

Some Random Notes on first hearing “Murder Most Foul”

I find myself self-centredly interested in the Shakespearean title which is one of 4 direct references (others are perhaps present with varying degrees of ambiguity)ⁱ.

More importantly, I love the way details and reflections on the assassination keep bubbling back to the forefront once he has ostensibly ‘moved on’ from the opening into a stream-of-consciousness recounting of times past. That’s perfectly done, or perfectly *executed* to use his precise pun.

There are numerous puns, of which some are quite macabre. Of those, ‘executed’ is perhaps the most superb, while “leaning to the left” is very deft (it joins the macabre by context). On the other hand, the most important pun is probably not in the song, but in the brief note that introduced it.

“Observant” is a very Dylanesque touch and “pay attention” is the lesser of its two meanings in play here. That religious imagery weaves throughout the song. Why is it *12 million* souls by the way? Was that Wolfman’s radio audience figure, coincidentally the number of sales of “I Wanna Hold Your Hand”. Why is the movie watched 33 times? LP speed? A 33 as opposed to a 45 (a pun in there, too). No, it can’t be that, perhaps just because it fits and sounds good, the actual number signifying “many times” being irrelevant? Though one should never presume that.

Like religion, other themes keep circling back, such as the references to Shakespeare, magic, the first Zevon album.

Elm in the ending of one verse and Ellum in the opening line of the next was a wonderful touch, linking the murder to Folk, Blues and Civil Rights history in one delightful move. More of that kind of thing would have helped make up for the cheap rhymes. But then the McGonnagal touch for banal and childish rhymes and sentimentality is a deliberate style. On “Tempest” (song) he did the same; after having written original lyrics, he then worked and worked at it and reduced it down to a Carter Family-based run of doggerel, brilliantly delivered. Making a point about performance and/or echoing rushed Broadside Ballads?

“Roll on John”, and the Nobel Speech over jazzy background (recorded separately, mmmmm I wonder....) also lead to this. Simplistic ballads with quotes, name checks, historical data and wonderful delivery. The most wince-

inducing rhymes are right at the beginning, giving the effect of a rushed street song of Elizabethan times, though they resurface later, too, as in the eye-wateringly simplistic couplet: "I'm goin' to Woodstock, it's the Aquarian Age/ Then I'll go over to Altamont and sit near the stage", though this may well be a mocking dig at "American Pie" which Dylan has mercilessly attacked in relatively recent times,

Patsy to Patsy Cline was not in the same league as Elm-Ellum. 'Patsy' itself was fine – quoting Oswald fits the song perfectly, but I felt the Cline connection very forced, the opposite to the delightful Elm-Ellum link. I don't see why Cline was dragged in, but perhaps I'm missing something, and it is as clever as Ellum. I have only had two listens and was busy through one of them, so maybe there was a point to it that I will get on later listens. (A slightly later thought: Actually, thinking of what Cline represents it is perhaps much closer to "Elm-Ellum" than I first thought – that's the danger in writing these 'automatic responses' ...Even later note: on reading this, Michael Gray pointed out that Patsy Cline also died in 1963.)

I've memories of a Van Morrison album where he lists titles of songs he used to listen to in a manner similar to the long "play xxxxxx" lines on this. ("Rave On, John?" may have been the title and it too was recited over a jazzy background if my ever-fallible memory is correct). The extended anaphora that Dylan utilises here looks stultifyingly boring on the page, but, in performance, he makes it mesmerising through his phrasing and delivery.

Was "Dumbarton Drums" played during the parade/motorcade? Having lived a few miles from Dumbarton, I'm curious. I suspect it was played that day as so many of the references are factual; "three bums", street and place names and so on.

As with "Tempest" (song), the performance convinces, (do we know when it was recorded? Around 2018 or even later or am I wildly off-beam...?) The lyrics feel like they were written at the same time as the ones on *Tempest*, but the singing feels later, and the style seems post-Nobel.

The opening strongly reminded me of, Bob's pal, John Fogerty's "I Saw It On TV". (lyrically) Interesting that the Americans see Dallas and the Beatles as two sides of one historical moment, forever entwined in their national consciousness:

The coon-skin caps, Yankee bats, the Hound Dog man's big start

The A-Bomb fears, Annette had ears, I lusted in my heart

A young man from Boston set sail the new frontier

And we watched the Dream dead-end in Dallas

They buried innocence that year

I know it's true, oh so true

'Cause I saw it on TV

We gathered round to hear the sound comin' on the little screen

The grief had passed, the old men laughed, and all the girls screamed

'Cause four guys from England took us all by the hand

It was time to laugh, time to dance

Time to join a band

I suspect I will not have time to write a proper article on this, though this is not a year in which predicting the future is a wise move, and so thought I would upload this instant reaction. I realise I am making myself a hostage to the fortune dependent on later listens and fuller contemplation, but, what the heck.....

ⁱ The Shakespeare-Dylan connection is explored in my latest book: <http://www.a-muir.co.uk/Dylan/saidin19.pdf>