This is a copy of my (AM) interview with ISIS editor Derek Barker (DB) for ISIS issue 202. That issue also includes my review of the Kindle, updated, version of Richard Thomas’s Why Dylan Matters and a comprehensive re-appraisal of Dylan’s involvement in Sam Peckinpah’s Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid by Derek. There will be some small alterations between the below and the originally printed piece, but nothing of substance. (Andrew Muir)

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DB: I’ve read about how you got into Dylan (http://www.amuir.co.uk/Dylan/Misc/gotinto.pdf), but what was your introduction to Shakespeare?

I got off to a very bad start, like most of us who went to school at that time, by being made to read Shakespeare with no hint that this was something that was supposed to be watched, nor any guidance or context at all, and at too young an age in the first place. All we did was stand up and read 10 lines and then sit down, and the people next to us stood up and read 10 lines and sat down and then the next pupil stood up and read 10 lines, and it went round and round the class until that period was over. Looking back now, it was more of an exercise in crowd control rather than anything else.

Shakespeare really came into my life just as my love for Dylan exploded exponentially. In 1975, as I experienced for the first time Blood on the Tracks, a slew of Dylan bootlegs including the “Royal Albert Hall”, and I was covering Macbeth for my final school exams leading into what turned out to be a glorious summer. I was finished with school, which I had detested, and I was reading and listening to all this incredible, and new to me at the time, material. Oh, and learning to drive because I was building up to my 17th birthday. And what hits you at that age then stays forever, and so Dylan and Shakespeare have remained with me ever since. At the end of that summer, I was off to university for four years, and Shakespeare was a significant part of each year. Anyone fortunate enough to do this would be overwhelmed with wonder at his gifts and mind. And, obviously, I was playing Dylan all the time and, though I couldn’t believe it was really happening, I first saw him live in 1978 just as Shakespeare moved into being an entire paper on his own in my final year. So they probably have always been entwined for me, though I never thought of them together in a book until the last few years.

DB: And how did this particular book begin?

I followed up 2013’s One More Night, a book on Dylan live with a book on live, outdoor Shakespeare in 2015, Shakespeare in Cambridge. Seeing the overlaps was as inevitable as it was irresistible. I took notes as I went and wrote the genesis of the book on my Shakespeare website, which you ran in ISIS if I recall correctly. Soon after that, I was in contact with Dylan’s office, about something, for the first time in over a decade, and so I put a copy of the article in with what I was sending them, not knowing at that time that the office gets a copy of every ISIS. Not long after that, Dylan gave his Nobel speech and mentioned the same connections and the way he put it chimed exactly with what I had written and was working on expanding.

DB: You were already writing the book, then?
AM: Yes, well, when work allowed me to, at least. It was a case of taking voluminous notes at that point and researching endless background information and connections which never ceased to multiply. I didn’t have much choice as I had to purge my mind of all the Dylan and Shakespeare parallels, as I was beginning to think of nothing else.

DB: You make it clear in the introduction that is not a direct comparison, but there are a number of such comparisons nonetheless.

AM: Yes, that’s true. I was aware that putting two names together would be controversial. A teacher upon hearing I was writing a book on Shakespeare and Dylan, asked, pointedly “do you rank them, too?” So, I made it clear early on that in that sense no one is comparable to Shakespeare. As Dylan says, when you go to see a Shakespeare play, you hear the English language at its peak.

There are also other reasons why they are not directly comparable. They lived in very different times, and the lengths of their respective careers contrast sharply. Dylan is heading into his sixth decade of creative output where Shakespeare had not much more than two of those. Also, although they both worked in more than one art form, they are primarily renowned for the very different pursuits of drama and song. I was also faced with the situation of us having very limited verifiable information on Shakespeare and an overwhelming amount on Dylan, although you have to work hard on verification there, too, for other reasons.

My book is not concerned with these, although I note them in the introduction, but instead concentrates on those connections and parallels at the core of their working practice that do exist. My driving point is the primacy of the performance of verbal texts which are at the same time of literary value that exceeds anyone in Shakespeare’s case and anyone in his own era in Dylan’s. As far as Western Art goes, anyway. Another major theme behind the book is how they both capture our deepest feelings and thoughts and give voice to those on stage for us. It’s an almost miraculous ability of capturing the exact essence of our individual and collective inner-selves and uttering that in the most perfect way, time after time.

The book’s sub-title stresses performing and even in my comparative chapter on verbal techniques this takes centre stage, if you’ll excuse the expression. When I show their use of puns, I - well, they, come to that - concentrate on aural punning. The emphasis is still on performance whenever appropriate.

DB: You also mention a lot about their use of paradox there, and quote Dylan talking about the favourite line of his own...

AM: Yes, but let’s not give it away (laughs). Dylan’s favourite line of his own at a particular point in time, at least, though it could still be for all we know. I suspect that changes with his moods, though. Which is more than fair enough, as for any of us it would be a question with so many competing contenders. What was most interesting in this case was that the paradoxical quote was Dylan’s favourite, then at least, because he viewed it as his “supreme Shakespearean shot.”
DB: Readers might be wondering what sort of parallels you were referring to earlier.

There are so many. You have to be careful, though, as given the scope and genius of both artists you are bound to see many similarities. You can see many between any two named artists, for that matter. But the fact that they are both in the business of putting on shows, and trying to get hits, leads to some that might at first not spring to mind. One important consequence, to which I always return, is that to put the shows on they must always be working in a collaborative enterprise. Even solo shows need roadies, lighting crew, possible guitar technicians and certainly someone taking care of the sound. Shakespeare always was involved in a company - he was unique in staying with the same one throughout his career in the way he did, as sharer, author and actor. Every play was a collaboration. Every time Dylan plays with other musicians, the same is true.

For various reasons, both Shakespeare and Dylan also chose to write collaboratively despite their own unparalleled abilities. Due to Shakespeare’s genius and reputation it is routinely assumed that he was always the main player in his collaborations and the younger writers were there to learn from him. That could be the case, but it is more likely, in his later years, that Shakespeare was hitching his name, by now considered somewhat old-fashioned, to that of the latest ‘chart successes’. Collaborator John Fletcher’s name was the one most probably selling the tickets in the co-written last plays of Shakespeare. Similarly, Middleton was the talk of the town and had had the biggest sales at Shakespeare’s Globe, when Shakespeare joined up with him. This strikes me as very akin to Dylan teaming up with the Grateful Dead and Tom Petty. The desire is to sell tickets, to fill auditoriums in which to perform.

Despite the reverence awarded their writing genius, the driving force behind both their careers was pure show business, and this dictates everything. For example, earlier in both their careers, even at peaks of success, they shared the same need to be constantly reinventing themselves for audiences that were forever on the lookout for the ‘new’. In Shakespeare’s London in the 1590s, most plays were only performed a few times before being replaced by the next ‘latest thing’. The popular music market of the 1960s was similar, and both decades witnessed a frenzy of creative outpouring to meet these demands. This had an impact on our two artists in major ways.

Oooops, sorry, I’m getting carried away on my hobby-horse here. And these aren’t even the main ones, ha! Points like these are small parts of whole chapters, but I keep going back to them as I think the Shakespeare elements surprise people, and, importantly, they once again stress that performance takes precedence. They are important points, too, in their own way. But there are so many things I want to say here; I’ll never stop! There are chapters on a wide range of topics, including sources wordplay, career development, performance considerations, religion. Many topics...

DB: And you can read them individually.
AM: Yes, it is structured for standalone reading of chapters though the final chapter is a practical demonstration and summation of nearly all the themes in the book, and so it is best to leave that till last. In the other chapters, you can read them in any order you prefer, any links to elsewhere in the book are noted. I have picked the order they are in because I think it works best, but it is not necessary to follow it.

DB: OK. I was struck by the generous amount of lyrics you have been allowed to quote.

AM: Yes, indeed, and so special thanks are due to Jeff Rosen and David Beal as the book would not be the same without them. You know, it’s a funny thing, but when I first entered Dylan fandom I kept hearing stories of the office that portrayed them as being very anti-fans, beyond unhelpful to the point of belligerence and yet I’ve never had even a hint of any of that. Jeff Rosen was absolutely superb with me over Troubadour, too. Naturally, they are very protective of Bob, and for goodness sake that’s what we’d all want them to be, but the office is so friendly as well as being so professional that I often wonder how it got that other reputation in the first place.

Actually, it was quite embarrassing this time, and I will look silly by admitting this, but what the heck. When I asked for permission Jeff was his usual helpful self and passed me on to David to complete the formalities. When David saw what I was actually intending to quote, however, he sent back an email pointing out as politely as possible that I had gone somewhat too far. As you know, Derek, I have spent most of this decade teaching English to business students and one of the things I often had to spend a lot of time on was instructing them on how to get the correct tone for letters. David Beal’s would have been an exemplary one to show them – not that I ever would have of course! - as he very courteously explained, in perfect business English, what should have been obvious to me regarding natural boundaries, which I had exceeded to the extent of being close to quoting entire songs at times.

DB: Oh dear…

AM: Yes, I’m blushing! My only defence, and it may be a flimsy one, is that there is no restriction on quoting Shakespeare’s lines and so when I was writing about them in parallel I tended to provide a balance of lines from each. There is still, as you say, a very generous helping of Dylan’s lyrics and so I am very happy and very grateful for that. Isis readers wouldn’t really need the lyrics to hand anyway as they have got them all in their heads, I’m sure, but it makes for a more comfortable reading situation even then, and naturally it is crucially important for those not as au fait with the lyrics, especially the out-take and live alternatives.

DB: Do you fear that people will be resistant to you coupling the two names together?

There’s nothing surer! I’m certain that there will be a lot of resistance, and that I will attract quite a considerable degree of flak for daring to put the two names together. Having said which, other than the “do you rank them, too?” jibe, I have to say that I have been very pleasantly surprised by the warmth of those in the Shakespeare community who know of the idea and of the highly positive feedback from the few who have read it. I had four draft readers and three of these were Shakespeare experts, with Tara Zuk, a recent Isis
contributor, keeping a very helpful eye on things from the Dylan side. Each reader was aware, to various degrees, of the other writer of course but that was the split in overall expertise. One of my Shakespeare experts, a retired Professor, whom I met when we both were being interviewed for a radio programme on Shakespeare, surprised me by his ready knowledge of the relatively obscure (in the general population, I mean) “Lenny Bruce”. Even better, he agreed with what I said about it, especially as mine is a minority view amongst Dylan fans. I was later to discover that he had once shared a flat at Hull University with Aidan Day and so I am not the first friend he has met who talks about Dylan all the time.

The resistance could go the other way too and Dylan fans could be put off by the Shakespeare side of things. I dearly hope not, as I have endeavoured to write it in such a way for it to be open to everyone whether fans of Shakespeare or Dylan or both. It is not written in jargon nor is it overly academic, which is hardly surprising as there’s a whole section of the book warning against an overly academic approach to writers for performance art.

The only time anyone might find it heavy going is during certain quotes that I use regarding Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, but these are used precisely to show that they are far removed from the experience of watching the play. At the same time I did apply academic rigour to it, and it is not in the slightest condescending or patronising to those who may not be experts in either field. A major theme of the book is the convergence of popular art with academic studies and so, in tandem with this, its approach attempts to combine the rigorous research of the latter with a widely accessible tone. I like to describe my style as ‘analytical but understandable’.

Since I am speaking to an audience of Dylan fans here, I could add that even if one was just to read the Dylan passages in the book then there is still a wide range covered: the burning questions around the use of source material, the Nobel Prize, takes on his writing and performing not written about elsewhere to say nothing of a very large amount of material examining *Tempest* and so forth. And there’s a lot of myth-busting, but that is for Shakespeare as much as for Dylan if not more. Undoubtedly, it’s best to read it all as the parallels and connections are as illuminating as they are at times surprising.

DB: Speaking of surprising did anything surprise you in researching and writing it?

Oh yes, loads and loads of things. That Dylan could have seen Ophelia in an iron vest in 1965 stands out, as does Shakespeare having to face his own ‘Judas type scenario’. Also the close parallels between their careers and the opposition they met both individually, and for their art forms in general, was amazing. The depth and breadth of their shared cultural background and how that bleeds into the language that they use is something I was aware of, but laying it out in detail was eye-opening. On the more micro-level the correlations and sparks between their writing just kept appearing and appearing. They still do actually; I don’t think it’s ever going to stop for me, now. They both have created so much that this may be inevitable.

Another surprise is how things can hide in plain sight. I’d actually finished the book, or thought I had, but was trying to drift off to sleep one night when a Dylan line suddenly came into my head as they so often do. It was not at all an obscure line and one that I had heard
countless times in my life before, but which I suddenly realised was a direct reference to something in Shakespeare…. 

DB: Which line? 

… No, I’m not going to tell you that, as I’m already giving too much away! What was incredible, though, was having gone through the whole process of researching and writing the book and yet completely overlooking this.

Others have been surprised, not just me. I can preview some blurbs here. Michael Gray writes that my “superbly close attention to the work of each takes us down the often surprising, remarkably rich and unexplored avenue that links the two.” While a trustee of the British Shakespeare Association notes that the book ensured “that a return to the works of each artist is enhanced by what has been revealed about the other - and perhaps most surprising is quite how much there is to discover about Shakespeare in the light of the material presented about Dylan (and not just the other way round).”

DB: Well, that’s certainly encouraging. From – maybe unnecessary given that - fears of resistance to hopes, what is it you hope to achieve with this book?

My hope is that people will be attracted by my novel approach. Despite both artists having been written about so extensively, they have never been approached like this before. By placing their work, circumstances and careers side by side new light is cast on their achievements. Everyone who has read it has remarked on this. Although it is more for Dylan fans than anyone else - let’s be honest here, it is Dylan who stands most to gain from the comparisons and parallels - I sincerely hope that Shakespeare devotees and general readers pick up on it, too. There’s a lot in it for students of literature and even more for those of performing arts.

DB: Well, good luck with it all! And what’s next on your Dylan horizon writing-wise? 

AM: The way my work is going at the moment I’m not sure when I’d have time, but the creation of the Dylan Tulsa Archives have actually put an end to my next project before it had even properly got started. I wanted to write a book on the Oh Mercy album and sessions. I wrote an article a while back and always intended to go back to it and turn it into a full-length study. Then Clinton Heylin put out the order the songs had been written in, and we also had Dylan’s inventive chapter on it in Chronicles. Putting those together with my own ideas, I could see a book developing…

DB: Sounds good to me.

AM: Yes, but, as I say, I am afraid Tulsa makes that impossible.
DB: Really, are you sure?

AM: Yes, definitely. There's a lot of writing you can do without going there, but some would be wasteful, and this is a prime example of that, sadly for me. You can't just pretend it doesn't exist and from what I have heard about the very extensive material they hold surrounding that album, then this project would be pointless without spending considerable time there, and by that I mean months. I would be writing my book while knowing that I only have a small percentage of the currently available information nor would I have heard anything like all the out-takes, and I would know that someone is over there doing that research, or will be soon, and my work would immediately be out of date and likely to be invalidated to some extent or another. I feel it almost inevitably would be to a significant degree. The Archives are a game changer for Dylan studies.

DB: Thanks for the interview and I look forward to you coming over to ISIS to sign the books.

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*Dylan & Shakespeare: The True Performing Of It* signed copies; Amazon [US, UK, Europe](https://www.amazon.com)

Also: [Foyles](https://www.foyles.com)  [Waterstones](https://www.waterstones.com) etc.

*ISIS Bob Dylan magazine* = [https://www.bobdylanisis.com/](https://www.bobdylanisis.com/)