

APPENDIX ONE

21st July 1993:
“Hey, that’s great...”

I am due to return to an important meeting after a short lunch break. I get a message that Alex, my brother-in-law, wants me to call him immediately. I gather it is something very urgent indeed. I have to go into the meeting as I’m already late. I reckon that it can only be one of two things: an illness in the family or something Dylan-related. If the former he surely would have said so. I have to assume it is the latter, and sit in a ferment of worry and nerves (I presume that Dylan is on telly or that some big news has broken) for the eternity of the 100 minutes that follow.

The minute the meeting ends, I rush out to phone Alex. I’m more than stunned to hear that Dylan has been in Camden and that Alex has stood next to him. Although he had had no opportunity to speak to Dylan, he was at least rewarded by seeing Dylan walk backwards into a café as part of a video shoot. One of Alex’s colleagues even spoke to Bob and obtained an autograph with a lovely little personal message for Alex.

Overwhelmed, pleased, a bit jealous – all those feelings at once, with the nagging question: could he still be there?

Alex is still talking: of a song possibly called “Blood In My Eyes”, of Dylan singing with a busker, of the autograph he has. This is all too much. He goes. I call Larry. General disbelief and astonishment later, Larry says he cannot possibly

get there but will phone Mike Sutton¹⁰² in Camden to see if anything is still happening. He tells me to call back in 20 minutes. Five minutes later I call him back. He hasn't got through to Mike. I ask him – very precisely – to tell me that there is no possibility that Dylan is still there and that I've to be sensible and go home. He follows my instructions to the letter; I hang up, step into the street and hail the first taxi I see.

Within three minutes we hit a traffic jam. I gnaw at my fingernails, knuckles, wrists and arms, still the taxi crawls along. I have the bright idea of calling Compendium Books,¹⁰³ who sell my fanzine, *Homer, The Slut*. I tell the driver that I'll be back but must run and make a phone call; I have no worries that I'll catch him up. I think that I'd better appear cool and collected – after all, Dylan probably left ages ago.

After a few rings, I'm greeted by the familiar voice of Compendium's buyer, Mike. I interrupt him hurriedly "Hello, I supply you with *Homer, The Slut*, a Dylan magazine, do you need any more copies?" "Funny you should ring just now, he's sitting straight across the road at the window of a restaurant...." click, *GRRRR!*

Within seconds I am back in the cab, impressing upon the driver that, traffic jam notwithstanding, I have to be in Camden High Street *NOW*. I expect he couldn't make out any of my words, but he got the idea. Sooner than I'd thought possible, we were in Camden High Street.

I get the taxi to stop straight across from Compendium Books. Sure enough there is a restaurant there, called Fluke's Cradle.¹⁰⁴ I walk in. For Mike to have seen him from the bookstore, Dylan would have had to have been in the room where I now stand. The room was empty of Dylan, bereft of Bob.

¹⁰² Mike Sutton has been going to Dylan shows around the world for over 30 years. Known for his dedication in queuing for hours before the door opens so he can be as near Dylan as possible, he usually spends Saturdays in Camden High Street near Compendium Bookshop. On this particular Saturday he went to a local supermarket instead and missed everything. I always point out how amusingly ironic this was. He has not laughed yet, no matter how wittily I put it.

¹⁰³ Sadly Compendium Books closed in the year 2000.

¹⁰⁴ Fluke's Cradle featured heavily in the "Blood In My Eyes" video. It had paintings on the walls for sale, and Bob is sitting beneath one such on the cover of *World Gone Wrong*. Alas, Fluke's Cradle is no more. Shortly after my Dylan experience it was sold, redecorated and renamed.

I trudge across to Compendium to ask when he left, what they saw etc. They kindly grab me at the door and say: "He's still there, he's in the back now, having a meal." "Can I have a *Homer, The Slut*?" "Yes, but don't take the top one, it's dog-eared. Take two and bring one back signed." "On your bike!"

I take two and go back across to Fluke's Cradle. My plan is simple; I'll go into the restaurant and sit as close to Dylan as possible, and ask for his autograph if there is a convenient opportunity as he leaves. I pass through the bar, thinking that above all I must be inconspicuous. I go into the restaurant and... *Oh my God He's really there!* OK, I went in knowing he would be there but seeing him really there, like really him, really sitting there ... too much! I've read that in moments of shock the body is supposed to have a kind of automatic defence system. I've obviously been programmed wrongly as when I went into shock my body went on the attack. Knees buckling, head spinning and heart attempting to smash through the ribs!

Dylan is wearing a top hat, sitting in profile, that nose, those curls; visions of Blackbushe and all that '78 meant to me seeing him live for the first time, visions of so many years before and after that. I stand stock still. I somehow remember that I am supposed to be inconspicuous. Dylan's table was down a few stairs to the left. I go to sit at the nearest table to him on my level of the restaurant (a whole other level) and try to be cool. I pick up a menu, though I know I'll never swallow anything I order. The menu slips through my sweaty paws. I decide I'm too conspicuous so I move to the next nearest table, which just happens to have a better view of our man. I realize I am, in fact, totally conspicuous as Dylan and his entourage are the only people in the restaurant apart from me. Maybe I'm not supposed to be there, I think, and this thought prompts others that remind me I'd always said I'd never disturb him in this way and that I was acting very stupidly. I leave the dining area and go back to the front bar.

I'm still feeling pretty happy though, seeing Him so close is a big thrill. I order a drink. I sit down. I stand up. I sit down again. I move table. I decide on an alternate strategy. I could go downstairs again and ask someone if they could get Dylan to sign a *Homer*. This I do, whispering my request and stressing that I only want it if it will not unduly trouble Dylan. "Go and ask him yourself." I glance up at Dylan, a mere four seats away.

"No, I don't want to disturb him and anyway it isn't physically possible." "OK, maybe." "I'll be sitting in the bar if you manage to get it signed. Thanks a lot."

I sneak back out and wait. A few minutes – or eternity – pass. My *Homer* is returned, this person doesn't feel it is right for him to present it to Dylan. "Fair enough," I think. I'm happy enough and have remembered all the stories about him being pestered by fans. I'll just sit and watch him leave.

A few more minutes pass and someone comes over to me and says: "Go now! Now's a good time." I stand up, hesitate, look doubtful. "You'll never have a better chance in your life, go now." I go. Back in the restaurant only Dylan's table is now occupied. The furthest away table; Dylan, naturally, the most difficult person to get near to. To get to him I'll have to push past someone I don't recognise and then Dave Stewart.

If I'd thought that my heart was pounding before – and, hey, it had been – it was doing something else altogether this time. There were four young-looking people at the table; three on the far side, one nearest me, then next to him Dave Stewart and next to him, Himself. Looking absolutely gorgeous. You know what they say about 'an aura around him'?

Well, I'd always thought that was nonsense – or, rather, a projection of our feelings. I was wrong. The aura is almost tangible. My legs are threatening to give way, as is my rib cage. I try to detach my tongue from the roof of my mouth and my jaw from the floor.

At this moment there is a babble of conversation in the room. Dave Stewart is facing Dylan – who is staring straight ahead in profile (and what a profile) – asking a series of questions quite vehemently. I cannot make the questions out due to the conversation amongst the others. Dylan is not responding at all. I push past the first person between me and Bob.

A silence falls around the table, with the exception of Dave Stewart's drumming questions. I cannot make out the words because my heart is beating so hard that my ears are drumming louder. I try my pen for the last time – but I'd tried it once too many times and it ran out – luckily I'd brought eight with me, so I fished out my seventh last. I'm now standing right beside Dave Stewart's chair. Dylan is within arm's reach.

The movement in getting *Homer* and the working pen out alerts Dave Stewart to the fact that there is someone behind him and that everything has gone quiet. He stops talking and looks around and up at me. His look is marvellous:

it says "Oh no, not another one of these Dylan nutters". (In a kindly way, however, and later I admire his ready acceptance of himself as a mere pop star beside someone who is a real Star.) He moves his chair slightly, I help him move it a little more.

I am now standing right beside Bob Dylan. There is total silence. Dylan just keeps staring ahead, not reacting to the sudden silence or anything. This lasts for seven zillion aeons (or about two seconds in real time).

Well this is it, after 18 years of interest – some have called it obsessive – in the Man, I'm at the point many of us have dreamed of over and over. What am I going to say?

I have no idea. Staying alive is only barely within my grasp at this moment. Thinking stopped some time ago. I tear my tongue from the roof of my mouth. "Excuse me, Mr. Dylan," I squeak. HE MOVES – and *how* – the head swivels round in an instant. Dylan is staring me in the face (or, at least, the rivers of sweat where my face should be) and says – 'says' is the wrong word but, since the real description does not exist, it will have to do – pointedly and interrogatively: "Yeeaah?"

I am dead. It is not a pleasant feeling. I want my mummy and daddy. I want the ground to swallow me up and never let me out again.

Suddenly I am reborn and mysteriously function. I hold out a copy of *Homer* issue 9. I force the Sahara Desert above my chin to respond; the sand becomes a torrent of burbling water. Something along the following lines pours out:

"Could you please sign this? Of course, it doesn't matter if you don't and I'm very sorry for disturbing you, I realize it is a stupid thing to do, and it has been great being this close to you and I'll leave now."

I don't know how much of this Dylan made out; maybe "please" and "sign" or possibly he just guessed what the pen and magazine were for! "Yeah, sure ...". He took the magazine in his left hand and the pen in his right I was pleased to see. However, the pen was upside-down! A tale flashed through my mind of someone asking for his autograph who didn't have a pen and his devastating response ... maybe if he tries to sign it now he'll get annoyed. Oh No

Fate, however, intervened. Or perhaps it was the whole point of the suggestion that I “go in now” (if so I owe that gentleman so much I could never, ever repay him). Dylan laid the magazine down and jabbed a beautiful finger at the embroidery on the jacket sleeve pictured on the front cover: “*That’s it, that’s the jacket I’m talking about.*” They’d been discussing that very jacket???! Someone says from the far side of the table “Well, that’s it then, it’s Hammersmith.” I answered, in a very small voice, without taking my eyes off Dylan’s right hand which was signing the front cover of *Homer* at that very moment: “Actually it is Belfast. But, hey, if you guys want it to be Hammersmith, then Hammersmith it is.” I take the signed copy from Himself and slither backwards out of the room. I am aware of acute physical pain. But the thought resounds that IT HAS HAPPENED.

I sit in the bar again. Stunned. Staring at *Homer*. More stunningly stunned. Slowly my brain tries to re-establish a modicum of control. “Sit where he’ll have to pass you on the way out,” it urges. I do. I get crafty, I get a table where they’ll have to pass in single file as they approach the door. I take away the second seat and wedge myself into a perfect viewing position as they leave the restaurant. I place the signed *Homer* by my right hand and lay the other one on the table in such a manner that anyone looking as they passed would have to see it.

Another few zillion years (about two minutes) later they start to leave. Stewart and some of the others (three, I think) are talking quite animatedly and, gesticulating over to me, one says something along the lines of: “Oh yes they still do, look at that lad over there.”

They all laugh, in a friendly fashion. I keep my eyes glued straight ahead waiting for Bob Dylan. I can scarcely believe that this is what I am doing. Everything seems surreal. I am dragged back to something approximating reality when, attracted by the laughter, the next person out – a young American – stops at my table (thereby blocking the passageway, so I have another hero) and, pointing to the unsigned *Homer*, asks “Do you subscribe to all of these?” “Yes, and, actually, I run this one.” “Really, how?” “Well I type it up on computer and I’ve a photocopier at home ...”

As those last three words came out, every sensory input in my being went into overdrive again. Dylan had majestically walked up the stairs and was now heading straight for my table. Do not believe he is 5’ 7”, this man is at least 9 feet not including the top hat. He rests one hand on the table and lifts *Homer*

from the young man’s hands. The youngster backs off a little, Dylan moves in. I self-liquidise.

Dylan starts reading the inside cover page. He says something about the information line number and laughs and then flicks a few pages, sometimes pausing to read. There’s a smile, a grunt, an “uh-huh”. Some of my senses are still working, I realise that behind me everyone has left except Dylan and the youngster who first stopped at my table. He is shifting his feet as though to leave, Dylan is still reading but I feel he is about to go.

“Please take it Bob.¹⁰⁵ And thanks for a great year ...” “*Yeah*”. (‘Heard it a million times before’ voice.) He is still standing, reading. “*Did you write this?*” I have no idea what page he is on. Remember I am sitting down, wedged in, he is right ahead and above me. I can see the front and back page and *him*. Having written virtually none of Issue Nine, I answer anyway. “No, I edit it ... it’s not a very good issue anyway Bob ...”¹⁰⁶

He raises an eyebrow and flicks a few more pages, keeps on reading.

Suddenly Dylan realises it is time to go, very regretfully he says: “*This is eh, uh, really interesting but you know I just don’t have time ...*” “Please take it, Bob, take it with you ...” He leans towards me with a look that says: “There’s a puddle on this chair and it is trying to speak to me, but I don’t know what it is burbling.” Thankfully the young man translates: “He’s trying to tell you it is yours to take, Bob.” (How can he say that so easily, I wonder.) Bob, still pretty close, in a very surprised and grateful voice: “*Really? I can take this one?*”

Utter panic, his face is now too close for its own safety. I gasp/scream/whisper “Nothing would give me greater pleasure in life ...” He – Bob FUCKING Dylan – puts the hand with *Homer* (his left) toward my right shoulder and his right hand squeezes my left shoulder as he leans forward and says gratefully “*Hey, that’s great ...*” I am now beyond death, beyond rebirth, beyond Nirvana. I am

¹⁰⁵ At least I think I called him “Bob” from here on in but I cannot be sure.

¹⁰⁶ Why did I say that? How should I know? Maybe I thought he had read a nasty comment. More likely that it was just another blurted-out answer. You may think I was handling this very badly – and you’d be correct – but wait till you try it. I contend that the wittiest, most informed mind ever would gibber in the Presence. So what chance did I have? Anyway, at least I hadn’t fainted or vomited, both of which were distinct possibilities ...

also almost completely incapable of movement. However, Dylan is still nearby so I manage to get up and follow him to the car waiting outside.

I notice Dylan is still being generous with his time, a denim-clad man is shaking his hand and they are exchanging greetings. I notice too that Dave Stewart is in the back of the car videoing everything. But mostly I notice Dylan, how friendly he's being, how people are drawn to him and, finally, something which even he may never understand, how even the ordinary things he does do not lessen the aura, the mystique.

He is doing normal things, but he is set apart. I never believed such a thing possible; but he just doesn't walk and talk like anybody else. He is Bob Dylan. He walks around the back of the car and goes in the far side back seat. (They let him walk near the cars? – dear Christ, I wouldn't.) He is waving to people on the street, unfortunately this brings too many of them across the road. They press against the car, staring in at him. He opens the *Homer* and buries his face in it as the car speeds away.

I have a feeling that I will never be able to describe; the way the fear, pain, hesitation, wonderment changes to an unbelievable rush of adrenalin. I want to tell everybody in the world what happened. I realised that I could start at Compendium and Alex's office and thank them at the same time. I ran across the road to Compendium. In my delirium I had forgotten such things as traffic. It was coming straight for me. Screeching brakes, burning rubber. Chaotic hubbub. My hero from the entourage shouting "Hey, watch the cars!!!" I spin round in the middle of the road and yell back: "What the hell does it matter now?!"

APPENDIX TWO

Why Not?

Is there something strange about touring? About playing live shows? If there is, tell me what it is.¹⁰⁷

BOB DYLAN, 2012

Gregory Peck has already been quoted as saying of Dylan: "He surprises and disguises; he is a searcher with his songs. In him we hear the echo of old American voices: Whitman and Mark Twain, blues singers, fiddlers and balladeers. Bob Dylan's voice reaches just as high and will linger just as long."

These well-chosen lines encapsulate the twin Romantic views of Dylan on the NET. He is seen as a physical and artistic embodiment of one of the main strands of the American literary tradition, still out 'on the road', restlessly searching for some higher truth. Alternatively, or simultaneously, NET Dylan is the troubadour, in the great oral tradition of Woody Guthrie, Hank Williams, old bluesmen and the cast of Greil Marcus's *Invisible Republic*.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Mikal Gilmore, *Rolling Stone* interview, September 27, 2012

¹⁰⁸ Greil Marcus – *Invisible Republic* Henry Holt & Co., New York, 1997

It is an enticing image, bolstered by the fact that Dylan keeps on travelling and touring and by Dylan's repeated comments on how much he enjoys playing on stage, as well as his avowed insights into what the covers he is playing mean to him:

*"I love that whole pantheon. To me there's no difference between Muddy Waters and Bill Monroe ... Those old songs are my lexicon and my prayer book... 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."*¹⁰⁹

Occasionally, Dylan seems attracted to a Romantic view of touring; in one of his many responses to the question "Why do you keep touring?", he declared how appealing it was to see the sunrise over a new road every morning.

Combining the two Romantic views of Dylan on tour, the entire NET experience can be seen as a vehicle akin to Mark Twain's Mississippi raft on which Huck Finn and Jim drifted downstream, uncompromised by the 'civilising' effects of settled society on the land either side. Or you can see the NET convoy as Herman Melville's *Pequod*, with Dylan at the helm, separated from home and family; though the White Whale Dylan is determined to chase and slay is his own myth.

Many years before the NET, Dylan had alluded to both Twain and Melville at different times. Interestingly, this was at a time when he returned to touring after a lengthy absence. Certainly he sees the NET as a way of dispensing with his own myth: *"It was important for me to come to the bottom of this legend thing, which has no reality at all,"* he said in 1992. *"What's important isn't the legend but the art, the work."* Yet one cannot help but recall the amount of times Dylan himself has kept that myth going in the NET through crazy publicity stunts and stadium appearances with other 'icons'.

Nonetheless, the view of Bob as Ahab or Ethan on a never ending Quest, year after year without respite, does not really add up. For most of the NET, Dylan has

¹⁰⁹ Jon Pareles 1997 N.Y. Times News Service

spent more time off the road than on it. Dylan has a more restrained schedule than the travelling bluesmen he is often compared to, as he himself has stressed. *"I do about 125 shows a year,"* he has commented. *"It may sound a lot to people who aren't working that much, but it isn't. B.B. King is working 350 nights a year."* Dylan may have been overestimating B.B. King's pre-'retiral'¹¹⁰ gigs per year here, but his overall contrast is valid. King usually plays at least twice as many shows a year as Dylan does.

Bob's adherence to touring does not necessarily make him a Romantic/Kerouac figure. It is too simplistic an explanation, not that explanations, as we shall see, are actually necessary in the first place.

After his motorcycle accident in 1966 Dylan stopped touring to be with his family. In 1974 he toured again after the lay-off. The Rolling Thunder Revue tours of 1975 and 1976 were specifically an attempt to root his psyche in the Romantic Artist/Genius/Travelling Minstrel figure in the American Dream. This period of his life ended up in divorce and born-again Christianity. So, Dylan knows such traditions inside out in both a personal and artistic sense. He had already lived through them and progressed to the next stages of his life a long time ago. Obviously, the NET as a stirring, mythic quest would be a wonderfully uplifting note on which to end my book, but it would also be a cop-out as it offers only a partial truth. It is only one of the many categories critics try to force the whole concept into.

At the other extreme we have the cynical view. The cynics portray Dylan as a different kind of fictional character, a far less attractive Huck Finn, who rather than being admirably unsullied by civilisation simply doesn't want to grow up. Instead of a Romantic hero we have a grown man playing at Peter Pan, using the NET to avoid responsibility and as a substitute for lasting relationships.

In fact, closer examination shows Dylan's life is actually far more balanced than either this theory or the driven Romantic artist in torment idea suggest. Away from the NET for half the year, Dylan can spend his time in any way he wants. He is not avoiding his children, who are all grown up, nor as far as we know his ex-wives. For much of the NET, what little information we have on his private

¹¹⁰ B.B. King (born in 1925) undertook a farewell tour in 2006. He was canny enough to quote Sean Connery's James Bond movie title *"Never Say Never Again"* and King has played some shows since then, including a European tour in 2009.

life (and the less we have the better, I very much believe; it is called 'private' life for a reason) indicates that he spends much of the Thanksgiving to January holiday periods with as many of them as possible. Dylan has a private life; he has family, children, ex-wives. Dylan 'grew up' and accepted his responsibilities a long, long time ago. One could easily make a case from the little we know of his private life that he takes his role as a father more seriously than anything else.

Another charge levelled at Dylan's NET is that he does it because he has nothing else; he is 'trapped' on the road because he hasn't a clue what to do if he stops. Occasionally Dylan himself will give this theory a boost as, unsurprisingly, given that he views the NET as his 'trade', his 'job', he sometimes tires of it. At worst he feels his 'job', as perhaps we all do from time to time, to be nothing more than the mundane routine. Some even take the rather inelegant lines in the otherwise beautifully assured "Highlands", from *Time Out Of Mind*, autobiographically:

"Woke up this morning and I looked at the same old page,
Same ol' rat race, life in the same ol' cage."

Dylan himself may occasionally, wistfully dream of an alternate life – "*I would prefer to start my life anew over and over again. Learn a new trade, marry another girl, live in another place.*"¹¹¹ – yet these are just natural human sentiments. Most of us daydream about alternate lives where the fantasy grass looks so much greener. To make out of them a case for Dylan being chained to a life he hates is to ignore a whole swathe of countering points.

Undoubtedly the NET pays Dylan well, allegedly commanding some \$50,000 per show and playing over a hundred of them a year plus festivals. Yet Dylan does not need the money, he could stop whenever he wanted. Apart from all his other income, Dylan could, and in some cases does, make money by the occasional show – like the three-song mega-grossing Pope bash – or by releasing old or new songs, by putting out a book, doing a movie cameo and so forth. There are a multitude of ways Dylan could make money were that his only aim, in other words. Selling a few copyrights to advertisers would be another, strikingly lucrative, example. Or, as he has recently discovered, via art exhibitions and selling paintings and prints.

111 *Der Spiegel* 16-10-1997.

So, if the NET were *only* a grind, why would he keep doing it? The point is that it is much more than just a paying job. Yes Dylan views it as his 'trade' but, as he has pointed out many times, it's a trade he still loves carrying out:

*"There's a certain part of you that becomes addicted to a live audience. I wouldn't keep doing it if I was tired of it."*¹¹²

These are views he has reiterated for decades now. In 2012, he answered the question, "So, live performance is a purpose you find fulfilling?" by saying:

*If you're not fulfilled in other ways, performing can never make you happy. Performing is something you have to learn how to do. You do it, you get better at it and you keep going. And if you don't get better at it, you have to give it up.*¹¹³

He went on to add that touring, his 'calling', was "*not any different to anyone else's. Some people are called to be a good sailor. Some have a calling to be a good tiller of land.*"

The final 'charge' against the NET by those who seem determined to find a sinister explanation for it was that Dylan was only performing so much because he could no longer write songs or make albums. This kept cropping up in the first half of the NET, as it was true that Dylan wrote little in the first dozen years of the NET compared to the prolific output of the first twelve years of his career. It is worth remembering that *Oh Mercy*, *under the red sky* and *Time Out Of Mind*, along with the second Traveling Wilburys album and two albums of covers, did come out, however.

Dylan partly 'inspired' these comments by mentioning in interviews of this period that writing has become more difficult for him, that the flow of songs had been reduced to a comparative trickle. Dylan has often contrasted the falseness of trying to create in the studio with the natural feeling of conceiving new art on stage.

"Yeah. The recording process is very difficult for me. I lose my inspiration in the studio real easy, and it's very difficult for me to think that I'm going to eclipse

112 *Ibid.*, Note iii

113 *Ibid.*, Note i

anything I've ever done before. I get bored easily, and my mission, which starts out wide, becomes very dim after a few failed takes and this and that."¹¹⁴

Yet, surely this seems more like an artist knowing exactly what he wants than someone being 'forced' into touring because he cannot do anything else. In 2012 Dylan still felt the need to remind those who question his motives for touring exactly where his priorities lie. Mikal Gilmore asked: "Miles Davis had this idea that music was best heard in the moments in which it was performed – that that's where music is truly alive. Is your view similar?" Dylan responded with:

Yeah, it's exactly the same as Miles' is. We used to talk about that. Songs don't come alive in a recording studio. You try your best, but there's always something missing. What's missing is a live audience. Sinatra used to make records like that - used to bring people into the studio as an audience. It helped him get into the songs better.¹¹⁵

This 'theory' has by now been completely blown out of the water by the "*Love And Theft*", *Modern Times*, *Together Through Life*, *Christmas In The Heart* and *Tempest* album releases. To which can be added the *Masked and Anonymous* movie, the *Chronicles* book and all Dylan's painting exhibitions. These latter activities aren't song-writing, but they are further evidence that Dylan is not forced into touring because he 'cannot do anything else'.

It may not be that all the theories above hold absolutely no validity whatsoever – though the very best that could be said for them is that they are very partial views, propounded by people who are pretending that they know Dylan's mind. Even if Dylan was not writing new songs (which he is) there would be no need to jump to the conclusion that therefore he would have to tour. He could do anything he wanted; luckily for us he wants to perform.

I am not claiming that I can read his mind any more than any other commentator can, but some straightforward points can be made and Dylan's own comments taken into account – though with a certain amount of care, as it would be highly unreasonable to expect that Dylan's motivations for, and feelings towards, the

114 *Guitar World* interview, published in March 1999 edition

115 *Ibid.*, Note i

NET are going to have remained the same day in day out since 1988. Some fluctuation is surely inevitable; in addition there is nothing to stop contradictory reasons being at work simultaneously. In Dylan's art and career, contradictory states often hold the greatest truths.

When introducing Dylan at the 1991 Grammy Awards, Jack Nicholson said that he had searched the dictionary for the 'fairest word' to describe Dylan. He chose acutely, deciding on 'paradox' because it meant: "A statement seemingly self-contradictory but in reality possibly expressing a truth." More prosaically, Dylan sees himself as "inconsistent":

*"That's just the nature of my personality," he says. "I can be jubilant one moment and pensive the next, and a cloud could go by and make that happen. I'm inconsistent, even to myself."*¹¹⁶

Notwithstanding paradox and inconsistency, it is easy to propose a more balanced view than the extreme Romantic and Cynic positions discussed above. A view based on those of Dylan's own comments that have remained consistent throughout the NET and on the facts we can be sure of, rather than on speculation about Dylan's personal life and current mindset.

From the first year of the Never Ending Tour onwards, Dylan has equated his touring with day-to-day work rather than the Romantic, beat-style existence. Speaking near the beginning of the NET:

*"There's just something instinctive that tells me that a man must support his family, no matter what. As it is, I'm doing what I do because I've been given to do it, but most of the people who work 'nine-to-five' have got to support families, and there is a tremendous disregard for that. You don't see much of that being heralded with heroic words and fancy awards. But that's what makes the world either rise or fall, that commitment to family."*¹¹⁷

It is a theme he has returned to; he sees himself as doing his job, his trade, his craft. It is, simply, what he does. This was the same interview in which he succinctly answered all these questions about touring by

116 *Ibid.*, Note iii

117 Interviewed by Kathryn Baker for *Associated Press*, 1988

saying “We want to play because we want to play.” What seems complicated comes down to those simple, oft-repeated but just as oft-ignored truths. He has even told us how this happens:

“A lot of people don’t like the road, but it’s as natural to me as breathing. I do it because I’m driven to do it, and I either hate it or love it. I’m mortified to be on the stage, but then again, it’s the only place where I’m happy. It’s the only place you can be who you want to be. You can’t be who you want to be in daily life. I don’t care who you are, you’re going to be disappointed in daily life. But the cure-all for all that is to get on the stage, and that’s why performers do it. But in saying that, I don’t want to put on the mask of celebrity. I’d rather just do my work and see it as a trade.”¹¹⁸

We are fast approaching the time when the NET alone will have covered half of his entire career (if you include the Petty tours he has toured every year now for over half his career), and Dylan still has to answer the same questions on why he tours. He has been uncharacteristically consistent in his replies. In 2012, he explains it, yet again:

“Touring is about anything you want it to be about. Is there something strange about touring? About playing live shows? If there is, tell me what it is. Willie [Nelson]’s been playing them for years, and nobody ever asks him why he still tours, Look, you travel to different places and you encounter things that you might not encounter every day if you stayed home. And you get to play music for the people – all of the people, every nationality and in every country. Ask any performer or entertainer that does this, they’ll all tell you the same thing. That they like doing it and that it means a lot to people. It’s just like any other line of work, only different.”¹¹⁹

In a nutshell, as he wrote in *Blood On the Tracks*’ “Buckets Of Rain”:

*“All ya can do is do what you must
You do what you must do and ya do it well.”*

To bring this somewhat spurious ‘debate’ to a conclusion; as I wrote at the end of *Razor’s Edge*, it is better to turn the question around and ask (as Dylan does

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Note iii

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Note i

above, I wish I had had that quote twelve years ago): why shouldn’t Dylan be touring? What is so surprising about him practising his particular trade? Can you imagine the job advert? It would go something like this:

Situation vacant

Description: Tour the world, working evenings only! You decide how to spend the rest of your time. Only work about 1 evening in 3, the rest of the day and night is yours to do whatever you please. Pick and choose when and where you want to work. Accommodation = luxury bus or the very best hotels or wherever takes your fancy. Your choice whether to dine out at a different top-class restaurant every night or not.

Duties: Your only obligation is to work at your trade, your calling, what you most enjoy doing .

Bonus package: Have lots of parties, garner worldwide acclaim, have young women desperate to meet you every time you turn up for work. There will always people on hand to carry out your every wish.

Remuneration and holidays: “Name your salary”, fantastic pay and as many holidays as you want.

Yet still people wonder why he does it, or even scorn him for so doing. Not that these people are prone to proposing an alternative even a tenth as attractive. It is as though they are desperate for Dylan to disappear for some reason; bizarrely, this includes people who think of themselves as as Bob Dylan fans. After all these years and all he has done and said and sung to dissuade them, people still think they know him, still think he owes them something (when it is the opposite that is the case), still think they own him. It makes no sense to keep asking “Why?” Dylan has answered this the same way all through the NET; in any case the answer seems, self-evidently, “Whyever not?”

Thank goodness Dylan had the sense to ‘apply for the vacancy’. Out of that decision has come the munificent bounty that is the NET; we get the greatest artist of his time going out year after year, recreating his magic in front of our very eyes and ears. Far from the ceaseless reworking of his old songs being a sign of loss of artistic creativity, it is the very centre and expression of his art. The refusal to take the easy option and just sing the songs the same way time after time is borne out of his inherent understanding that the core of his art is the never ending challenge of the new performance.

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ONE MORE NIGHT

Special thanks to Duncan Hume for access to his vast and impressive Dylan photograph collection. All photographs by Duncan Hume. Front cover photograph is from Paris, April 30th 2002. Back cover photograph is from Brussels, 6th April 2007.