

*I don't know anybody who's made a record that sounds decent in the past 20 years, really. You listen to these modern records, they're atrocious, they have sound all over them. There's no definition of nothing, no vocal, no nothing,... remember when that Napster guy came up across, it was like, 'Everybody's gettin' music for free.' I was like, 'Well, why not? It ain't worth nothing anyway.*  
Bob Dylan 2006

*A compilation of bits and Bobs from last 30 years? That'll be \$129.99.*  
Sony 2008

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### Introduction:

I wrote this very soon after the release of *Tell Tale Signs*. Although I was presuming *ISIS* would be delayed in order to allow a more considered take on the release, my own work commitments demanded an early response in any case. I have presented it as a dialogue that highlights – if not exaggerates – trends I have felt in myself and in discussions amongst Dylan fans at large.

I have taken the liberty of framing the dialogue in a setting plagiarised brazenly from a classic as Bob does with many an out of copyright source as Dylan Cynic would say or, if you are aligned to Dylan Enthusiast rather than Dylan Cynic, the framework of the dialogue alludes intriguingly to a past literary master in much the same way Dylan binds his own work artistically to Ovid in *Modern Times*. I won't mention the play it comes from as the fun is surely always in the searching and then deciding if it is just rip-off or a deeply thought allusion that adds to the whole.

*In the background is the house of DYLAN ENTHUSIAST, surrounded by huge storage buildings that house a lifetime's collections of all things Bob. Our two friends are lying in the back garden, one of them asleep. On the roof is BDEXTREMISTS.*

### ACT ONE. A Prelude.

DYLAN ENTHUSIAST (DE) *waking CYNIC up*: Why, Cynic! what are you doing, wretched man? The time is nearly upon us, soon the eighth Bootleg Series release will be in our hands.

DYLAN CYNIC (DC): Ah yes, that overpriced monstrosity; a collection of multi-takes, haphazard live tracks, rejected songs and re-released oddities already on official albums from an artist already

decades past when he mattered and when he painted his masterpieces.

DE: Oh, I see I've caught you in a good mood this sunny morning. Nothing like reviewing a release before you have even heard it, eh?

DC: Actually looking at the track list we *have* heard nearly all the songs and even some that look new are probably early try-outs of ones we already have, like that "Dreamin' Of You" nonsense.

DE: Lovely video though!

DC: Yep, nice video, shame about the song. And I notice you ducked the money question.

DE: Who cares about the money when it is Bob! Forget the pounds and feel the quality.

DC: Don't you think \$129.99 is an interesting price for a Dylan item consisting mainly of digital music given his recent remarks in *Rolling Stone* and I quote your hero: ..."*remember when that Napster guy came up across, it was like, 'Everybody's gettin' music for free.' I was like, 'Well, why not? It ain't worth nothing anyway.'*" C'mon, they could have released it in a way where everyone was happy. \$12 dollar for one CD, 20 for two and 30 for three and the ridiculous "deluxe set" at whatever they wanted and then you could decide which to buy without losing out on the music.

DE: After all he's given us he deserves every cent of it as far as I am concerned and you can't put a price on Art. Anyway it is up to you if you want to pay for it and *I* do. C'mon, it is exciting isn't it, a new Bob release?

DC: (relenting) Yes of course it is, it's like when you go to a show and it's still thrilling to see him come on stage....but then he opens his mouth....

DE: Oh stop that! He can still do it when he wants to, didn't you see what Toby Richards-Carpenter said in the last *ISIS*?

DC: Er no, I gave up your teenybopper 'zines years ago, remember.

DE: Well he raves about the show in Halifax this year, says it was "one of the great shows, up there with the best" and insists that Sony should release it saying that if they did "it would transform the public perception of Dylan."

DC: How very true.

DE: (nervously backtracking) Anyway, one thing we both agree on is that this has been one helluva year for releases. We have had the *61 Carnegie Chapter Hall*, not one but two classic 63 shows....

DC: Yes, that's true, it has been quite an incredible year already for releases from the past, and bewilderingly little fanfare for them.

DE: That's because there's no community anymore, because people like you have given fandom up. And, incidentally, I was about to add *GBS 4* to that list.

DC: Ah yes, *GBS 4*, now lets see, it was vastly over-priced, full of things we already had including officially released material and showed an artist very weak in his later years when compared to his earlier ones, and all in all makes a tawdry comparison with earlier GBS releases – now whatever can that put you in mind of? Does it remind you of anything?

DE: (frostily) It certainly can't remind me of something I've not heard yet, can it? Goodbye you old grouch, I'll speak to you after we've had time to listen to it.

DC: Don't forget we'll have the Guardian download tomorrow after we've signed up to some other conglomerate's mailing address just for stage one in this tortuous drip-feed of a release.

DE: Bet you'll sign up in the first nanosecond though!

#### ACT TWO: A Pre-Release Release

CHORUS: *OUR FRIENDS are in the thrall of first listening to another pre-release track.*

*(Phone rings)*

DC: Oh hi, DE, I thought it'd be you.

DE: Oh! Oh! - it's fantastic isn't it?

DC: Yeah, I like it, not as much as the album version though, but very nice, consumer friendly Bob but very pleasant. If I'd never heard the song before I'd be *really* excited, I guess.

DE: Oh come on it is gorgeous, utterly gorgeous. That voice. OK, not better than the "*Love & Theft*" version but nearly as brilliant.

DC: Calm down, in a few weeks it'll be one of the hundreds of things you've raved about that you never play again.

DE: Never! It's really good! Oh I am so excited that tomorrow we'll have the whole thing. Aren't you?

DC: Yeah, can't wait to hear, "Can't Wait", NOT!

CHORUS: *OUR FRIENDS are now in the thrall of first exposure to discs one and two. They had agreed to wait until the afternoon to call each other.*

ACT THREE: Scene i Disc One and Two

DE: Hahahahahaha – who was wrong about "Can't Wait" then? Just shows you never to pre-judge His Bobness.

DC: Yes, astonishing isn't it? But be fair you'd never have predicted that in a million years. And "Someday Baby", good grief.

DE: Yeah, yeah! They are like new songs as is "Marchin' To The City" which sounds incredible. And speaking of new songs, just what about "Red River Shore"?! Absolutley magic; pure unadulterated Dylan.

DC: It's fabulous, even though it sounds exactly like I was expecting it to I still find it utterly irresistible. In fact I need to play it again right now – we can catch up again tomorrow when we've had more time, eh?

CHORUS: *The next afternoon finds our Enthusiast still in full ecstatic mode, but Cynic has already moved on. Their conversation by now runs on two different tracks that barely intersect.*

ACT THREE: Disc One and Two Scene ii

DE: Don't tell me you've gone off it already, you were so enthusiastic yesterday.

DC: Yes the initial rush - I loved "Red River Shore" and still do and I was astonished by the transformations of "Someday Baby" and "Can't Wait", but at the end of the day they are just "Someday Baby" and "Can't Wait". Extraordinary that he did these versions

and chose the putrid ones to put out - but there you go, that's Bob and it's nice to know he still has a bit of Bobness to him, but they are hardly songs one needs to replay in the future, are they?

Having said which, I'll probably play "Can't Wait" again just because you have to keep playing it and believing that they really did put the other version on. And it is a good (by late Bob standards) vocal and sounds exciting when played loudly.

DE: They are both fabulous and the sequencing on disc one is so thoughtful. It is really thoughtfully put together, or feels so anyway.

DC: Yes, well until the live track comes crashing in anyway. At the same time though, the second disc is a dreadful hotch-potch. "32-20 Blues" - which is such a let-down- has no connection whatsoever with the songs it is sandwiched between. You lurch from genre to genre in an odd way and what on Earth were they thinking putting the live "Lonesome Day Blues" on it where they did - or anywhere come to that?

DE: I'll grant you that, but its supposed to be like a bootleg after all, tracks culled from everywhere and stuck together. It is an odd place for that - and for "Ain't Talkin'" ...

DC: Well that is just a press of the skip button for me, I listened to the first few lines once to see if it had changed much but aborted it after I heard "mystic garden". One of them was already more than enough, thank you very much.

DE: OK, OK I can't expect you to like that but you've got to love the acoustic "Most Of The Time", surely? It is just amazing.

DC: Well, no, sorry, not 'love'. It was nice to hear once or twice but the melody is too unformed to have the pull of later versions. It's an appealing idea, a later Dylan song - and one of the very best - in early Dylan folk troubadour style. It's just not quite got there yet, a little later this might have been stunning but we already have a masterly version on *Oh Mercy* and of course that outrageously brilliant one...

DE: ....Yes, yes but I love it here too and the second "Mississippi", not as good as the first one maybe, but fascinating. And don't you forget that you'd already heard the first "Mississippi" before you heard these disks.

DE: Hardly my fault that it was released in dribs and drabs. Come to that, I'd already heard the lovely Ralph Stanley duet and the

stately "Cross the Green Mountain" too because they've already been released. These discs end more like *Biograph* than *Bootleg Series*. Even you can't defend that.

DE: Yeah but at the same time, it is not Sony's fault that things like "Miss the Mississippi" and the live "Ring Them Bells" are not new to you.

DC: True, true and how wonderful they sound in this quality, You are right there, if I did not listen to bootlegs I would be far more excited by this release. Even so, there'd still be too much filler. Things like this "Born In Time" for example, nothing wrong with it as a version I suppose but well it is neither a new nor a good song with its faux poetic conceits and grandstanding self-importance.

DE: Well I think it is lovely, and this could well be better than the album version.

DC: (Yawns ostentatiously.....)

DE: And there's another really good "Mississippi" so that is two new versions already of this classic.

DC: Yes, and again it is nice to hear them, especially the sweet first version but it is not a patch on the version we have on "*Love And Theft*" – it turns a major, majestic song into a minor one, albeit very pleasant. And there's still another version to come – have trouble filling the discs did they?

DE: I am sure they did not...

DC: (interrupting) that even with these live cuts arbitrarily thrown in?

DE: (persevering)... and it is hugely interesting to hear how he works with songs like "Mississippi" and "Dignity".

DC: Of course, but that's merely academic interest. They are interesting to study and more than pleasant to listen to but they don't make me re-evaluate the songs as songs in any way.

DE: Well I could listen to all his versions of "Dignity" for the rest of my life. It is fantastic to hear it in "unfinished masterpiece" mode like here.

DC: I don't agree with the word 'masterpiece' and I am not surprised he had such trouble trying to get a version that he was

happy with; the whole song is just too self consciously clever to pull off with sincerity.

DE: Rubbish, he got more than one brilliantly realised, finished version. It is way above what other rock writers could come up with... and, incidentally, nothing ever stops you calling "Caribbean Wind" a masterpiece and it is far more unfinished than this!

DC: *Touché*, I just can't help it, I'm a total sucker for "Caribbean Wind".

DE: As you should be, but you should be for "Dignity" too.

DC: Well, I'm sorry but I can't pretend to be *that* excited when I am not. Where are all the new songs? "Red River Shore" is stunning but I've already played it more times than I fear the song's length can sustain....

DE: That's not fair, there are other new songs too and what did you have against "32-20 Blues"? It is not disappointing, it is just what you'd expect and it'd have fitted perfectly on *World Gone Wrong* which even you still rate, remember. Your problem is you expect too much.

DC: And you are too easily pleased. It is, as you keep reminding me, Bob Dylan we are talking about.

DE: But it is full of classics!

DC: Yes, agreed "Series of Dreams", "Ring Them Bells", "Mississippi", "Cross The Green Mountain" and "Most Of The Time" are brilliant songs, but then we knew that already!

DE: We didn't know "Can't Wait" and "Someday Baby" could sound this good though did we?

DC: No, but they are hardly brilliant songs are they?

DE: Whatever you say, you'll still be coming round to my place to hear the third disc, won't you?

DC: Sure thing, I'll be there before the postman! The third one's got to have the best stuff on it at that price!

DE: Well I am telling you now, though, that we are playing it straight through, none of your skipping tracks in my house.

DC: Oh God, OK then but you can tell it is just thrown together you don't have to play it in that order.

DE: In my house, yes, you do.

### ACT FOUR Disc Three

CHORUS: *OUR FRIENDS are in the home of The Enthusiast. They are now the thrall of first exposure to disc Three. We catch snatches of their excited reaction from the window outside.*

DE: Wow, that Duncan and Brady was a great opener, eh?

DC: Yeah, sounded such fun; it is way past time that the Bromberg sessions were released in full. Hold on a live track... Hell's teeth - that was jumping through the roof too, light years better than the released song.

DE: Bloody hell, what an album *Time Out Of Mind* could have been, should have been.

DC: Yes indeed, he should have done all the really bad *Time Out Of Mind* songs live as they sound so much better anyway what's next? This disc is starting like a wild party

DE: I knew you'd like it. That party mood is gonna change though, 'cos here's "Mississippi".....Another lovely, another lovely version

DC: Beautiful, I know it's only our first listen but this already sounds like my second favourite version of them all, the jaunty step works very well, changes the song entirely of course.

DE: Yes, yet again(!) the lyrics were changed too. Pity I didn't write them down...

DC: That "Most of the Time" is the same vocal as the album isn't it?

DE: Possibly, I'll compare them later; sounds like they've changed the backing and dropped...

DC: Shhh, here's "Ring Them Bells"....

DE: It is lovely to hear him play a solo piano version so beautifully

DC: Yeah, hard to believe he's the guy on keyboards on stage these days. What's next?

DE: "Things Have Changed" .....that was pretty good, huh?

DC: It was OK, as good as it gets I guess. Now for the biggie!

DE: Well that "Red River Shore" was gorgeous. the different backing is so apt and the careworn vocals make it seem even more real.

DC: No argument here. Christ, this might be an even better version.

DE: Maybe, I'm just happy to have both.... It would have been nice to hear "Girl From Green Briar Shore" before or after this.

DC: Yes it would have; oh well, never mind that - after all these years waiting "Red River Shore" is just as overwhelming as we'd have hoped for. Bob be praised! Mind you it is the only new song of any note. What a contrast to earlier releases.....oh here's your "Born In Time" again....

DE: Wow! That was ravishing!

DC: Mmmm, it is still the same song; essentially the same feeling and performance - I've nothing against the versions here but I am not sure what they add, I'd probably pick either of these two over the album version...

DE: Probably?! What are you talking about? This one is far superior, listen again later...here's another "Marchin' To The City."

DC: Oh dear, oh dear, even "Born In Time" seems a classic now, in retrospect.

DE: Well they couldn't continue with this run of classic after classic, I guess; lets hope the next one erases the memory of that!.....It did - another Can't Wait, another completely different song.

DC: Interesting too, this one is positively creepy.

DE: One to go and it's gonna be GREAT.

DC: Sorry DE, I didn't like that much, seems to have been tacked on as a late thought, not necessarily a good one I'm afraid.

DE: What! It was a *World Gone Wrong* classic! How can you love the album and not this? It is the same Dylan, same voice, same feeling.

DC: Shit, I hope you're wrong or my memory of *World Gone Wrong* is very false. I don't remember the vocals as sounding as very pinched as these do. Maybe it has a lot to do with the placing. And it is another cover in the style of the time, so welcome I guess, but lightweight at best.....

DE: "Pinched", "lightweight"? Are you insane? You are missing the point entirely. Here. I'll read what the critics said about it to you. (Moves towards a huge pile of magazines, papers and printouts all in separate Perspex folders.)

DC: Don't you dare quote the fawning press at me, of course there'll be huge waves of acclaim for it from around the globe. It is like the old Wordsworth v. the young; the old fart gets accolades, tributes and awards while when the genius poured forth in younger days there was mainstream scorn a-plenty.

DE: This isn't the same thing....

DE: It is exactly the same, just you remember that *Modern Times* - an album that makes *Down In The Groove* seem like *Blonde On Blonde* - was hailed as a masterpiece....

DE: Hey, Hey, now you are going far too far, you should... you should....you should apologize!

DC: You are right, I should apologize. Sorry, ... *Down In The Groove*.

DE: Right that's it, you've gone too far. Get out, go on get out of here, I never want to see you again.

### ACT Five

*At the door of the enthusiast's house the two friends finally part, never to meet again.*

DC: Do not vex yourself so, DYLAN ENTHUSIAST; henceforth your life shall be nothing but your pleasure in all things Bob, and you shall no longer have me for your foil. But come, let us part amicably.

DE (*resignedly*) So be it; if you will, let us go on in life then each on his own path.

*The CHORUS turns and faces the audience.*

You meanwhile, oh! countless myriads, listen to the sound counsels  
I am going to recall from the works of Himself and take care they  
are not lost upon you. That would be the fate of vulgar spectators,  
not that of such an audience. Hence, people, lend me your ear, if  
you love frank speaking and:

*Trust yourself,  
Trust yourself to know the way that will prove true in the end.  
Trust yourself,  
Trust yourself to find the path where there is no if and when.  
Don't trust me to show you the truth  
When the truth may only be ashes and dust.  
If you want somebody you can trust, trust yourself.*

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