

*Most of the following discussion of accusations of misogyny on Dylan's part vis-à-vis 'Sugar Baby' was dropped from the final version of the "Love And Theft" chapter. As that chapter had at one time reached 40,000 words, serious pruning was required. This "debate", I felt, was a distraction to the main points of the chapter. It is still present in the book but in much reduced format. Here are my original thoughts:*

## "Love And Theft" – Outtake 1

There is another side to Dylan singing of ageing and his setting an album in a past, agrarian world amidst musical styles from long ago. All this brings to mind his own age and his relationship with – or estrangement from – the modern world. One thing that has never hampered Dylan is an overly scrupulous attention to the modern concept of 'political correctness'.

So it is no surprise to find that this album ignores that concept. That term has come to convey the stultifying deadness of over-conforming to anything, even things of inherent virtue. What is now a term of scorn was born out of concepts that were inarguably good, no discrimination on basis of sex or race, for example. The human ability to create evil out of good seems never-ending. However, none of it impinges on the land of "Love And Theft", a land from before it was ever heard of, after all. This is part of its charm, which is not to say that everything about old fashioned attitudes is charming; the iniquities they inspire are the whole reason 'political correctness' came into being.

Dylan is a man of the past as well as a man singing of the past, his formative years were in the Fifties, a point he often stresses – if he doesn't say the Fifties he says the Forties but never the Sixties, the second half of which he seems to despise and always makes a point of distancing himself from. Talking of the 'summer of '67' et al in the Rome interview he flatly stated that he was not 'part of that culture'. For him, yet again, it was his formative years that mattered: *'I think whatever time you are born and raised in has a tremendous influence on whatever your personal and private life is...'*

Christopher Rollanson, in his review of the album, is engaging on this topic in its linguistic incarnation, or rather its absence, due to what he calls Dylan's 'sublime lexical disregard' for 'the fashionable niceties of... political correctness'. There are not, as it happens, many offensive terms on "Love And Theft" but there are some attitudes which upset people who have taken sixties and post- sixties liberal thinking as their own and think that Dylan shares those views. This happens on 'Sugar Baby', in particular.

Being the final track, it stands slightly apart from the others. It is not as big a jump to it as it was to 'Dark Eyes' on *Empire Burlesque*; more like the half-step to 'Shooting Star' on *Oh Mercy*.

In true last track Dylan tradition this sparse, but poignantly beautiful, song sums up the entire album and points the way to further explorations of his muse. In here you will find lost love, lost youth, some sadness, some joy, some bitterness, some defiance, some hope, some anger, some faith.

The rest of the album may be spoken via the mouths of a cast of characters (notwithstanding that they reveal to us Dylan's view of life) but here I feel there is absolutely no authorial distance, this is Dylan speaking to himself; to thoughts of his loves, his past, his twin, 'that enemy within'. Perhaps you hear him sing to demons that have haunted him, of addictions both female and chemical, perhaps sometimes also to his muse. Then you listen to the song again and hear it very differently, it is like a coiled spring full of impacted meanings. When they are sprung free, the connotations and references take you down many a different path, led by that unmistakable voice of Dylan in full prophetic and personal modes. The wonder is that he lets us listen in to this statement of how he feels now, at the moment he recorded this.

I know from a number of friends that they feel uncomfortable with this song because, not for the first time, Dylan's words upset their beliefs regarding the place of women. Dylan's uncompromising:

*There ain't no limit to the amount of trouble women bring*

- as well as the opening chorus lines – have re-opened an old debate. To me there is no argument, Dylan is not only not a supporter of the 'women's lib' movement; he doesn't even seem to understand it. In the Kurt Loder interview from the Eighties he revealed that he is simply not on the same wavelength as those who find his attitudes off-putting:

*KL: ...there's a song on Infidels called 'Sweetheart Like You,' in which you say, 'A woman like you should be at home ... takin' care of somebody nice.'*

*BD: Actually, that line didn't come out exactly the way I wanted it to. I could easily have changed that line to make it not so overly, uh tender, you know? But I think the concept still would have been the same. You see a fine-looking woman walking down the street, you start going, 'Well, what are you doin' on the street? You're so fine, what do you need all this for?'*

*KL: A lot of women might say they're on the street because they're on the way to their jobs.*

*BD: Well, I wasn't talking to that type of woman. I'm not talking to Margaret Thatcher or anything.*

Dylan is not a flower power child of the sixties, he grew up before the sixties in a Jewish family in a small Midwestern town. He does not – and never has – shared many of the hippies' beliefs. Even this year he still felt the need to point out that when he wrote 'Masters Of War' he was not writing as a pacifist; that he is not and never has been a pacifist. Nor will he ever have a modern perspective on women's place in society. If you let that put you off his work, that's your loss. I don't agree with his attitudes to women, but then I often find his views on other subjects (religion, for example) also run counter to mine. To take a non-Dylan example of something similar, I remember being devastated by Neil Young's endorsements of Ronald Reagan. I still listen to Bob and Neil though; why should their beliefs have to match mine for me to enjoy their songs?

The attempt to make Dylan (or anyone else) think what you want them to is as silly as booing him off stage for daring to play an electric guitar. It is an immature reaction to rock music; idolising the star on stage. 'I can't think for you' sang Dylan once long ago, and 'trust yourself' many years later. These are worth taking on board at face value.

Dylan is more than just a rock star on stage, as this book has hopefully made clear he is also an artist of some poetic standing. His poetry may be in song rather than printed verse but there are enough similarities to talk of him in the same way as one would John Donne or Robert Browning. Naturally one likes to think that poetic artists who have moved you share beliefs and values you hold dear, but it is unrealistic to think this will always be so. Dylan's view of women in his songs and interview comments come across as patronising, old-fashioned and ill-informed to younger age groups than his own in western culture. Am I supposed to stop listening to Dylan albums because of this? (Whatever your answer is, I can assure you mine is no!)

I do find it off-putting in live concert when the line about women bringing trouble is met with moronic whooping and cheering from male voices in the audience. I mentioned this to a friend who pointed out that you can hear female voices cheer anti-male comments at concerts by Alanis Morissette and many others. I don't think that this is quite the same thing given the history of male domination in society; but it did make me pause to consider that in popular music one sex is praised for directly savaging the other while Dylan is routinely put down for misogyny for lines that are open to more than one interpretation.

More importantly than all this though is the simple fact that a literal reading of the lyrics brings a very limited view of the song. Even if taken at its most literal level you can hear that Dylan is singing about more than woman troubles, as is suggested by a line like:

*Every moment of existence seems like some dirty trick*

The verses are also clearly speaking from more than one perspective; it seems to me there is a clear shift from the verses to the chorus, perhaps I'd go as far as to say I most commonly hear them as call and response (I also see the song in a religious context, but more of that later). Paul Williams is a Dylan listener who struggles with this song for two reasons:

*My problem is six words in the chorus (repeated four times): 'You ain't got no brains no how.' I hunger to identify with this beguiling love song, but I can't think of a lover, past, present or imaginary, I'd want to say that to, or have that said to me by.*

Plus, writing of the trouble women bring line:

*...I'm reminded unpleasantly of cultures where women are beaten or murdered for wearing clothing that reveals their femaleness. And one must also deal with the echoes of this sentiment throughout "Love And Theft": 'Keepin' away from the women, I'm givin' them lots of room' ('High Water'). 'Some of these women they just give me the creeps' ('Honest with Me').[1]*

Mr. Williams comforts himself by remembering that Dylan often writes to himself. Paul's writing comes from the heart, though, and his honesty compels him to add that at any given listen: 'I could be back hearing 'Sugar Baby's chorus as an expression of contempt for a life partner'.

I have heard the same kind of disquiet from others and clearly it is a barrier to their appreciation of the song, and therefore the album as a whole. Barriers to appreciation were conspicuous by their absence in the slew of enthusiastic reviews that greeted the release of "Love And Theft", with people revelling in the humour of the album.

[1] Paul Williams, 'Stolen Kisses (Sweeter than Wine)' *Crawdaddy*, 2001

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*Most of the following discussion was dropped from the final version of the "Love And Theft" chapter. My idea originally had been to include the extended John Donne commentary as an example of how so referentially rich an album actively encourages the listener to make connections with other art, be it popular or "high". I was interested in the meaningfulness (or otherwise) of authorial intent and wanted to demonstrate the tenuous nature of many of the connections listening to the album sparks off in a listener's mind. I felt, in the end, that I proved the tenuous aspect a little too successfully!*

*Nonetheless, in the hope you find something of interest here, what follows is a passage from an earlier version of the "Love And Theft" chapter.*

## **"Love And Theft" – Outtake 2**

All this makes me wonder to what extent – one could even argue, if any – the poet, John Donne is being alluded to in the album. This usually does not really affect my appreciation too greatly. The music, vocals and large number of clearly intentional references are more than enough to provide the richest of fares. However, it does impact to an extent on my appreciation of the opening to 'Sugar Baby'.

Before looking at that, it is worth noting that Donne is quoted at least once, though this comes in yet another case of

"Love And Theft" and Dylan could be quoting someone else quoting Donne! This famous 'theft' comes in 'Moonlight':

*For whom does the bell toll for, love?  
It tolls for you and me*

You cannot tell if Dylan is citing Ernest Hemingway or John Donne or both. We know Dylan is familiar with both writers, so that offers no guide. The 'double referencing' makes – like the 'Coo Coo' song allusion – a very pointed statement about the "Love And Theft" that is Dylan's new song form. Again Dylan does so with a quote so well known as to have become a commonplace.

Perhaps Dylan wants us to go beyond Hemingway to Donne, or perhaps he wants us to think of both – which you cannot help but do in any case. We cannot say for sure, and you feel Dylan does not want you to be sure. Dylan, I suspect, knows full well that he made me think of Hemingway and Donne and the lines from 'Standing In The Doorway'

*I can hear the church bells ringin' in the yard  
I wonder who they're ringin' for*

The original Donne quote is part of one of his most famous passages, including also, as it does, another of his best known sayings 'no man is an island...' Even a casual reader of Donne is well familiar with this particular 'Meditation', and we know that Dylan is at least that.

Donne's writings have always had resonance in Dylan's songs. So, when he is deliberately called to your mind in such a direct way he cannot help but come to the fore at other times. So by the time I heard the closing track, 'Sugar Baby', a poem of his was recalled immediately upon hearing the extraordinary opening lines:

*I got my back to the sun 'cause the light is too intense  
I can see what everybody in the world is up against*

These lines already carry religious overtones, and if the Donne they bring to mind is an intended allusion then it endows the already powerful opening line with added religious significance. The song then would have a very powerful religious 'envelope' of opening and closing lines. 'Sugar Baby' ends with the lines:

*Just as sure as we're living, just as sure as you're born  
Look up, look up – seek your Maker – 'fore Gabriel blows his horn*

Every later listen to the song comes with the knowledge of those last lines. so that the listener is aware of a religious dimension with or without any allusion to Donne and whether or not he or she picks up on the other religious musica.l and lyrical overtones in the opening verse.

The Donne I am proposing *may* be being alluded to is, 'Good-Friday, 1613. Riding Westward', part of which reads:

*This day, when my Soules forme bends toward the East.  
There I should see a Sunne, by rising set,  
And by that setting endlesse day beget;  
But that Christ on this Crosse, did rise and fall,  
Sinne had eternally benighted all.  
Yet dare I'almost be glad, I do not see  
That spectacle of too much weight for mee.  
Who sees Gods face, that is selfe life, must dye;  
What a death were it then to see God dye?*

You will note, I am sure, that the penultimate line here is akin to Dylan's: 'no man sees my face and lives' from 1983's 'I And I'.

It is the image of Jesus's resurrection in the second line above that I was reminded of on hearing 'Sugar Baby'. Donne is using the same 'Sun'/'Son' pun I discussed in the previous chapter with regard to 'Not Dark Yet', 'rising set' referring to Christ dying on the cross and then rising.

Michael Gray incidentally, takes issue with that interpretation of 'Standing In the Doorway':

*I dislike this, there should be a reason within the text to suggest it is a pun...In 'Standing In The Doorway' he refers to 'the dark land of the sun': we are surely not to conjecture that this may be Dylan's condemnation of a newly discovered great wickedness in Jesus and his entire domain.*

There is some mischief in the way he puts this, as it is patently absurd to suggest that proposing the pun in one song (or line) means one necessarily proposes it in another song (or line). Nor would we say so with every trope in Mr. Gray's book or we would end up with even more humorous misreading than the one he posits in this example.

His point re 'reason within the text' is the crucial one. Ironically, Mr. Gray himself gives good reason from the text of *Time Out Of Mind* as a whole in a deft reading of the songs. Perhaps we define 'the text' differently. Given the way Dylan ceaselessly quotes others and refers to his back catalogue, I think we can say the text is more than the song in isolation. Dylan's work has always been strong on allusion and referential meaning but by now this has become the very core of his material. The text is all of this as well as the music that accompanies the lyrics, a crucial point in appreciating 'Sugar Baby' in particular.

Before returning there, a final point on the Sun/Son pun in 'Not Dark Yet'. If the pun occurred to so many people hearing the line then it is inconceivable that it never crossed the mind of a master wordsmith like Dylan that it both could and would be taken that way, whether it was his initial intention or not. This is especially so as he had employed the same pun previously.

Does it matter if Dylan is alluding to Donne here? Perhaps not, the ascending chord that introduces the song and the prophetic tone and content all make their point anyway. Without their being a divine presence or at least influence, the 'I can see better than any of you lot' and other comments would come across as galling rather than enlightening.

Which is not to deny that Dylan's lines are working on more than one level – with or without Donne foreshadowing them. The opening lines work as physical description too, Obviously if you look into the sun you won't see anything because the light literally will be *'too intense'*. If you turn around its light will illuminate what you now gaze on. It is not the first time in Dylan's career the he has been adept at combining the spiritual and the material (nor at aligning his own voice with Christ's). 'Sugar Baby' takes the implicit journey of 'Highlands' further down the road, the speaker perhaps turning at the end of his journey, or perhaps having a vision like the one in Donne's poem.

Exactly how I would take the religious implication is down to Donne's connection, though overall the song's position is clear, the allseeing prophet viewing the same world of *under the red sky* and *World Gone Wrong* and his own history, a summation of *"Love And Theft"* and *Time Out Of Mind*, taking 'Highlands' further down the road with no room now for the light-hearted touches, and returning to his lexicon to complete the 'religious' teaching. There is a school of criticism that would tell me that it is of no relevance what Dylan intended, if the Donne poem is what it brings to my mind then so be it, that is what it 'means' for me. Whilst having an enormous respect for what this approach has brought to modern studies of literature and my own appreciation, I cannot, in all honesty, report back to you that this is how I feel.

Whether or not Donne's poem was in Dylan's mind, consciously or otherwise, does affect how I hear the first verse. 'Can't come back' takes on a wholly different hue, for example, becoming an even more resonant phrase to be uttered at that precise moment.

I prefer the song with the Donne allusion, even it is just a subconscious link that allows divine light to be the source of the all-seeing singer. For a mere mortal with no divine aid to claim: *'I can see what everybody in the world is up against'* and state *'One day you'll open up your eyes and you'll see where we are'* does not ring true to me. It sounds like divine inspiration is involved, with or without any link to *'Good-Friday, 1613. Riding Westward'*.

The reason I have spent this time discussing one potential allusion is twofold. Firstly, I believe 'Sugar Baby' to be a major song, rich in compacted meaning and 'difficult' in the way modern verse is. The song is openly a *'big statement'* and yet its modernist difficulties come not from traditional post-Victorian poetic techniques but from Dylan's new style of song-writing, a style so rich in referential content that it takes you down such paths. I have highlighted only one here, albeit a crucially important one, of numerous examples. This is the risk Dylan is taking as a writer of such songs, we as listeners are not inventing problems; any art form that continually puts quotes, allusions and links in its body invites us to keep finding more.

The danger is of going too far and losing touch with the original work of art itself. If becomes train-spotting it is not art appreciation nor entertaining. Undoubtedly things like the *Huckleberry Finn*, *Great Gatsby*, *Minstrelsy* and folk references do add to both our pleasure and understanding. The question is where does this stop?

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