, their stale inability to even do so. He suggests a way in which this state can be remedied:

*'...a renewed criticism will no longer be formalist or intrinsic; it will be contextual rather than textual, not primarily concerned with structure or diction or syntax, all of which assumes that a work of art 'really' exists on the page rather than in a reader's passionate apprehension and response. Not words on the page but words in the world or rather words in the head, which is to say, at the private juncture of a thousand contexts, social, psychological, historical, biographical, geographical, in the consciousness of the lonely reader: this will be the proper concern of critics to come.'*⁷

This extract sees Fiedler calling for a more open-minded form of criticism, an apt way of thinking in the context of the

culturally fruitful late Sixties from where this essay is recalled. Applying this sort of criticism to Henry's predicament is a worthwhile task. When talking about his beloved pop music, Henry explains *'it moves me, the way people are supposed to be moved by real music.'*⁸ Although Fiedler is not directly talking about music, his logic can be applied. The text (in this case, the song) has clearly had some effect on Henry as he describes himself as being moved by it. The notion is that if a text is capable of moving an individual to such an extent then its value has been proven, regardless of whether it is traditionally considered intellectually acceptable.

The nature of pretence in critical writing is a serious issue. With all the above in mind, attention is drawn to Ray Connolly's self-described 'serious' essay on the song-writing qualities of The Beatles. Of John Lennon's 'Across the Universe', Connolly's 'personal favourite', he quotes the lines:

*'Thoughts meander like a restless wind inside a letter box
They tumble blindly as they make their way across the universe.'*⁹

However, just as Connolly finds himself complimenting Lennon's words too much he stalls and says:

*'I am not saying that this is great poetry but such a brave use of imagery gave immense encouragement to young writers everywhere.'*¹⁰

Like Henry in *The Real Thing*, Connolly is almost apologising for his admiration for The Beatles, just as Ricks does with Dylan. It is as though their true emotions have been running away with them, until they remember who their audience are. The

above quote reads like an excuse in defence of Connolly's tastes. It is cowardice such as this that Fiedler scorns in his essay. Stoppard (more arguably) also seems to have recognised this critical failing in his play.

Moving back more specifically to Dylan, in an attempt to promote the idea of Dylan's work being academically challenging, I immediately find myself trapped in a losing battle. Modern English Studies' embrace of the literary canon means that in order to introduce Dylan it is necessary to perhaps compare him to a member of F.R. Leavis's elite and consequently acknowledge its existence and the rules it has imposed. In his intriguing book *A Short History of English Literature*, Sir Ifor Evans celebrates the vigour of James Joyce:

*'Joyce attempts to make a fiction that shall image the whole of life, conscious and subconscious, without any concessions to the ordinary conventions of speech. He would break up the structure of the language until it could image these fluctuating impressions.'*¹¹

Joyce's powers with words are best found in *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake*, but the closing chapters of *The Dead* represent some of his best writing. The underlying tension that has just come to a sad and somewhat uplifting end is described with huge emotional force. A sombre description of the weather is a beautifully disturbing climax to an enigmatic collection of stories. The point here is that, however good Joyce may be at pushing language to its maximum imaginative potential, he can be at least challenged by Dylan:

*'Now the moon is almost hidden
The stars are beginning to hide
The fortune telling lady*

*Has even taken all her things inside.
All except for Cain and Abel
And the hunchback of Notre Dame
Everybody is making love
Or else expecting rain
And the Good Samaritan, he's dressing
He's getting ready for the show
He's going to the carnival tonight
On Desolation Row.'*¹²

'Desolation Row', a rambling masterpiece of enigmatic and powerful loosely related verses, is to Dylan to what *Under Milk Wood* is to Dylan Thomas. Like *Under Milk Wood*, 'Desolation Row' has no plot but each stanza features the unusual circumstances and current business of its characters.¹³ In structure it is very similar to Joyce's Dubliners, and the same sinister undertone that crawls through *The Dead* is present in 'Desolation Row'.

Dylan's mastery of language has steered him towards an extreme variety of verse. 'Desolation Row' may carry with it an irresistibly sinister charm but that is just one emotion he is able to create. There are a great many more. In his epic love song 'Sad Eyed Lady of the Lowlands' for example, Dylan can boast some of the most affectionate lyrics ever committed to paper:

*'With your mercury mouth in the
missionary times,
And your eyes like smoke and your prayers
like rhymes,
And your silver cross and your voice like
chimes,
Oh, who among them do think they could
bury you.'*¹⁴

The intense imagery created in this example is of the highest quality. It goes on to develop into an extremely affectionate love song. Its charms lie in the fact that for

much of the song Dylan uses ordinary expressions. He, in effect, has taken the mundane but sincere words out of our mouths and given them his own magical makeover before writing the one thing that has so often eluded poets and songwriters: the perfect love song. ‘Sad Eyed Lady of the Lowlands’ is at least as affecting as Lord Byron’s *She Walks In Beauty*. There are heavy parallels that can be drawn between Dylan’s verse above and this (again, more academically respected) verse of Byron’s:

*‘She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that’s best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes.’*¹⁵

Though perhaps more immediately associated with such verse than Dylan, Byron’s poem has no more to say than ‘Sad Eyed Lady of the Lowlands’ does. Its subject matter is similar not because Dylan has been overly influenced by Byron, but because the theme they both use is an eternal one. At the beginning of this essay

Professor Richard Middleton was commenting on Chris Smith’s provocative viewpoint and he elaborates by going on to say ‘*the cultural and generational differences between the classic poets and Dylan make it impossible to compare the two.*’¹⁶ This view is perhaps an understandable one, but does it really apply to topics that are eternal? One of the reasons why Shakespeare’s plays are still relevant in the twenty-first century is that they are concerned with issues that are not contemporary but infinite.

In musical circles, at least, Dylan holds a high station. I do not pretend to have made a comprehensive case in this short article that his work should be considered an academic force. I have simply been attempting to raise the profile of Dylan in serious studies by comparing him to some other great figures, with a design not to antagonise or offend the ardent followers of Joyce and Byron, but to encourage the development of Dylan’s reputation alongside that of these great artists.

1. The Times They Are A-Changing, Bob Dylan. Bob Dylan Lyrics 1962-1985 (Jonathan Cape 1987, page 91). Originally featured on the album *The Times They Are A-Changing* (CBS Records 1963).

2. *The Spectator* 4/6/1998.

3. *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*, J.A. Cuddon (1976, Penguin 1982, page 637).

4. Quote from Dylan: Behind the Shades, Clinton Heylin (Penguin 1991, page 186).

5. *Essays in Appreciation*, Christopher Ricks (Oxford 1996, page 329).

6. *The Real Thing*, Tom Stoppard (Faber and Faber 1982, page 17).

7. *Cross the Border – Close the Gap*, Leslie Fiedler (Stein and Day, New York 1972, p 61). Currently available in *Postmodernism: A Reader* edited by Patricia Waugh (Edward Arnold 1992, page 31).[§]

8. As note 1, page 25.

9. *Across the Universe*, John Lennon and Paul McCartney. *The Beatles Lyrics* (Futura 1991, page 209). Originally featured on the album *Let It Be* (Apple 1970).

10. *The Beatles*, Ray Connolly. Featured in *The Beatles Complete* (Allen and Unwin 1994, page 14).

11. *A Short History of the English Language*, Sir Ifor Evans (1940, Penguin 1960, page 190).

12. *Desolation Row*, Bob Dylan. Bob Dylan Lyrics 1962-1985 (Jonathan Cape 1987, page 204). Originally featured on the album *Highway 61 Revisited* (CBS Records 1965).

13. Throughout its ten verses, Dylan uses *Desolation Row* to dissolve the myth that ‘rock’ musicians and lyrics are illiterate by referring to a wealth of historical and fictional figures. Those featured include Romeo, Cinderella, Bette Davies, Ophelia, Einstein, Robin Hood, Casanova, *The Phantom of the Opera*, Nero, Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot.

14. *Sad Eyed Lady of the Lowlands*, Bob Dylan. Bob Dylan Lyrics 1962-1985 (Jonathan Cape 1997, page 239). Originally featured on the album *Blonde on Blonde* (CBS Records 1966).

15. ‘*She Walks in Beauty*’, Lord Byron. *Poetry of the Romantics* (Penguin 1995, page 38).

16. As note 17.

I Happen Not To Be A Swede, Myself

Michael Gray in conversation
with Andrew Muir

AM: I'd like to start by talking about your *Song & Dance Man* books, as it is now 30 years since the first edition and there is significant news relating to the current (third) edition. To take the last first, can you tell us about the reprint of edition three?

MG: Yes. There have been three reprints of *Song & Dance Man III* already - in May and December 2000 and in April last year. They're bringing out a fourth now because they have sold out of the paperback again. But the significance of the new reprint is that it is going to be a great deal cheaper. They are bringing it out at £15.99 instead of £29.95. To show that it is different, apart from the price, it has got a new pale blue cover instead of a black background and we have changed the text on the back, and it has a new ISBN. But the thing is, the demand for this cheaper edition has basically come from bookshops, according to the publishers. So this is very good news.

AM: Yes, it is. The hardback is such a treasure though - are there any of those still available?

MG: Yes, there are a few, I have a small pile here in my study that people can still buy at the same price as before. They are all hand numbered and signed, and once they're gone they're gone. I mean there were only ever two hundred for the UK market.

AM: I believe you have an upcoming tour where you will be talking about Dylan in general and the book in particular. Was this timed to coincide with the reprint?

MG: No I was doing this anyway, it's just a coincidence...

AM: 'Take what you can gather from' it?

MG: Yeah [laughing].

AM: How did these talks come about?

MG: Well I spent most of the 1990s communing alone with the word processor doing this book and therefore it was extremely necessary and pleasant to be able to get out and actually meet people and be in the same room as other human beings and so on, which I started to do the minute the book came out. There was a tiny launch party for the book, as you know, at the Poetry Society, and then the first 'gig', if you like, that I did was at Helter Skelter

Books and then I did a seminar for post-graduates at Goldsmiths College. Those were both at the very, very end of 1999. Then through 2000 and 2001 I did quite a lot of talks.

My publisher started off telling me I shouldn't organise any of these myself because when a bookshop like Waterstones or Borders consented to have an author do one of these signings, the publisher had to subsidise it - had to pay a sort of fee to the bookshop, and therefore the more I set up the more money it cost the publisher. Well, of course, I subsequently found this wasn't true at all. One day a Borders bookshop rang me and said they were having this special Dylan event and would I be part of it? I said, 'Well, is my publisher going to have to pay you?' And they said 'No!' So through a series of stages I reached a point where I discovered that actually bookshops would pay me to do this, instead of the other way round, which makes more sense.

The very first one I did before I was being paid was a Waterstones in Manchester and, you know, I travel to Manchester, I'm walking into the bookshop, and outside it says 'Michael Gray blah, blah, blah - £5 entry'. And I think, '*Hang on a minute, I'm doing the work here. The whole thing is based on work that I have already done, and then actually appearing and talking and doing stuff is me doing the work, and the bookshop is charging people who come to listen to me, and nothing is coming to me!*' It's just amazing. But this is the problem with authorship, as soon as you start to talk about money people think how mercenary you are. It doesn't seem to apply in any other walk of life but it certainly does if

you're a writer. You're never supposed to think about money. You're supposed to have a private income or something. If only!

AM: Presumably the publisher apologised for giving you the false information and putting you off doing the talks?

MG: Well I don't know, that's a long way back now. Anyway, over the course of 2000 and to a lesser extent in 2001 I started doing talks other than in bookshops and the odd college. I did some in large libraries, some at festivals and so on, and obviously I got paid for these - and as time has gone on and the talks have gone well, the fee that I get has reached the point where I can almost make a living.

AM: I met you just before you were going to give one of those, but I wasn't allowed in as the audience was very select - it was a private gig!

MG: Oh that was a weird one! That was the last one I did in 2001, and it was in Malden in Essex and it was an all-day seminar for the United Reformed Church. I was talking about Grace and Redemption in the work of Bob Dylan, and I thought it would make a nice change actually from Bob Dylan and the history of Rock'n'Roll, which is my more normal subject. Yes, that was a gathering of vicars or whatever United Reformed Church people call themselves... It was in a church and I showed a bit of Bob's 1980 Toronto concert on video and things like that.

AM: How did it go down?

MG: It went down very well but actually I didn't enjoy it all that much. There didn't seem enough room to branch out. Usually when I do my gigs there are various bus

stops I must visit, as it were, in the course of the talk, including the pieces of music that I play, to keep me on the right route. But in between those bus stops I feel free to go down whichever highways or tiny lanes or whatever I feel like at the time, to keep it fresh for me and other people. I don't read from notes or anything, and I don't read out long chunks of my book. Usually I don't read any of it. Occasionally a little bit.

AM: Is the 'tour' finalised?

MG: Well I think there are five or six more to come in, but at the moment there are about 20 dates that are firm and fixed. It includes two gigs on remote Scottish islands in September and a mini-tour of Ireland in October. There's a couple of festival dates this time, but mostly Art Centres. It should be great.

AM: Were you pleased with edition three when it came out?

MG: Yes, I was terribly pleased with the way that they let me do it at whatever length I liked, because I had already had one publisher drop out on me because of the length of it, even though they had known all along that it was going to be terribly long. And - I've said this before - I shan't do the book again. So it was great to be able to do it to my own drum-beat this time, and not be told to go away and cut a hundred thousand words, or something like that. But there were a lot of things that were horrible about it too - about the experience, I mean. Not least having to proof-read it twice; because it's half a million words, and to proof-read half a million words where you're paying attention to every semi-colon, let alone every paragraph, is arduous. But first of all you send in the manuscript, and the editor

has a look at it, and then he gives it to some copy editor whose job it is to change every time you have written 'maybe' to 'perhaps', just to sort of justify themselves. And of course it's madness because they get this thing and they spend a few moments looking at it, but if you think about the sentences you write, and you think about the words you use to bolt together these sentences, then you are likely, as the writer, to have given it immensely more thought than a copy editor has time to bring to it, so it's not likely that they are going to be making improvements.

I don't mind in the least it being edited by a real editor who says: *'Look Michael, this whole section here sounds self-indulgent to me'*, or *'This whole section could do with a rigorous pruning, because it's just bringing the chapter out of shape.'* But the sort of nit-picky stuff that copy editors do - well I'm much better at the nit-picky stuff than they are. So there was an enormous amount of reinstating of original text after it had been mangled by a copy editor.

AM: And it's very hard to proof-read your own work because you read it as you meant to type it, as you thought you had...

MG: Yes, that's very hard too. But I'm talking about what you get back after you've sent them the best manuscript you can manage and you have to read the proofs. And I had to do that twice because the number of printing errors and typos and copy editor's errors meant that when the first set of proofs came back it was swimming with mistakes - and when I had corrected all those and the second lot came back, it was unbelievable: it was just as bad! In the course of making the corrections, a

whole new series of things had been made wrong instead. So much so that I found it extremely difficult to imagine that the third time around, which was going to have to be the finished typeset text, it would be virtually error free. But it was. Except that then the index arrived and I had about two days to check it and it was a disgrace! Every sort of mistake an index could offer was there, from mixing up Jerry Lee Lewis with Jerry Lewis to listing people the text only mentioned once yet omitting people who came into it many times over, to listing the group Moby Grape as Grape, Moby.

AM: By which time you were presumably very frustrated and sick of it?

MG: Oh yes, not only sick of it, but going through that process makes it absolutely impossible to know whether what you have done is any good or not. Because you have seen it too much, seen it too close up, and you are just physically very, very tired by that amount of concentration over that long a haul.

AM: You must have been buoyed up by the reception it received - like the praise from Christopher Ricks and the reviews that are collected on the Bobdylan.com website?

MG: Oh, it was fabulous because I had no idea, as I say, if it was any good or not by then, and even if it was any good I couldn't take it for granted that it would be well reviewed. Because it was so big and it was about Dylan, who had only just begun to be critically popular again, there was really no predicting how the book would be received. It was very easy to imagine that it would be a sitting target for a 'who needs half a million words about this boring old fart?' line of attack.

AM: Which would not have been surprising - especially in the magazines...

MG: Yes, especially in the cool music mags and so on. And the first review I think was in *Uncut*, and that was just fabulous, that was just so good [laughs]! I do think some reviewers just take their line from what others have said and therefore handily for me it meant that anyone who did work like that... You know, the initial review was so good, that tipped them a wink that they should give it a good review too. I don't actually know if that worked in this case, but I do think that these things follow each other and set a pattern.

AM: It's certainly true when Dylan tours. I have followed that press coverage for years and very often you can see how much the first reviews are copied.

MG: Yes.

AM: I suppose it's not too surprising, if someone is working to a deadline and is told to review a show the easiest way is to read back over what others have said the week before, sadly...

MG: Well in this case the funny thing really was that a couple of the reviews, *Uncut* and *Record Collector* - and I think it was implied in the Q review as well - they all sort of stated that when the book came out the first time around, in 1972, it had been this breakthrough, and it had been a great book. Well, I couldn't help thinking '*I don't remember this having been said at the time!*' But on the other hand I'm very happy that it's being said now.

AM: One of the problems about writing such a work on a career that is still ongoing is that there is always a 'next release' after your book has concluded. I imagine that it

was almost a double-edged experience for you when *'Love And Theft'*, with all its riches, came out. On the one hand I am sure you experienced - and still do - great pleasure in listening to it. On the other, it must be galling that it does not appear as the final chapter of your book. It is hard to imagine a more apposite and uplifting conclusion than it would have formed.

MG: [Laughing] Well yes and no. Actually I have no regrets that it came out after the book was finished, because I knew that something would happen. You know that you can never keep up with him, and that is one of the privileges of living your life at the same time as his, because that is what it is always going to be like with a live artist. And even if he had become a recluse and done nothing, there would still be the drama of his mysterious silence. There will always be something beyond the end of the book. And as it happens *Time Out Of Mind* was quite a useful last album to be writing about. Because a track like 'Highlands' did show a part of his talent still completely intact - a part of his talent that went right back to the very beginning of his career. And at the same time a track like 'Not Dark Yet' did begin to address these questions of being the older artist speaking for the older person and all that.

Now I do think *'Love And Theft'* is a wonderful, wonderful album. We can play games about where it fits into his canon but it certainly does shift things around. Certainly it was wholly unpredictable and it immediately became indispensable, and I love it in many ways. What's extraordinary about it, for one thing, is that it astonished most of us, if we're honest about it: that he

could do something that good and that unlike the rest - at this late stage of things.

AM: And it did, of course, continue to be informed by, and make references to, the folk and blues traditions you had written about. One can imagine the amount of footnotes 'High Water' would have caused.

MG: Yes, it certainly confirms all that material in my book, which stresses the importance of the back catalogue of pre-war acoustic blues and many other things too. There is nothing in *'Love And Theft'* that contradicts or undercuts the kind of approach to his work that I had the space and time to fully articulate in the book. But the other side of what you were asking me is, I can't tell you how pleasurable it was after finishing the book to have a new album that I could simply enjoy as a punter and not have to write about or turn into a professional assignment in any way. It was just wonderful to have a new album - and, as it turns out, a really good one - that I didn't have to write about. It just felt great!

AM: You have actually answered my next question already. I was going to ask if there was ever going to be a fourth edition but you ruled that out earlier.

MG: Yes.

AM: Is that definite?

MG: Yes, it's a definite 'No'. I mean the only proviso...

AM: [Laughing] So it's almost absolutely, definitely 'no'.

MG: Ha ha ha! The only proviso would be that if somebody was interested in financing a properly corrected edition of *Song & Dance Man III*, and one with a decent index, then I would be interested.

Maybe.

AM: OK. Going back to the first edition, how did that come about? Or perhaps it would be more logical to begin by asking how you first 'got into' Dylan and how, from there, you ended up in the position of bringing out the first in-depth study of his work?

MG: Right, well the crucial thing is discovering popular music as a form of rebellion and liberation. I was born just after the Second world war, and my early years were spent in a drab Britain. I went to a very strict school and my parents were very proper, my father was a great believer in the British Empire and all that.

The most amazing event for me at school was at the annual school revue - it would have been 1957, I believe. Instead of the usual lame sketches, one of the pupils performed three rock'n'roll songs on-stage with a bass and drum backing. This was not just a different form of music, this was like striking at the heart of the whole edifice that I was stuck in. It was fantastic! It just confirmed for me that rock'n'roll was something amazing. So rock'n'roll was the first kind of music that mattered to me. And then I got to University and found that there were all these sort of folkie people lying around in the Common Room playing this awful music and awful songs like 'Masters of War'. Well, they made it sound like they were awful songs.

But there was this one fellow student that I was keen on and, like me, she was reading English Literature. The kind of things that were exciting me at the time included the novels of George Eliot, and the whole literary critical exercise of close-to-the-text

analysis, which I was very good at and really saw the point of and loved - while at the same time the other half of me, if you like, was still keen on the original rebellious leaders of the rock'n'roll revolution. I was still interested in Elvis Presley even though by now it was the mid-'60s and he just was making flaccid films and being terrible. Anyway, this fellow student, Linda Thomas - who has remained a friend, I am glad to say, all through the intervening decades - she said to me: '*You know there is somebody who is a star on a whole other level to Elvis Presley*'. I found this almost inconceivable!

AM: It probably sounded sacrilegious.

MG: Yes, because Elvis Presley was the most exciting God-like vibrant creature that had ever walked the Earth. Anyway, she said this other bloke writes his own material and he's not just interested in, you know, he doesn't just sing '*I love you, please be true*', you should give him a listen: and this was of course Bob Dylan. So that was how I got turned onto Dylan. His newest album at the time was *Another Side Of*.

AM: How did you feel about it?

MG: Well I took quite a long time getting into it, because his voice was a problem to me at first. All my upbringing had been on pop. Smooth singers. Even if they could shout and scream, like Little Richard, they still had this wonderful 'on the note' vocal control, and I liked people like Roy Orbison, and Elvis Presley has a wonderful voice, that is part of what he has. Bob Dylan's voice was problematical for me at first and so was all the rule-breaking that he did. But then some kind of golden penny dropped and I realised that far from having an inferior voice, his voice was actually just

the most marvellous expressive instrument. And things were changing so much in Bob Dylan's own output. 1965 was the most fantastic year to pick up on him.

So anyway, soon there was a sort of unifying of the two sides of me because of him. I could see there was just as much point in a close-to-the-text analysis of this multi-layered, complex, serious minded stuff that he was writing as there was in applying it to the high-brow novels of the 19th Century. So from about 1966, after listening to *Blonde on Blonde* a great deal, I started to walk around the campus saying, 'I'm going to write a book about him.' And that was not because I wanted to write a book, or become an author, but because I wanted to write about Bob Dylan at great length and what else could you do? In those days everything was so different; you were very lucky if you could get any kind of mention of anything to do with popular music into a broadsheet newspaper for instance.

AM: So different from today, now Rock reviews are everywhere...

MG: Absolutely, it's completely different. Then you were more or less confined to the world of *Melody Maker* even if you wanted to write short articles about him. And even in 1967-1968, when I started to do a couple of things for magazines like *OZ* and *International Times*, Dylan was already threatening to be someone they wanted to topple as newer things came along. Therefore the last thing they really wanted was a sort of Leavisite Lit. Crit. approach - and that is exactly what I wanted to do.

AM: It's interesting hearing your story of starting off in rock'n'roll in the '50s, then

getting pulled into the folk circles. It can seem to mirror Dylan's story which is about to go full circle.

MG: Yes, it can. I hadn't thought of that actually. The only full circle like that which occurred to me was that many, many years later when I went to Hibbing and stood on the stage that he had played on, and touched that piano, I thought how strange it was, at 50-something, to finally arrive at the place and sort of psychic moment that is the extraordinary beginning of the very early Bob Dylan story.

AM: I was going to ask you about Hibbing later, but since you have brought it up now, it seems only proper to ask you about that here.

MG: I finally got to Hibbing in 1998, and it was November, so the streets were covered in snow. It was absolutely perfect. That's exactly how you would hope to see it, and I loved it. In fact it was so captivating I almost wondered why Bob Dylan had ever left [laughs]! It's a very atmospheric place, but it is in the middle of the Great North Woods. On that visit I just looked around and was amazed that there was nothing there to acknowledge him. They haven't exploited Bob Dylan at all. At that point they were hardly admitting that they were responsible for him. It's ridiculous really...

AM: It's good news for those - like me - who haven't yet been and want to visit. That's surely the best way to experience it: I'd rather see Hibbing than 'Zimmy's Home Town'

MG: Absolutely, yes. I did a piece for *Isis* about this and how it's great to go there and just knock on Bob Dylan's boyhood-home front door. But of course in the long term

that's not practicable. But yes, it's great to have that rather than to arrive in Hibbing and find the 'Bob Dylan Experience'.

AM: I believe you spoke in 'Zimmy's', the one reference to Dylan?

MG: Zimmy's is a bar and restaurant on the main street, Howard Street, and it is the only form in which Bob Dylan's name is visible in the town. There is the library, which was built in the '50s, and down in the basement there is a room with a small display of photos of him - but there is nothing on the ground floor to tell you it exists: so they are not exactly directing people to it as they come in.

But then I went back, in April last year, when I was doing a series of talks in the States, mostly on campuses, including a couple in Minnesota. In Hibbing I didn't talk in Zimmy's, though, I talked at the library: the library hosted the talk. They had had to finance it by getting money from the Chamber of Commerce and Friends of Hibbing Library and this and that and the other. About five organisations clubbed together to sponsor my talk. And it was an honour for me to be there. It was just the most wonderful experience for me. I did my usual sort of talk about why Bob Dylan is important, but then after the interval I did a special extra section specially for Hibbing, to try to persuade them that Hibbing should stop sulking about Dylan the sulky adolescent stomping off and saying 'you're boring' because after all, that's what adolescents do! I was basically telling them that they should take pride in his achievement and also that he had written some very beautiful stuff about that part of the world and that he was

confessing in this material that Hibbing was formative for him, as obviously it was.

It was also thrilling because the crowd was not just Bob Dylan fans but a real cross section of the community. At the end various people came up and talked to me, really appreciatively, and they included two old ladies who told me they'd been friends of Dylan's mother, who had died not very long before this. Then there were a couple of people who had been in Dylan's early bands, LeRoy Hoikkala and Larry Fabbro, who came up with his wife and chatted afterwards, and then Dylan's classmate Larry Furlong, who'd shown me the town in 1998, and who hung around waiting to test out whether I'd remember him. Of course I did!

And people were buying my book at the end - and I have never sold so many books at a single event before or since. It was brilliant. And afterwards I learnt that one of the people in the audience, a very old man at the front who I'd clocked but hadn't known who he was, turned out to have been Dylan's old English teacher.

AM: That must have been a treat for you.

MG: It was just wonderful, it was just the most exceptional day. It was also a thrill because just outside Zimmy's they have a big notice board thing that sits up in the sky like outside an old fashioned drive-in movie house along the highway or something. It said: *'Hibbing welcomes author Michael Gray, 7pm'* or something like that. It was brilliant.

AM: Did you speak to his old English teacher?

MG: No, not then, because it wasn't until afterwards that I got told who he was. Later

I was told he'd enjoyed the evening and that he had said something like '*Ah, a man of culture comes to Hibbing!*' I did phone him up subsequently, when I was back in England, and had a conversation with him. Again, that was a privilege.

AM: Did he say anything about Dylan in his class?

MG: Well I wasn't trying to interview him. I never do that sort of doorstep stuff, but yes, he said something like: '*Well he was a very bright student, a very able young man.*'

AM: I wonder what your 1966 self listening to *Blonde on Blonde* and thinking about writing a book would have made of the thought of you in Hibbing talking to Dylan's English teacher all those years later?

MG: All this is the completely unpredictable stuff of life isn't it? When I started walking around saying I was going to write a book about Bob Dylan, I had no idea when it would happen, or what would be the result of it then or later. I had no idea that it would turn into the thing that I am best known for. I had no idea that Dylan would have the kind of extraordinary career-longevity that he has had. All of it, the whole world of it, was completely unpredictable, unguessable.

AM: Back in the Sixties, were you focused mostly on Dylan or were you listening to everything else that was going on, the Beatles, the Stones, The Who, the sounds coming from the West Coast of America and so on?

MG: Oh, I was listening to everything, yes. Except that I was still taking a major stance against British music, basically. Growing up with rock'n'roll, once I discovered life

beyond Tommy Steele I always thought that American music was authentic and exciting and British music was phoney and unexciting; and I basically held to that position right through Merseybeat, even though I grew up on Merseyside and used to go to the Cavern. It was OK, but I thought it was amateur thrashing about compared to a Jerry Lee Lewis. So that was essentially my position. Even though people kept telling me that the Stones were great and the Kinks were wonderful and all this, on the whole, most of my attention and expectation was directed towards American music.

But yes, I was completely caught up in the whole 60s dropping-out, underground explosion. Not that I ever wore a kaftan or distributed flowers or anything like that; but the whole thrust of things, the whole promise that there was an alternative way of ordering the world, I bought that, you know. And I thought it was going to mean certain kinds of people were going to be abolished. And of course in the '70s we got a backlash against that. People like Margaret Thatcher, for instance: they were supposed to be abolished by Woodstock.

AM: Unfortunately it is not that simple.

MG: No. Quite. Even at the time it obviously wasn't. I was very aware in the '60s that there was this new snobbery, hip snobbery, that made me very wary. I didn't feel I fitted in. When I went to the Isle of Wight Festival in 1969 I didn't feel, 'here I am among my tribe'. I felt an outsider. But that's alright.

AM: What situation was the book in at this point?

MG: I think it was still just notes, little

pieces of paper. The real serious work on the book was done in 1970-71.

AM: So you knew you had a publishing deal at that time?

MG: Yes, I can't remember exactly what happened when but it was signed to Hutchinson and then the editor there moved to one of the Granada companies and he took it with him. That delayed things a bit, but I know I had a deal. By 1971, I was living in a cottage in North Devon with a very young child and a very young wife and I thought it was idyllic. It didn't turn out to be but I thought it was. And I remember that my publisher got the British rights to *Tarantula* and for the hardback they wanted me to write the dust-jacket notes and these had to be sent through to Bob Dylan for his approval - which I got - and I can remember having to deal with all this by a series of telegrams, and going to the phone box by the bridge over the stream in this tiny hamlet, and having to read this stuff over the phone to this obscure bloke in London. The whole thing was done in a beautifully unslick way.

AM: Again it's a big contrast with today and e-mail...

MG: Yes. It's funny though isn't it? We have all this instant stuff but it doesn't essentially make any difference.

AM: How do you mean?

MG: Well, you know, the difficulties in communicating are more or less as they were. It only speeds up what people expect. I can remember the one time when I came in from the cold of freelancing and worked for a record company and then drifted from that into managing Gerry Rafferty, it was really obvious in the offices of this

record company that if people forgot to post something in time they would messenger it round. And then when fax machines came in they used them instead of the messenger bikes. It was still a way of getting something to somebody because you had forgotten to post it the day before. And so on, and it's always like that. you know. Back out freelancing again, on the other side of all that experience, there was a point in the '80s when it suddenly became very difficult to manage any longer if you didn't have a computer. So I had to get one of those Amstrads. Then there came a point where it impossible to deal with newspaper editors if you didn't have a fax. So there is all this extra communication facility but at the same time you are always having to run to oblige it, it's not just a simple matter of it obliging you.

AM: What effect did the first edition coming out have on your life?

MG: It was all pretty minimal. Writing a book, unless you have a best seller, does not change your life. When the British edition came out I was still teaching at a school in North Devon and living in a cottage. It was like it was my hobby, like an interesting sideline event in my life, no more significant than some trippy encounter. It was just a novelty item on my CV. When I got an American deal I decided it enabled me to give up my day job - I was teaching English in a school in Birmingham by then - but it didn't really give me enough to give up a day-job on. It was more a question of using that as an excuse.

As you say, there wasn't any Rock press, not only that there was not even a Rock Book Section in a bookshop. There were none of

these things, the book had to really struggle to get through because it wasn't going to get reviewed in broadsheet newspapers, although somehow it did get a tiny snippet in *The Sunday Times*. There was nowhere to put it in a bookshop, nobody knew where to put it.

AM: Was the second edition specifically timed in 1981 for the Dylan tour?

MG: No, *Song & Dance Man III* is the first time it's been well timed. The other two were both badly timed. In 1972 he hadn't been doing anything for ages and ages and he wasn't at all hip anymore, and by the time the book came out in 1981 well, he was here touring but the excitement and critical and commercial success of the 1978 tour had largely evaporated. He was 'saved'. It wasn't a good time to bring the book out. I can't remember how that edition came about really, I think I probably reacquired the rights to the first edition and set about trying to sell it again and Hamlyn took it up.

AM: It was a handsome edition.

MG: Yes, I like the look of it. I mean I'm not sure that the text revision was as good as it might have been but I think I was very pressed for time and my own life wasn't really altogether at its best then.

AM: What have you been doing since edition three came out, working on something else or just lazing around?

MG: I never laze around [laughs]. You have to work all the time if you are trying to survive as a freelancer. People think it's great to be your own boss but money is a constant problem. So you have to keep doing things to bring money in and that includes writing pieces for newspapers.

But, as I say, I have also been doing the gigs and setting up the new book I'm writing, which is an investigative biography come travelogue about Blind Willie McTell for Bloomsbury. I have to deliver in September this year for publication a year after that. And that's another thing that Dylan's turned me onto if you like.

AM: That sounds of obvious interest to the Dylan fan, though of course it won't be written from that perspective.

MG: No, and I'm not writing it from a blues fan perspective either. I'm writing it as a rattling good yarn for any interested general reader. Basically it's for people who have never heard of Blind Willie McTell. His is just a remarkable story of a fascinating, unusually gracious man in a very interesting time and place. He was born in 1898 in rural Georgia and he died in 1959, very soon before he would have been rediscovered by the blues and folk boom that Bob Dylan came to New York and bumped into. McTell lived his life mostly in Georgia, although he did travel around a great deal, and he lived it in the pre-civil rights era. He is just a very interesting person to look at. Most travel books don't really take much interest in music and most books about blues people don't really take much notice of the environment in which people live. Plus most stuff about the blues has always been about what has gone on in Mississippi rather than in the milder environment of Georgia. So. We'll just have to see how it goes. You know I write travel articles as well as writing about music, and this book is a way of fusing the two things. I have done a couple of trips now and have another one to do, following in his foot-

steps to places like Statesboro, which is the focus of his most famous song, 'Statesboro Blues'.

AM: Has it changed out of recognition or do you feel you are still walking the same road?

MG: Once you get out of Atlanta, Georgia still feels as if he might have just turned the corner and disappeared down the railroad track. It depends what you want to notice. You could notice how modern much of the way everything is structured is, but if you want to you can feel those old, timeless atmospheres very easily. And you can still just about meet people who remember him, even though it is such a very long time since he died. I am almost too late, and many of the people involved are dead - most of them are dead - but you can still meet, and I have met and interviewed, people who remember him. I've got some wonderful material. I just hope I can lash it together so that it works both as his story and as the story of getting the story.

AM: Moving on to a slightly controversial topic now. Your recent review/overview of Dylan at Stockholm in April caused quite a stir amongst Dylan fans,...

MG: Really?

AM: Yes, and presumably you knew that it would when you wrote it. Can you tell us a bit of the background to the article? And do you still stand by it?

MG: First of all, I didn't give a thought to how it would go down in the Dylan internet newsgroup world. I really didn't give that a thought, and I think it would be extremely damaging to any attempt to do an honest piece of work if you did have one eye on your audience all the time.

Obviously if you are writing for a particular publication there is a sense in which you automatically fall into obliging that publication in some way, even if it's just the kind of length of sentences you use or something stylistic. You in some way settle your own style into some sort of marriage with what you perceive to be the style of the newspaper. So I'm not saying that it's a virginal, holy process, but I am saying that you couldn't write anything decent if you kept worrying about what people might think of what you're writing. And if anybody in the world ought to know that, it is Bob Dylan followers, because if his own stance has ever been about anything, it's been about that.

AM: It appeared in the UK newspaper, *The Daily Telegraph*.

MG: Yeah, well, you know, the *Daily Telegraph* is not my spiritual home, but they like my stuff. It was the *Daily Telegraph* that first published my travel writing. But it doesn't represent my politics at all. I don't read the paper, I only write for it. A.J.P. Taylor used to write for the *Daily Express*.

As for the Stockholm piece, yes, I stand by it: what is there to apologise for? I haven't even looked at all this stuff, this fuss and response to it. I mean, I got my copy of *Isis* and I saw that there were a couple of letters and that people didn't seem to be very happy, and several people seem to have e-mailed me and told of their unhappiness, but on the other hand several people whose views I respect have also e-mailed me to make approving noises in response to that piece. But, essentially, I don't understand what the fuss is about. It doesn't even seem

to be just about what I wrote about Dylan! It seems to be about the fact that I dared to make detailed observations about the audience - and in some cases it even seems to be because I'm supposed to have knocked Stockholm!

Well it doesn't seem to me that I said anything wrong in any of these areas and I think, essentially, I have a right to express my opinion and other people have a right to disagree. But all this jumping up and down about it, I think that is very unhealthy. I had never been to Sweden before, I'm conscious that I spent two nights in a dreary hotel in Stockholm and went to an indifferent Bob Dylan concert there. And that the concert took place in a very unpleasant post-modern housing estate patch of town, and that's all I've said. I haven't gone in there and said 'Sweden is pants', you know. I know perfectly well I haven't spent enough time in Sweden to know what I think of it. But if it turns out I visit Sweden again and dislike it and then on subsequent visits, it turns out that I dislike it more and more, I'm fully entitled to do that. I am entitled to dislike Stockholm and to like red wine and to prefer Don & Phil to Ant & Dec, and so on.

AM: Fair enough, you are talking about right of opinion; but it seems that this is not always afforded to those who criticise Dylan in performance. There is an intolerance towards that.

MG: Yes, and I find this aspect of the Dylan fan world absolutely poisonous. Nothing could do Dylan a greater disservice than this stance that he is beyond criticism. I criticised the Stockholm concert because it fell so far short of the very standards that

Bob Dylan set, not for any other reason. I have no wish to go to a Bob Dylan concert, find it a bad one and say so. But I am certainly not going to go to a Bob Dylan concert, find it a bad one and say that it was great.

AM: It's also a matter of which show you are reviewing, it's not as though they are all the same.

MG: Absolutely.

AM: I only saw four of the last leg of shows and saw my best ones, which I enjoyed very very much, first and the poorest, which I didn't like at all, last; unfortunately for me, as it is preferable the other way round of course. You referred to the Stockholm show as 'desperately poor'; have you seen shows since and did they impress you differently?

MG: Yes, well I saw the worst one first and the best one last. I saw five this time. I saw the Stockholm one and as I said in the piece, quite straightforwardly, and being very specific, it was bad because he was not committed to being there and therefore he resorted to a series of fakes and I absolutely defend my right to protest at that. Then I went to four in Britain: I went to Newcastle, which I liked very much. Manchester which I liked less. Then the two shows at Docklands arena - the first one had a wonderful sustained patch in the middle of it and was OK either side of that, I thought. The second one was a really terrific concert. He was riveting and it was an extraordinary achievement that someone 61 years old could do that and be firing on all cylinders in that way.

AM: I haven't heard that one yet but all reports, and what you have just said, seem to

put it as the best after the April shows took off in mainland Europe.

MG: But that doesn't mean I want to hear the recording of it. Because I do think that, as you and I have discussed privately before, and as do most people: what you get standing there in the presence of the man is not necessarily what you get when you listen to a recording afterwards. The thing about 'you had to be there' is sometimes true, I feel. It hasn't always been: you didn't have to be there in '66, the live recordings are out of this world, but the Never Ending Tour I think on the whole, if you were at a great show, you have to have been at the great show.

AM: Actually I haven't sought out copies of the shows I most enjoyed yet...

MG: You probably want to protect your memory of them by not wanting to listen to them again, don't you? I think I feel that about the Newcastle show. I felt that he was in a very open, fragile mood and I liked the fact that it was less sort of rock'n'roll than the Manchester one turned out to be the following night, for instance. But it might turn out if I listened to the recording of Newcastle that what I took to be fragile vulnerability is something less jewel-like than that.

AM: And a lot would depend on the quality of the recording, and if there any distractions on it...

MG: Oh yes, yes. The worst recordings are from America, where the audience just talks all the way through, mostly about cheeseburgers.

AM: Or how their travelling to the show went, or those important hairdressing points or where to go after the show...

MG: Oh, they're just ghastly aren't they? But, you know, it's my duty as a critic to criticise: not necessarily adversely but to speak as I find. It doesn't do Bob Dylan any good to have people going ape-shit over a completely indifferent version of something he could do a lot better if his audience wasn't so over excited.

AM: You have to wonder about the effect that has on him too, to get the exact same response whether he just goes through the motions or pulls off an extraordinary performance of something. You did write a lot of complimentary things about Dylan in the article too, though that seems not to have been noticed.

MG: Yes of course, and not only that but I see too that when *Isis* reprinted the article (without telling me in advance that they were going to do that), they cut out most of the affirmative bits. I think that if they had room for turning over their letters page to the 'controversy' of my Stockholm piece then they might have had room to reprint the whole piece if they were going to reprint any of it.

AM: Will you be pointing that out and responding to the letters in *Isis*?

MG: I've had a private exchange of views with Derek Barker about the ethics of that, but I don't respond in print to people who whinge about me. I've kept my mouth shut about it all until this interview, and this is the last time the word 'Stockholm' is going to cross my lips.

AM: OK, point taken, I'll move on. There are a number of upcoming projects mooted that Dylan will be involved in which I view more with apprehension than keen anticipation. I'd be interested in your views on

these. For instance, there's the film role where he is cast to play the part of 'Jack Fate'.

MG: 'Jack Fate' is the worst-sounding character's name that I have ever come across. It is just so awful, it is unbelievable and it makes you feel that the whole project is doomed: that at best it is going to be Hearts of Fire II. And it is so unfortunate, because I would love to see Dylan do another film, you know, a proper film. I would love to see him have a decent role in a decent film. He doesn't have to be the centre of attention, as far as I'm concerned. I thought that for instance when, finally, we were able to see the Director's Cut of *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* - I'd always liked Dylan in it, then I had read all these reviews saying it was a good film but that Dylan wasn't a very good actor, and I hadn't agreed with them - then the Director's Cut came out and all over again he was wonderful. And obviously someone as charismatic as Bob Dylan can be - could be - magical on film. But not if he is going to be doomed to playing retired rock singers. I mean 'Dylan the rock singer' is the least interesting aspect of Dylan the persona, to me.

AM: You mentioned Elvis's terrible films earlier, the plot-line seems to have come straight from the same stable.

MG: Actually it's more like the same stable as Paul Simon's *One-Trick Pony*. I just wish that a director whose work you can respect would put Bob Dylan in a significant but not central role. I wish that he would appear in a Robert Altman movie. On the other hand, it makes me feel slightly uncomfortable to sit here predicting doom and gloom for this project, because what do we know about it?

AM: Yes, that's true. It's just that the little we do know about it...

MG: It's just that the storyline makes your heart sink, and 'Jack Fate' sounds so dire.

AM: I was going to ask about things like the one time rumoured TV show and the more certain-seeming *Chronicles* project. Given what you have just said though perhaps it is better to leave that...

MG: Yes, best to leave it till we see it. I would just say that, with the single exception of the notes he wrote for the Jimmie Rodgers tribute album, which are simply badly written, Dylan has written surprising, imaginative and delightful prose, and could do with *Chronicles*. It could be a very exciting thing to read. Not because it may give us the low-down on something but just because, for the first time since *Tarantula*, it gives us the opportunity to read a good deal of prose by Bob Dylan. A sustained piece of prose.

AM: Given that your many years of study have now provided us with *Song and Dance man's* three editions, and that Christopher Ricks's book really is forthcoming this time (at least I believe that is the case) - do you think that a time will come when Dylan is widely regarded as a serious artist as well as a popular one? Or does the latter obviate the former so that as in the cases of Shakespeare and Dickens, it can only happen afterwards.

MG: Pass.

AM: [Laughing] Was that a bad question?

MG: No, I just don't know the answer [laughs].

AM: Thanks very much for your time and words, is there anything else you want to say?

MG: Only that I would like to say that *Song*

☞ *Dance Man III* is not just about Bob Dylan. Dylan himself often criticises people who devote themselves to him and so on. For myself, a detailed interest in Bob Dylan has never squeezed out the rest of the world. In some Dylan circles I am proud to say that I am regarded as a dilettante because, for instance, I don't know how many concerts I have been to. But I do know that there's a whole world of fantastic

places and things that I shan't get round to because I am 55 years old, and I know that it's a very rounded universe out there. Bob Dylan is extraordinarily special as an artist and has opened an enormous number of doors. His achievement is unparalleled in the contemporary world, but it's a wide world.

Michael Gray Gigs - UK & Ireland 2002-3

(* = a Hebden Bridge Arts Festival event)

(** = a Perth & Kinross The Word's Out Festival event)

Tues June 25	Hebden Bridge	The Little Theatre, 8pm*
Wed July 3	Maidenhead	Norden Farm Studio, 7.45pm
Wed July 17	Darlington	Arts Centre, 8pm
Thur Sept 5	Winchester	Tower Arts Centre, 8pm
Fri Sept 13	Carlisle	Museum/Stanwix Theatre, 8pm
Mon Sept 16	Perth	A K Bell Library, 7.30pm**
Mon Sept 23	Stornaway	Town Hall, 8pm
Tues Sept 24	Tobermory	An Tobar, 8.30pm
Sat Sept 28	Southport	Arts Centre, 7.30pm
Mon Oct 7	Castlebar, Eire	Linenhall Arts Centre, 8.30pm
Wed Oct 9	Listowel, Eire	St. Johns Theatre /Arts Centre, 8pm
Thur Nov 7	Gloucester	Guildhall Arts Centre, 8pm
Mon Nov 11	Inverness	Eden Court Theatre, 8pm
Thur Nov 14	Stamford	Stamford Arts Centre, 8pm
Fri Nov 15	Salisbury	Salisbury Arts Centre, 8pm
Thur Nov 21	Aberystwyth	Arts Centre, Penglais, 8.15pm
Sat Nov 23	Halifax	Square Chapel Arts Centre, 7.30pm
Thur Nov 28	Swansea	Taliesin Arts Centre, 7.30pm
Fri Nov 29	St. Donat's	Arts Centre, St. Donat's Castle, 8pm
Mon Dec 9	Exeter	Phoenix Arts Centre, 8pm
Wed Apr 02 2003	Hatfield	Lindop Building, Herts. Uni, 7pm

NB. Further dates in Ireland are expected to be confirmed soon;
ditto for Lichfield and other UK places.