

DYLAN REVIEW, SUMMER 2020

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SPECIAL TOPIC: CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

THE COPS DON'T NEED YOU AND MAN THEY EXPECT THE SAME

For the next issue of the *Dylan Review*, Winter 2.2, the Editors invite articles and Song Corner essays on the special topic of political authority and race in Dylan's work.

*Up on Housing Project Hill
It's either fortune or fame
You must pick one or the other
Though neither of them are to be what they claim
If you're lookin' to get silly
You better go back to from where you came
Because the cops don't need you
And man they expect the same*

This familiar stanza from "Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues" sets the tenor for the Editors' special topic. But we hope to receive contributions ranging across the decades, from "The Death of Emmett Till" and "Only a Pawn in Their Game" to "Cold Irons Bound," and from *Infidels* or "Love and Theft" to "Drifter's Escape" and "Pretty Boy Floyd."

The *Dylan Review* Winter Issue 2.2 will be available online in December 2020. The deadline for contributions to the special topic is October 15.

REVIEWS

Bob Dylan. *Rough and Rowdy Ways*. Columbia Records, 2020

REVIEW BY Charles O. Hartman, Connecticut College

Containing History

The cover art on Dylan's *Rough and Rowdy Ways* shows couples dressed in sharp 50s style dancing nearly in the dark, but illuminated by Lost Ark beams from a jukebox, over which a lone man leans. Perhaps the record player offers Jimmie Rodgers's "My Rough and Rowdy Ways," perhaps also Waylon Jennings's "My Rough and Rowdy Days." The lone man is surely Dylan, our jukebox of American music, and the magic chest surely contains all the many dozen recordings alluded to in the album's lyrics. An NPR review of "Murder Most Foul"—the long single released on March 27, three months before the album—lists 74 references, and more are strewn through the whole album. Dylan has always said that songs, in particular American folk songs (very broadly defined), constitute his path to truth. In a 1997 interview: "I find the religiosity and philosophy in the music. ... Songs like 'Let Me Rest on a Peaceful Mountain' or 'I Saw the Light'—that's my religion."¹

Unsurprisingly—it is the first collection of songs written and recorded by Bob Dylan in eight years (since, among things, his Nobel Prize in Literature)—*Rough and Rowdy Ways* received well over a dozen reviews before it was released on June 19, including two with identical subtitles, "arguably his grandest poetic statement yet." Many reviewers dwelt on the lyrics' allusiveness, which began to be an issue for Dylan's fans and critics around the time of "*Love and Theft*" (2001), when he was discovered to have lifted some lines from Junichi Saga's *Confessions of a Yakuza*. (Saga declared himself flattered.) The fact that he had frankly taken that album's title—the quotation marks are meant—from Eric Lott's critical book on minstrelsy (1993) should have deepened and clarified the question, but controversy continued at least through *Modern Times* (2006), with its extensive

¹ David Gates, "Dylan Revisited," *Newsweek*, October 5, 1997.

borrowings from Ovid's *Black Sea Letters* (Peter Green's translation) and the poems of Henry Timrod. Though the Nobel may have removed the racy thrill from debates about "the folk tradition," appropriation, and so on, it's still a tempting sensation to drag out for a review. In fact, we know perfectly well how to tell homage from plagiarism: if the writer wants us not to recognize the source, it's cheating. If, instead, Dylan means us to hear the original through his re-contextualization, the echo always signifies something: at least a tribute that he may hope will lead us back to the source (Saga's sales soared), and perhaps a transformation of the transplanted material.

This distinction is simple enough, but applying it can get complicated. It depends on how probable the author's guess is about the audience's knowledge. As anyone who has taught college in recent decades has seen, the cultural continuities that made such guesses reliable a century ago have so expanded, contracted, and shifted that classroom synapses misfire all the time. From Dylan's point of view, the real problem is our ignorance of the American heritage of song. To him, Memphis Minnie's "Chauffeur Blues" (from which he or his band took the riff between stanzas on "Obviously Five Believers" on *Blonde on Blonde* back in 1966), and Billy "The Kid" Emerson's "If Lovin' Is Believing" (1954), of which "False Prophet" on the new album is a thorough contrafactum,² are both staples, no more obscure than George Herbert's "Prayer (II)" or the opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice*. Perhaps not many people recognized the musical provenance of "False Prophet" when it was released as a third single; but within minutes the awareness permeated the Internet, the Overmind that would make any attempt by Dylan to hide his sources absurd.

Mesmerized for half a century by Dylan's words, we might half-forget that *Rough and Rowdy Ways* is, after all, or before all, an album of music. To talk about its effects and achievements entails, among other things, talking about the band that Dylan is fronting—largely his touring band of recent years. In turn, in order to

² Hartman, "Contrafactum: The Career of a Song," *Yale Review*, 2007.

talk precisely about Dylan's band, it is worth beginning with the lyric and harmonic structure of the third track, "My Own Version of You." It's a knowingly odd song, at once B-movie ghoulish, ardent, and hilarious. Its title sounds almost like a parodic answer to denunciations of Dylan's songs on the ground that his protagonist is always trying to remake his female addressee into someone more suitable to his tastes—"someone who feels the way that I feel." (Songs like "Sweetheart Like You" seem to support this position. A counterargument begins from "All I Really Want to Do" and the adoption of "It Ain't Me, Babe" as the title of the first feminist collective of cartoonists in 1970.) In the new song, he proposes to assemble a living being from spare parts, a spoof on *Frankenstein*, but also an echo of the dismemberment of Osiris and his resurrection by his wife, (wait for it!) Isis³.

The camp luridness of the lyrics is highlighted by the musical background. It begins with a riff that will continue throughout, with variations. A minor chord (C#m), sustained by pedal steel guitar, is embellished by an almost equally sustained electric guitar's descending sequence of "color tones": minor seventh, sixth, flat sixth. This chromatic series, warping the basically diatonic regime of folk and rock music, establishes the song's creepy vibe. (Pedal steel always has a banshee quality.) After a four-bar A-strain on this pattern, repeated, we get—as we would expect in the AABA structures alluded to frequently on Dylan albums since *Highway 61 Revisited*⁴—a B-strain that largely replicates the A-strain pattern, but in the subdominant, F# minor (with some harmonically clever alterations). The C# minor A-strain then reappears, but the color-tone overlay has changed: the top notes now are major 7th, minor 7th, 6th. Neither of these sequences, the A-strain nor this altered A' strain, would be very surprising in jazz (and Dylan reuses the A' progression in the bridges of "I Contain Multitudes"), but setting the two next to each other is unusual and intrigues the ear. In the song's first stanza, this

³ An early essay by Ezra Pound on his poetics is called "I Gather the Limbs of Osiris" (1911).

⁴ Hartman, "Dylan's Bridges," *New Literary History*, 2015.

AABA' is followed by a contrasting C-strain that insists on a suspenseful A7 for seven bars, before returning to C#m with its original overlay of color tones.

So far, this is a chord structure only a bit more complex than was typical of Dylan's songs before his long venture into the jazz-and-show-tunes Great American Songbook associated with Frank Sinatra (*Shadows in the Night* [2015], *Fallen Angels* [2016], and *Triplicate* [2017]). But "My Own Version of You" adds another, characteristically expansive layer to the AABA structure native to that repertoire. The pattern described above fits the first two of the song's eight stanzas, and also its sixth and seventh; but the third, fourth, and fifth are half again as long, and the final stanza is more than three times as long as the first or second. To put it in terms of the lyrics, stanzas comprise 3, 3, 5, 5, 5, 3, 3, and 11 couplets. The song's variation from stanza to stanza is rule-governed, but the rules are not elementary: every stanza's chord structure is AABA times x , followed by C, where $x = 1, 2, \text{ or } 5$, and the last A before the C-strain is always A'.

This is all gratifying to form-conscious fans (post-New Critical literary analysts or aspiring singer-songwriters). But it also makes a difference to our sense, as listeners, of Dylan-and-his-band as a performing unit. It turns out that this array of rules can be realized *only* by a set of musicians who know whether the section they are presently playing is a last (AABA') or a preceding (AABA) section of the stanza. What to play now depends on what we will play several seconds from now. The sonic evidence is clear that everyone contributing to the released recording knew exactly where he was in the song. It's conceivable that Dylan (or some assistant, like Al Kooper in preparation for *Blonde on Blonde*) could have written out, if not a score, at least a diagram or road-map, or that Dylan and his musicians could have rehearsed the whole song often enough for everyone to memorize the asymmetrical pattern. How does this band really work?

A clue comes from "Murder Most Foul." The chord pattern behind that essentially spoken lyric is a simple C F C F G F, but the matching of chords with words varies; some lines correspond to two chords, some to one, some in

between. It seems clear that Dylan is conducting the music, in the studio, in the same way he has always done: first, he hires excellent musicians, and then, as Eric Clapton is quoted as saying in the liner notes to *Biograph*, “When you rehearse with Dylan . . . you listen hard and watch his hands for the changes. It may be your only take.” Earlier in the career we can hear occasional instances of this coordination faltering, because (as Clapton implies) Dylan disliked both rehearsing and a finished studio sound, preferring rough performance. But whatever the details—as far as I know no one in the band has revealed anything in print—the system was in place during the recording of “My Own Version of You.”

The same is true of “Black Rider,” two tracks later. This song uses a fairly conventional downward-stepping progression in D minor (simpler than the chromatic variations in “My Own Version of You,” and familiar from as far back as “Ballad of a Thin Man”). But the five stanzas of “Black Rider” display at least three distinct variations, and though they are all plausible, there is no obvious way to predict which stanza will select which version. The musicians need to coordinate not only with Dylan but with each other. Even in the apparently straightforward blues, “Goodbye Jimmy Reed,” each verse ends with an unusual bar of 5/4. Whatever studio direction there was, what was required was superlative mutual listening. On “I Contain Multitudes,” the album’s opening track, we can hear the band following Dylan’s rubato (rhythmically loose) delivery at the beginning; shifting into tempo at each of the two bridges and back to rubato for the next verse; and in the last A-strain stanza (“Pink pedal-pushers . . .”) building back up to the beat again.

In short, in the ways that musically matter most, this band is great—possibly, for his unique purposes, Dylan’s best ever. When Charlie Sexton joined Dylan on “*Love and Theft*” and then, after some years, rejoined permanently in 2013, he took over a chair (to put it in symphonic terms) that had been held by Mike Bloomfield, Robbie Robertson, and Mark Knopfler, all among the outstanding players of their generation. Yet Sexton may be, if not the greatest soloist among

them, Dylan's finest accompanist. His first, floating notes on "Key West" are perfect. More important, since this is a band, is his coordination with Donnie Herron's pedal steel guitar to create the seamless riff behind "My Own Version of You." Sexton's guitar more obviously drives the blues-riff tunes: "False Prophet," "Goodbye Jimmy Reed," and "Crossing the Rubicon."

Herron, a multi-instrumentalist, joined Dylan on *Modern Times* (2006) and stayed on through *Together Through Life* (2009) and *Tempest* (2012, Dylan's last album of original songs until now). Dylan retained him, unlike most other band players, for the three more orchestral albums that scrutinize the oeuvre of Frank Sinatra. On *Rough and Rowdy Ways*, Herron's accordion is the signature sound on "Key West," establishing the sea-shanty that the song so provocatively melds with a celebration of pirate radio, though the stations he names were land-based. (Dylan's *Theme Time Radio Hour* was its own piratical testimonial.) Herron also contributes important violin and mandolin parts on several tracks, particularly the songs that are given something close to a bare string-band treatment, more or less novel in Dylan's work: "I Contain Multitudes," "Black Rider," "Mother of Muses," and "Murder Most Foul."

The acoustic and electric bassist, Tony Garnier, has been with Dylan the longest, since the 1989 tour. He is the pillar supporting *Time Out of Mind*, "Love and Theft", *Modern Times*, *Together Through Life*, and *Tempest*, as well as the Sinatra albums. On *Rough and Rowdy Ways*, his bowed acoustic bass links the beginnings of "I Contain Multitudes" and "Murder Most Foul," the opening and closing songs, as well as "Mother of Muses"; it is a gorgeous sound, and we bask. (Those bookend songs are both in C major; in between—whatever other considerations went into sequencing the album—the key signatures are neatly arranged: C major, C minor, C# minor, D blues major, D minor, A blues major, A major, G blues major, and C major twice.)

Matt Chamberlain, the newest musician in Dylan's band (he joined in 2019), is a supremely flexible studio drummer who has recorded and toured with an array

of musicians from Brad Mehldau to Kanye West. His rock-blues drumming on the up-tempo songs is impeccable, but less surprising than the dignified, quasi-march feel that he gives to “Key West” and his propulsive brushwork on “My Own Version of You” and “I’ve Made Up My Mind.” Still more unexpected on a Dylan album is Chamberlain’s atmospheric play with mallets on “Murder Most Foul,” not starting until two minutes into the song—a sign that his contribution is not confined to the expected role of a drummer. He is almost absent from “Mother of Muses,” but he punctuates the song here and there with a very quiet double-tap on bass drum (“Just so!”). At first he seems to sit out “Black Rider” entirely, but occasionally (at 0:50, 1:35, 2:21, 3:06, and 3:50) he inserts a discreet rim-shot. (It sounds almost as though someone dropped something in the studio—unthinkable on this album, which is not the party of “Rainy Day Women #12 & 35.”) Presumably Dylan asked Chamberlain to mark these points of articulation—always between stanzas—in the song’s fevered drama.

In its recordings during the present decade, Dylan’s band has taken on an increasingly refined sound. (Even the backing vocals lend the new album a pacific tone. On “I’ve Made Up My Mind,” a mellow chorus of three or four male voices quietly sketches the harmonized melody. It sounds like Bob Nolan’s “Cool Water.” On “Key West” the chorus comes in almost subliminally, and late, at about 3:25.) This vehicle is not Steely Dan, certainly not Mantovani, but it is a sufficiently luxurious limo to convey Dylan’s rough and rowdy voice. He delivers the lyric of “Murder Most Foul” in a near-monotone, like a spoken-word performance. But his voice is—*pace* all the decades of jokes about his singing—often quite beautiful, as on “Mother of Muses” and “Key West,” and almost always highly expressive in ways that owe much to the years of Sinatra Studies. One example is his suave, supple timing on “I’ve Made Up My Mind to Give Myself to You.” (Its lines vary between seven and fifteen syllables.) In an almost infinitely hesitant line like “No one ever told me, it’s just something I knew,” he not only pauses in the middle but lets his voice slide mournfully down in pitch, and then waits several slow beats to resume the words.

Dylan has always been an enthusiastic, vitriolic singer of blues. “Goodbye Jimmy Reed,” a tribute to the great bluesman (1926-76), is also, through his delivery, a commentary on blues conventions. Near the end of a stanza, just where the beat breaks and the guitar riff takes over, there is a moment's gap into which it is traditional to insert a zinger. (In the Mississippi Sheiks' “Blood in My Eyes”—which Dylan transformed on *World Gone Wrong* [1993] and in a memorable video, and which he alludes to in “Murder Most Foul”—they sing: “It ain't no need a-gettin roustin yo jaws / You ain't gonna get none of my Santa Claus.”) But here, though “I can't play the record cause my needle got stuck” has the *tone* of a double entendre, it's hard to make much of the phallic implications of “my needle.” And inserting a phrase from the Lord's Prayer is goofily blasphemous—a confirmation of all those bad things they say about Saturday night on Sunday morning. On the other hand, his penultimate verse feels classic:

Transparent woman in a transparent dress
Suits you well, I must confess
I'll break open your grapes, I'll suck out that juice
I need you like my head needs a noose
Goodbye, Jimmy Reed, goodbye and so long
I thought I could resist her but I was so wrong

Dylan's timing in the last line is devious and droll. Trying to notate its rhythm would be an advanced musicological exercise.

If “Goodbye Jimmy Reed” honors and muses over a whole genre (or multi-genre) of songs, other tracks enact more specific tributes. The debt of “False Prophet” to “If Lovin' Is Believing” has already been noted (here and by other reviewers). It is a purely musical debt, not a verbal one. In a 2004 interview (Robert Hillburn, *LA Times*) Dylan described this process with simple exactitude:

I'll be playing Bob Nolan's *Tumbling Tumbleweeds*, for instance, in my head constantly—while I'm driving a car or talking to a person or sitting around or whatever. People will think they are talking to me

and I'm talking back, but I'm not. I'm listening to the song in my head. At a certain point, some of the words will change and I'll start writing a song.

A more peculiar and complex musical rehabilitation takes place in "I've Made Up My Mind to Give Myself to You." First, its general sound recalls two of Dylan's own earlier songs: "Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands" (*Blonde on Blonde*, 1966) and "When the Deal Goes Down" (*Modern Times*, 2006) are both stately waltzes led by brushwork on snare and cymbals. If the former is a famously personal hymn to Dylan's soon-to-be wife, the latter is an elaborate reworking of Bing Crosby's "When the Blue of the Night Meets the Gold of the Day," with lines equally famously lifted from Henry Timrod. Especially in the vicinity of the Timrod lines, "When the Deal Goes Down" has moments vertiginously close to the edge of the maudlin—and of cliché as well. If I quote David Byrne's maxim that "Singing is a trick to get people to listen to music for longer than they would ordinarily," it is not to be snide, but to acknowledge the doubleness of our listening experience. As an artist in a binary medium, Dylan occasionally pulls our attention away from the lyrics that make "Visions of Johanna" and "Tangled Up in Blue" monumental or novelistic, and toward the music that, after all, makes them songs. Breaking the dyad, Dylan shows us how it is put together; music and words long for each other, sometimes in vain.

Even so, lines stand out: "My heart is like a river – a river that sings" is poetry that, as Wallace Stevens stipulated, escapes the intelligence almost successfully. The first clause steps boldly from heart to river (recalling the blood's stream, Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River," and the red "Rubicon" later on the album); the following phrase leaps from river back to voice. The irrationality of both moves underscores the metaphor into which they bind.

So far I have ignored a point about "I've Made Up My Mind" that many listeners will recognize immediately, that Dylan's melody and harmonic structure are taken directly from the "Barcarolle" in Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffmann*. The

Wikipedia entry on “Belle nuit, ô nuit d’amour,” the aria with the famous melody, remarks that the musicologist “Carl Dahlhaus cites the piece as an example of the duplicity of musical banality: in the period of Wagner, when serious opera was marked by chromaticism, Offenbach used the Barcarolle’s very consonance to give a sinister feel to the act throughout which it recurs.” This helps make sense of the tone of Dylan’s choice of musical armature. In the twentieth century, the tune became a staple of “light music” like that of Mantovani, who began to release recordings in 1949, when Dylan was eight. Dylan will have heard the Barcarolle on the radio, repeatedly. Given the musical tastes he was no doubt already developing, he will have identified it as fluff, as cliché, though this doesn’t rule out its being nostalgic for him.

Yet Dylan also transforms the tune. For one thing, as already noted, the timing of his vocal delivery presses so hard on the structure of the melody as to deconstruct, if not Offenbach’s intent, then what has been made of it since. For another, he adds a bridge (three times, the last time including the heart-and-river lines) that shifts into the relative minor to give the song’s lilt a tempered edge.⁵

Rough and Rowdy Ways is as broad a study of song forms as any of Dylan’s albums since *Blonde on Blonde*. Though I have concentrated on musical examples, a lyric like that of “Key West” relies on Dylan’s long fascination with rhyme, refrain, and related structures. As often—“Desolation Row” is one example—the song’s title, repeated at key points, governs and requires a whole array of rhyming words. The A-strain stanzas (supported by a tripartite harmonic structure, with two chords per lyric line) rhyme as aab, ccB, ddb, eeB, where B is a line that ends with the title. So, though the “a” rhymes differ from stanza to

⁵ Why is *Rough and Rowdy Ways* fascinated by edged weapons? We get *knife* or *knives* in “I Contain Multitudes,” “My Own Version of You,” and “Crossing the Rubicon,” and sword(s) in “False Prophet” and “Black Rider.” “Black Rider” and “Crossing the Rubicon” are (in part) boast/threat songs, recognizable from a blues tradition that includes Robert Johnson, though it long precedes him. Dylan has experimented with this mode before; “Pay in Blood,” perhaps the strongest song on *Tempest*, is a good example; “Ain’t Talkin’ [Modern Times] generalizes the attitude without losing the asperity. As “False Prophet” avows, “I’m here to bring vengeance on somebody’s head.”

stanza, every “b” rhyme in the song is more or less the same; aside from the ten line-final repetitions of “Key West,” he finds ten more rhymes on “-est” (or “-ess”), including the marvelous “overdressed.” The four bridges (B-strains) likewise, but separately, rhyme aabccb—like, incidentally, the stanzas (but not the bridges) of “You’re Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go”; it’s a usefully varied but unified, stray-and-come-back form. Whatever other kinds of labor a song may be doing, Dylan often reminds us that working out these patterns is serious fun. (Amid the sprawl of “Murder Most Foul,” he takes a moment to group, by phonetics as well as era, Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd, Bugsy Siegel, and Pretty Boy Floyd.) “Crossing the Rubicon” uses its title in a similar way, letting us guess repeatedly what rhyme-word will anticipate the return of the rich name “Rubicon.”

Those who heard “Murder Most Foul” on its single release on March 27—and then “I Contain Multitudes” when it was added on April 17, and then on June 19 the whole collection, of which those singles became the last and first songs—had one experience of Dylan’s newest album; while those who listen through *Rough and Rowdy Ways* all new, in order (culminating in the two longest songs), will have different experiences and views of the whole. Either order, though, can hardly avoid centering our attention on “Murder Most Foul”; it is no misfortune that Dylan’s most eager listeners have had the most time to react to that song, and perhaps no accident either.

But the album’s dedicatory song is not the one about JFK, but “Mother of Muses,” whose ponderous beat and modal harmony give it the sound of a Celtic dirge. The mother of the Muses is Mnemosyne, that is, Memory. Some reviewers read the album as a kind of pre-farewell, and latch onto this song’s line, “I’ve already outlived my life by far”; but this is, Biblically speaking, a simple fact: Dylan passed “threescore years and ten” nearly a decade ago. It is not clear either that he regrets having come so far, or that he “feels his age” in the way people usually mean that phrase. Addressing this Mother, Dylan asserts his love for—and asks for—her daughter Calliope (“the beautiful-voiced”), who is the Muse of epic

poetry. This may anticipate, at least on our second time through, the length of “Murder Most Foul.” (It outlasts even “Highlands,” from *Time Out of Mind*. The lyrics rhyme in 82 couplets, 164 lines, delivered at about 10 per minute, so that on average a line takes up about six seconds—a long time.)

The notion of epic resonates with the album’s emphasis on naming: “If you want to remember, better write down the names.” Sometimes they’re place names (the streets of Dallas and Key West, as well as the America-spanning “Salt Lake City to Birmingham / From East L.A. to San Anton’,” again recalling “You’re Gonna Make Me Lonesome” as well as “She’s Your Lover Now” and many other songs)—as if this were the *Iliad*’s Catalogue of Ships. More often, they are the names of people: Jimmy Reed, Marx and Freud, Liberace, Anne Frank and Indiana Jones, and dozens more, some fictional, most not. Aside from Mona (a refugee from “Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again”), a large majority of the people named are nineteenth- and twentieth-century figures prominent in cultural, political, or often military history, mostly American. The album, expansive as it is, feels acutely specific.

This may remind us that Ezra Pound’s definition of “epic” was “a poem containing history.”⁶ Dylan’s line in “False Prophet,” “I opened my heart to the world and the world came in” sounds not ecstatic, but aghast. Whitman meant “I contain multitudes” as generosity, but an album that imagines assembling a beloved out of body parts makes the declaration more sinister. (One could contain multitudes by eating them, as history does.) *Rough and Rowdy Ways* is internalized history, and that inner arena is troubled, every outcome contested.

Personhood, too, is baffled.⁷ In the song that takes Whitman’s title, the “greedy old wolf” and the woman addressed as “madame” are unidentified and otherwise unanchored in any scene we might construct. The “lusty old mule” addressed in the ninth stanza of “False Prophet” can hardly be the “darlin’” of the

⁶ Pound, “Date Line,” 1934, in *Literary Essays*.

⁷ Hartman, “Dylan’s Deixis” in *Polyvocal Dylan*, ed. Nduka Otonio and Josh Toth, Palgrave, 2019.

following stanza, who plays antimatter to the singer's matter: "When your smile meets my smile, something's got to give." If the *you* of these songs is unstable, the *I* is multiple: everyone, no one; unique, and all of us. In the sweep and welter of Dylan's historical vision, boundaries among persons become fluid; causes, roles, and responsibilities overlap and collide. How did generals like Sherman and Patton (and Zhukov, a surprise Russian) create "paths" for Elvis Presley and Martin Luther King (in successive lines)? If—to suggest one tenuous reading—America had to defeat Confederates and Nazis to produce the postwar society that would shape Dylan, how does (perhaps General Winfield) Scott fit into that narrative?

On *Rough and Rowdy Ways*, history is history in the endless, uncomfortable state of being digested, while it digests us. This has something to do with why reviewers seem equally likely to call the album "timeless" or "timely." (Anne Margaret Daniel on *Hotpress* calls it "a record we need right now.") As the breadth of Dylan's references to song history and world history insists—"way back before England or America were made"—it was not only in November 1963 that "the soul of a nation has been torn away."

In "Murder Most Foul," it is not "he" who killed JFK—"Oswald and Ruby" are an incidental pair in the second stanza—but "they." That was the crucial pronoun of Dylan's astonishing "Only a Pawn in Their Game" (1964). Now we know to wonder, if "they" is meant to generalize the responsibility, why it isn't "we." Through conundrums like these the album asks: Should we see ourselves as the victims of our times, or the perpetrators of them?

Bob Dylan. *Travelin' Thru, 1967-1969: The Bootleg Series, Volume 15*. Sony Music, 2019

REVIEW BY John Hunt & Tim Hunt, Illinois State University

Travelin' Thru, 1967-1969: The Bootleg Series, Volume 15, the latest installment in Sony Music's series of archival releases of Bob Dylan's work, compiles outtakes, alternate versions, rehearsals, and informal collaborations related to *John Wesley Harding* (released December 27, 1967) and *Nashville Skyline* (released April 9, 1969). Ostensibly, what ties this material and these (stylistically and sonically) different albums together is that they document Dylan's exploration of country music following his mold-breaking transformation of rock in *Bringing It All Back Home*, *Highway 61 Revisited*, *Blonde on Blonde*, and the incendiary 1966 tour of England with The Hawks, all before Dylan's July 29, 1966 motorcycle accident brought this phase to its close. At the time, those of us who avidly followed Dylan's work and parsed each new text as if it were our era's *The Waste Land*, and we its naive New Critical acolytes, didn't know that this unprecedented break in Dylan's productivity had included the informal music making and home recording sessions that have become known as *The Basement Tapes* (Columbia Records released a double LP selection of this material, selected and post-produced by Robbie Robertson in 1975; in 2014 Columbia/Legacy Records released *The Bootleg Series, Vol. 11: The Basement Tapes—Complete*). But even if we had had *The Basement Tapes*, *John Wesley Harding* would still have struck us as initiating a new direction for Dylan and we would still not have expected Dylan's genial smile on the cover of *Nashville Skyline*. *Travelin' Thru*, like earlier installments in the Bootleg Series, invites us not only to recall how Dylan's various albums and stylistic pivots were originally received but also to reconsider these stylistic pivots and to remap their implications for understanding his career.

In his *All-Music Guide* entry for *John Wesley Harding*, Stephen Thomas Erlewine categorizes it as "a quiet, country-tinged album that split dramatically from his previous three," then adds that the album "isn't a return" to Dylan's "folk

roots" but rather "his first serious foray into country." And for Erlewine, *Nashville Skyline's* status as country is even clearer. It is, he declares, "a full-fledged country album."¹ That both albums were recorded in Nashville with A-List Country Music studio pros, such as Charlie McCoy, clinches the matter of genre and style, and the series of duets with Johnny Cash gathered on *Travelin' Thru* ices the cake. The only thing missing is an album cover featuring Dylan posed in a Nudie suit awash with rhinestones and set off with fancy embroidery. Instead, the actual covers evoke different *country* possibilities: the black & white image used for *John Wesley Harding* signals country as rural home-made music of the sort we imagine predated commercial recordings in the 1920s, and the color photo on *Nashville Skyline* of a smiling Dylan holding his guitar up in one hand as he reaches for his hat with the other as if about to say *Howdy* seems to belong more to the semi-professional traditions of the first decades of the twentieth century that evolved into commercial country, as if a contemporary Jimmy Rodgers had paused to greet the camera. In this regard it is perhaps telling that Dylan planned to use a photo of the Nashville skyline for the cover of *Nashville Skyline* before deciding instead to use this Elliott Landy image that came from a shoot that was to yield a photo for the back cover. In any case, Dylan's *country* was neither *the country* music of Nashville in 1967 when Buck Owens and Tammy Wynette were riding the charts nor in 1969 when Merle Haggard hit big with "Working Man Blues" and Loretta Lynn was asking "Woman of the World (Leave My World Alone)."

The material gathered on *Travelin' Thru* makes it possible to consider the differences between the takes chosen for *John Wesley Harding* and for *Nashville Skyline* and the alternate takes that were set aside, and these differences help clarify the terms of Dylan's engagement with country music. Similarly, the series of duets with Johnny Cash, as he and Dylan search for common ground between

¹ Stephen Thomas Erlewine, "Bob Dylan: John Wesley Harding," *AllMusic*, n.d., <https://www.allmusic.com/album/john-wesley-harding-mw0000189848>; and Erlewine, "Bob Dylan: Nashville Skyline," *AllMusic*, n.d., <https://www.allmusic.com/album/nashville-skyline-mw0000650101>

their distinctive styles, helps clarify Dylan's relationship to the traditions of country music, as do the four informal recordings that document Dylan's first meeting with the great bluegrass banjoist Earl Scruggs. As well, *Travelin' Thru* provides an occasion for recalling, or at least trying to recall, what it was like to hear these albums when they were first released—a time when the United States was deeply divided by the Vietnam War, and music was still largely divided by politics—the country music of Nashville playing as the soundtrack of those who supported the war and Dylan's music and rock music more generally playing as the soundtrack of those who opposed it.

In 1967 and 1969, when *John Wesley Harding* and *Nashville Skyline* were first released, rock and country were not just different musical styles; they represented two intensely opposed camps, each tending to demonize the other. Styles and genres were not simply aesthetic practices or performance traditions but social and political symbolism, and having long hair or a crew cut were assumed to be reliable indicators of whether one rolled a joint or knocked back a brew and whether one marched against the war or counter-marched in support of it. (The mock naiveté of The Byrds' "Drugstore Truck Driving Man" on *Dr. Byrds and Mr. Hyde*, released a few months before *Nashville Skyline*, exploits this polarization.) *Travelin' Thru* not only provides a context for exploring Dylan's aesthetic choices in *John Wesley Harding* and *Nashville Skyline* and appreciating the artistry of these albums, the set also provides an occasion for recalling that the term *country* and using country elements outside the context of mainstream Nashville country music was more fraught than we might credit today and that this may bear on how we understand what might be termed Dylan's stylistic rhetoric in this period.

***John Wesley Harding* and *Nashville Skyline* as we heard them then:**

Over the two-and-a-half years that it took Dylan to release his first four albums, he transformed contemporary folk music from a practice of re-expressing traditional

folk material into one of creating new material in the folk idiom (especially material engaging contemporary issues) and then into a mode for highly literate self-expression. In the fourteen months that followed, from March 1965 through May 1966, Dylan similarly recast contemporary rock, over the course of three of his most powerful and influential albums: *Bringing It All Back Home*, *Highway 61 Revisited*, and *Blonde on Blonde* (a double LP) along with the major single "Positively 4th Street." While Dylan's first album wasn't widely circulated when it appeared, and even though many came to know his work through the recordings of Joan Baez and Peter, Paul and Mary (or perhaps more belatedly through The Byrds recasting Dylan's avant-folk into folk-rock with "Tambourine Man"), from *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* forward, Dylan's own releases were avidly purchased and parsed by what was then termed as youth culture listeners. We hung out on "Desolation Row," and we mined the lyrics for adages and mantras. We believed we didn't "need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows," and we heard both the license to reject and the challenge to test and understand one's motives in "if you live outside the law, you must be honest."

Looking back a half century or so later, the year-and-a-half interval between *Blonde on Blonde* and the release of *John Wesley Harding* in December 1967 is a brief pause in Dylan's productivity, but at the time it seemed much longer than that. The newspapers had reported Dylan's July 1966 motorcycle accident, but details about the extent of his injuries were not to be had. And in that pre-social media era, rumor ruled; rumor had it his career might be over. The uncertainty of *if* there'd be a next album replaced the anticipation of *when* the next album would be out and where it might spin us next. And when *John Wesley Harding* did come out, it registered more as a reset for Dylan's career or a kind of taking stock than the advent of a new stylistic direction. The relatively spare arrangements mostly featured Dylan's acoustic guitar and harmonica backed by

Charlie McCoy's bass and Kenneth Buttrey's drums playing more subtle patterns than we would likely have noticed even if our less-than-audiophile stereos had reproduced their parts with the presence they deserved. The tempos and the changed quality of Dylan's voice brought the lyrics to the fore, and the lyrics presented stories with what seemed, but elusively so, an allegorical reach. At the time, we registered the country-ish use of steel guitar on "I'll Be Your Baby Tonight" and "Down Along the Cove," but even more we heard the rest of the album as a variation on, a new inflection of, some of *Blonde on Blonde* with the surreal edge softened and the redeployed symbolic narratives presented in a more acoustic, rural context. If we had heard *John Wesley Harding* as Dylan's "first foray into country," we lacked any real sense of what this might involve stylistically. Just as those who were listening to commercial country music, the music of "Music City, U.S.A.," weren't listening to Dylan, we weren't listening to Buck Owens or George Jones. We weren't attuned to hear the poetry of Haggard's "Working Man Blues."

In any case, in 1967 we heard *John Wesley Harding* more as a coda to the series of remarkable albums Dylan had produced in the 1960s than as the advent of a new arc of experimentation and development. When *Nashville Skyline* arrived sixteen months later, what struck us was not only that the country stylistic elements now dominated the album as a whole, but how relatively slight the songs seemed lyrically when compared to the allusive, elusive allegorical work collected on *John Wesley Harding*. "Lay Lady Lay" was a great number to slip onto the turntable when your girlfriend came by, but it wasn't "I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine," and tracks like "Country Pie" were amusing but seemed, for Dylan, like filler. We listened to *Nashville Skyline* and asked it to be profound (in something akin to the manner that we found *John Wesley Harding* to be profound), and when we accepted that it wasn't, we shelved it, turned back to *John Wesley Harding* and the albums before it, and wondered whether this new Dylan, crooning and genial, would ever take us again to "Positively 4th Street."

John Wesley Harding and Nashville Skyline in the context of Travelin' Thru:

I first circled around to Dylan's country period some 30 years after its initial release. Unmoored as I was from the late 60's, it didn't seem like that much of a creative detour. It was enjoyable enough, just sort of slight in comparison to what had come before. It didn't sound like an attempt to breach the walls of the silent majority. Nor did I hear how it might have helped pave the way for the emergence of more left-leaning country writers like Kris Kristofferson. It simply felt like Bob took a deliberate step back and scratched another musical itch. Yet another example of Bob willfully choosing to confound expectations and be, well, Bob.

While Dylan can be called many things, I rarely think of him as subtle. He can be winkingly subversive on occasion, but rarely subtle. The material here, however, both bootlegged and as originally released might be the warmest, gentlest, and yes, subtlest of his career. Aside from his stints with The Band and the Traveling Wilburys, the session with Johnny Cash might also be among his most generous and spontaneous collaborations.

The songs, recorded for *John Wesley Harding* and *Blood on the Tracks*, though newly recorded, sound patinaed and slightly outside of their time, with their veneer of crooned pop vocals and understated instrumentation. There is nary a slashing Mike Bloomfield blues guitar riff, penny whistle, or biting sardonic vocal to be found. Instead of reaching back to modernize and amplify the singalong protest music and attitudes of Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, on *John Wesley Harding*, Dylan pulls out the darker themes of A.P. Carter's *Appalachia*, remixing them through his own surrealist folk filter. Lacking high harmony vocals, straight ahead 4/4 drumming, or overtly twangy guitars, these songs are more akin to the acoustic side of *Bringing it all Back Home* and the

quieter moments on *Highway 61 Revisited* than they are to the country rock of the International Submarine Band, The Byrds, The Flying Burrito Brothers, and Poco, among others. Jimi Hendrix might have been the first to identify the darker rock core of what Dylan was doing with this material, and his amped up cover of "All Along the Watchtower" has become the definitive version. The alt-country and literate rockers who would follow, whether it be the '70s Outlaws, early Springsteen, Steve Earle, or later Uncle Tupelo, all eventually drank from the same musical well.

Where *John Wesley Harding* built on the thematic elements of older country music as its lyrical foundation, musically *Nashville Skyline* pushes Dylan as close as he would officially get to the sounds of contemporary country. However, if one listens past the light pedal steel adornments and dials down the crooning, *Nashville Skyline* plays even more aggressively as a return to the folk of his pre-electric albums, particularly tracks in the vein of "It Ain't Me Babe" from *Another Side of Bob Dylan*.

The first track of *Nashville Skyline*, the newly updated "Girl from the North Country," now a duet with Johnny Cash, is spare and subdued. Really, only the second track on *Nashville Skyline*, the instrumental "Nashville Skyline Rag," overtly plays up the country aspects of the music, and the song is pushed even more dramatically into the country sphere on the closing track of *Travelin' Thru*, where it is performed with Earl Scruggs and Family. However, the rest of side one of *Nashville Skyline* dials back the country influences. The chugging baseline and sparkling piano heard on the released version of "To Be Alone with You" sound more like shuffling rock accompaniments. The heavily echoed drums on the released version of "I Threw it All Away" have more in common with Hal Blaine's elevator shaft sound on Simon and Garfunkel's "The Boxer" (which also features an appearance by Charlie McCoy) than it does with, say, Marty Robbins. Side

Two of the original album kicks off with the most hallowed of traditional country rhythmic instrumentation: congas and cowbell.

Though he clearly incorporates country influences and inspiration on *Nashville Skyline*, Dylan still sits somewhere outside of the genre. The studio chatter between Dylan and Cash on *Travelin' Thru* as they try out various songs illustrates this, capturing both their efforts to find a shared musical vocabulary that would enable them to work together and Dylan trying to find a more general footing in the country idiom. Dylan is clearly familiar with both the Johnny Cash and Jimmie Rodgers catalogue, even though he's less in his vocal element when it comes to the yodels on the Blue Yodels. He sounds particularly out of sorts on the awkward attempt at "Amen" and the gospel tracks that follow after Cash asks him, "Say Bob, what religious song do you know?" It shouldn't be surprising then, given Dylan's age and respect for Cash, that the two artists most seamlessly and joyously come together on the Sun Records tracks. The proto-rock of Elvis Presley via Arthur Crudup's "That's All Right Mama," Carl Perkins's "Matchbox," and Cash's own "Big River" provide some of the best moments on the whole set. Both musicians are seemingly relaxed and right at home in the Sam Phillips wheelhouse. Near the end of "That's All Right Mama," Cash asks Dylan, "How far do you want to go?" Dylan wryly retorts, "How far do you want to go?" As Carl Perkins on guitar keeps driving along, Cash laughs and says back, "Let's do it some more," leading to them *do-do-doing* their way through the melody to get to a final shared chorus and a blazing outro from Perkins.

Taken together, all of this might be why I have never really thought of Dylan's country period as being all that *country*. However, like other entries in the official Bootleg Series, *Travelin' Thru* provides new context to the originally released material and challenges earlier assumptions and narratives. My ears have always heard a somewhat hesitant embrace of modern country sounds on the two

officially released albums. However, the outtakes presented from both the *John Wesley Harding* and *Nashville Skyline* sessions, particularly the early attempts at "To Be Alone with You" and "I Threw it All Away," push Dylan into a more overtly contemporary country sound, dialing down the folk while playing up the telecaster twang and adding a little more saloon to the piano. In particular, *Travelin' Thru* reveals that Dylan, had he chosen some of the alternate takes for *Nashville Skyline* and resequenced the album so that it opened with, for instance, "To Be Alone with You," could have ended up with a record that would have registered more overtly as contemporary country (if not quite country-politan). Perhaps this muting of the country style may help explain why Dylan didn't push himself further down the country road but instead moved quickly onto the next thing: *New Morning*, then the mishmash of *Self Portrait*, a reunion with The Band, and finally fully regaining his creative footing with *Blood on the Tracks*. It would be up to others like Graham Parsons and Gene Clark to realize more fully the country rock sound Dylan hit on in the outtakes on *Travelin' Thru* and to explore more fully its expressive possibilities.

Typically an archival compilation such as *Travelin' Thru* helps reveal underlying continuities that might not have been apparent, or provides a more comprehensive context that helps us make sense of discontinuities. Instead, *Travelin' Thru* brings various questions more clearly into view, underscores their importance, and leaves us less able to wrap the package in pretty paper and put a bow on it. *John Wesley Harding* has country touches, but the two songs that use steel guitar ("Down Along the Cove" and "I'll Be Your Baby Tonight") are its final two tracks and are distinctly different (both stylistically and in their lyric scope) from the preceding ten, non-country songs that dominate the album. We are left to wonder whether the country elements of the first album are in any useful sense to be understood as a precursor to the second or whether the second is a stylistic veer or break from the first. And in either case, we're left to wonder what *country*, whether as style or repertoire or marketing label, might have represented to Dylan in this period and in his sense of these two albums.

The four tracks that close *Travelin' Thru* offer a clue—or perhaps a complication. These performances with Earl Scruggs and his sons were recorded for possible use for the documentary *Earl Scruggs: His Family and Friends* that aired on public television (then NET, now PBS) on January 10, 1971. In early 1969, Lester Flatt and Scruggs had broken up their long-running and trend-setting bluegrass partnership. Flatt was adamant in his support of the Vietnam War and a staunch traditionalist in his music. Scruggs had come to question the war, and he wanted to play music with his sons. With them he wanted to expand the bluegrass repertoire to include the music of Dylan, among others. The musical divorce was not amicable. The one Dylan-Scruggs collaboration used in the film and included on the soundtrack is "Nashville Skyline," which easily adapts to bluegrass picking and shows Scruggs as the master he was, but it's the previously unreleased recordings that are more revealing. The first is "East Virginia Blues," a traditional song recorded by The Carter Family, a staple of the folk revival scene when Dylan first came to Greenwich Village, and a favorite of first-generation bluegrass acts. The song is *folk* and it's *country* in the sense that bluegrass had been part of the commercial country music scene in the later 1940s and early 1950s. It isn't, though, *country* in the contemporary sense of country music at the time when Dylan and Scruggs recorded the piece. Even more telling is their performance of "To Be Alone from You" from *Nashville Skyline*, where the acoustic instruments rock the beat against Dylan's blues-inflected delivery of the lyrics, all but erasing its possibility as a *country* song.

In part, the success of the four brief Dylan-Scruggs collaborations reflects Scruggs' instrumental virtuosity, his ability to play in a variety of idioms, and probably as well a willingness to suggest material that he believed would most allow Dylan to be Dylan. But there's perhaps another dynamic in play. For Scruggs, the break with Flatt was a rejection of the current politics of the country music

scene and the general sense that country was (when not safely apolitical) the music of the right. Even in the later 1960s, country was already predominately a music addressed to those who felt threatened by the urban mainstream and functioned not just as an assertion of patriotism and the war but also as a defensive construction—an attempt to refuse to be marginalized that can be seen as a precursor of MAGA hats. For Scruggs, to embrace youth music was to refuse this construction and to assert the possibility of a humane and inclusive populism rather than an exclusionary and corrosive one.

And perhaps this parallels Dylan's interest in drawing on country music in the era covered by *Travelin' Thru*. When Dylan recorded *John Wesley Harding* and *Nashville Skyline*, to use country music elements in one's music was a political gesture, whether or not the lyrics were political. In the context of *Travelin' Thru*, Dylan's country phase suggests less an attempt to record country music (and certainly not to be perceived as a *country* artist) than an attempt to reclaim the country tradition from the political and cultural right: to reassert its possibilities for narrative and reclaim its roots in the folk tradition. This is not the folk tradition of the so-called folk revival typified by the neo-traditionalists or such commercial acts as the Kingston Trio, or even the practice of the young Dylan. Rather, *Travelin' Thru* invokes the *country* music of the 1920s which included Appalachian traditional music, folk blues, and parlor songs, along with the synthesis of these categories. Such innovators as Jimmie Rodgers, for example, spoke to and for rural and small town folk across the southeast, reasserting country as *folk* and folk as *country* to create a newly democratic music. If so, *John Wesley Harding* veers less from *The Basement Tapes* than it initially seemed, and the ambition of *Self Portrait* can be seen, in some small way, as deriving from and connected to *Nashville Skyline*. And if nothing else, *Travelin' Thru* underscores that *country*—whether understood as genre, as repertoire, as musical practice—is a problematic descriptor for Dylan's

music in this period. Coming to terms with this phase of Dylan's creative output requires treating the term *country* as a central problematic rather than a reliable interpretive key.

THE DYLANISTA

Dylan's recent interview with Douglas Brinkley published in the *New York Times* reminded me of the Wallace Stevens lines, "You must become an ignorant man again / And see the sun with an ignorant eye / And see it clearly in the idea of it" ("Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction"). The occasion of the interview was the forthcoming *Rough and Rowdy Ways*, but Brinkley managed to touch on other subjects including nostalgia, technology, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, and "the long strange trip of the naked ape." Dylan seemed straightforward during the interview, thoughtful and alert to the nuances of Brinkley's questions. It's one of those Dylan interviews that somehow neutralize one's skepticism about his notoriously enigmatic answers in earlier interviews.

For sixty years Dylan has taken interviewers (and the rest of us) on a rollercoaster ride up steep crests and down dizzying plunges of wild fabrication, good-humored whimsy, aggression, impertinence, candor, insouciance, cunning, guardedness, personal religion, unexpected musical tastes, and seemingly unshakeable allegiances. It has seemed as though, to understand or believe him, one "must become an ignorant man [or woman] again," as if seeing the same sun "with an ignorant eye." Dylan has frequently answered the same questions (thanks to indefatigably stubborn interviewers) in different ways, leaving us flatfooted interpreters in a state one might describe as learned ignorance. Interviewers, meanwhile, have appeared by turns (and sometimes in the same interview) gullible, incredulous, erudite and scrupulous, staggeringly uninformed, probing, humbled, fawning, canny, contemptuous, or manipulated.

Whitman's "I contain multitudes" has now been officially cathected onto Dylan's lyric persona. But this shouldn't come as a surprise. The interviewee Bob Dylan has contained multitudes at least since he informed Cynthia Gooding in 1962 on public radio that, on one hand, he'd traveled "with the carnival off and on six years," and that, on the other, he was more than just a singer of folk music. As he added, with remarkable insight: "A lot of people, they're just folk music, folk

music, folk music. I like folk music . . . but I don't sing much of that, and when I do it's probably a modified version of something. Not a modified version; I don't know how to explain it. It's just there's more to it I think." The capaciousness of an interview that ranges from wanderlust fantasies to probing introspection can't be ignored, even if the fantastical dimension does have a tendency to undermine Dylan's prophetic understanding of his own performances as more than folk music, as "a modified version of something."

The same extremes occurred throughout the decades. Fifty years later, in the now-celebrated, and panoramic, 2012 interview with Mikal Gilmore in *Rolling Stone Magazine*, Dylan at one point talks about what he calls "transfiguration" and refers cryptically to the 1964 death of a Hell's Angel called Bobby Zimmerman. Gilmore tries to pin Dylan down on transfiguration—"By transfiguration . . . do you mean transmigration, when a soul passes into a different body?"—but Dylan rejects transmigration. He offers instead: "I had a motorcycle accident in 1966. I already explained to you about new and old. Right? Now, you can put this together any way you want." And then he adds a genuinely weird comment:

You can go and learn about it from the Catholic Church, you can learn about it in some old mystical books, but it's a real concept . . . you get real proof of it here and there. It's not like something you can dream up and think. It's not like conjuring up a reality or like reincarnation—or like when you might think you're somebody from the past but have no proof. It's not anything to do with the past or the future. So when you ask some of your questions, you're asking them to a person who's long dead. You're asking them to a person that doesn't exist.

Huh? One is tempted to laugh this off as an earnest interviewer's nightmare—the abracadabra disappearance of the interviewee who's facing you. Or maybe the reverse is true: maybe it's the interviewer's dream answer, a gold strike of Dylan's personal occultism.

In either case, while the transfiguration theory might sound less than comprehensible to some of us—not everyone, however: see, for example, Richard Thomas's brilliant take on transfiguration in his article in this issue—Dylan's answers to other questions during the Gilmore interview were focused and crystal clear. Gilmore pressed him on his view of history and Dylan replied with acute insight (and with prescience, given our contemporary moment):

GILMORE: *Do you see any parallels between the 1860s and present-day America?*

DYLAN: Mmm, I don't know how to put it. It's like . . . the United States burned and destroyed itself for the sake of slavery. The USA wouldn't give it up. It had to be grinded out. The whole system had to be ripped out with force. A lot of killing. What, like, 500,000 people? A lot of destruction to end slavery. And that's what it really was all about. This country is just too fucked up about color. It's a distraction. People at each other's throats just because they are of a different color. It's the height of insanity, and it will hold any nation back—or any neighborhood back. Or any anything back. Blacks know that some whites didn't want to give up slavery—that if they had their way, they would still be under the yoke, and they can't pretend they don't know that. If you got a slave master or Klan in your blood, blacks can sense that. That stuff lingers to this day. Just like Jews can sense Nazi blood and the Serbs can sense Croatian blood. It's doubtful that America's ever going to get rid of that stigmatization. It's a country founded on the backs of slaves. You know what I mean? Because it goes way back. It's the root cause. If slavery had been given up in a more peaceful way, America would be far ahead today.

Others have said similar things, not least James Baldwin, a writer Dylan read. And Dylan doesn't mention the founding genocide of Native Americans. But the sheer, shattering realness of his answer and his keen eye for racist stigma (“I saw

a black branch . . . ") clash with the magpie mysticism of the transfiguration answer. Does the former neutralize the credibility of the latter? Or can we, as practiced Dylan-watchers, distinguish the valuable bits from the dross (if it is dross). Can we disentangle the solid ethical architecture from the experimental flux? You'd think we'd be surfeited, at this late stage in the proceedings, with such polarized inconsistencies—that even the most dedicated thrill-seeker would have had enough of the rollercoaster ride.

And yet we hunger for more. We read on, or listen to “live” interviews, privately building dossiers and forming composite BDs from what we believe, half-believe, want to believe, and suppose Dylan believes when he answers interviewers' questions. Are his answers important? Absolutely *not*, because the songs are what matters. Are his answers important? Absolutely *yes*—because the songs are what matters. We might be as skeptical of Dylan's self-analysis as we are of any artist's. We might have our doubts about Dylan's worldview: it's too vague on the details, it lacks political sophistication, his deity impinges, ethos overshadows praxis. But still we need to hear what Dylan has to say: every interview we read or hear, stemming from the earliest press conferences and live radio to the recent filmed versions and even the Nobel lecture—in other words, every incremental stepping stone of Dylan's career—now bears the colossally oppressive weight of his 600 songs. The fact of that artistic achievement and of Dylan's cultural authority (the “voice-of-a-generation” millstone of the sixties) makes deciphering the interviews a desideratum for any . . . well, for any Dylanista.

Which brings me back to the Brinkley interview. Toward the end of the interchange, Brinkley asked a question that I took to be almost pro forma, one to which everybody already knew the answer (or so I thought):

BRINKLEY: *What role does improvisation play in your music?*

DYLAN: None at all. There's no way you can change the nature of a song once you've invented it. You can set different guitar or piano patterns upon the structural lines and go from there, but that's not

improvisation. Improvisation leaves you open to good or bad performances and the idea is to stay consistent. You basically play the same thing time after time in the most perfect way you can.

None at all? Improvisation plays no role whatever in Dylan's performances? This response floored me. Allen Ginsberg associated improvisation with spontaneity, calling them "the whole point of modern poetry." Daniel Belgrad, in *Culture and Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America*, points out that "although rock was not the music that had originally developed in connection with the culture of spontaneity, in many ways it partook of the spontaneous aesthetic. Rock lyrics were often written as spontaneous poetry, as with Bob Dylan's 1965 underground classic, 'Subterranean Homesick Blues.'"

Until the Brinkley interview I might have agreed with Belgrad (in a qualified way). When I think about Dylan's performances, scores of what seem spontaneously altered verses come to mind, including famous bootleg recordings and countless songs barely recognizable once they've been taken from the studio to the stage. And, as is well known, this "spontaneous poetry" seemed real enough to attract dissenters. Every concert had its phalanx of fans begging Bobby to play the songs the way they knew them from the records, the way he first wrote and sang them. They seemed to think he was improvising, and they disapproved (sometimes becoming quite exercised about it).

But evidently Dylan doesn't improvise. He can sing, on *Real Live*,

Headin' out for the old East Coast
Radio blastin' the news straight on through
Tangled up in blue

instead of the *Blood on the Tracks* version,

Heading out for the East Coast
Lord knows I've paid some dues gettin' through
Tangled up in blue.

But this is not improvisation. This is categorically not part of Ginsberg's or Belgrad's spontaneous aesthetic. If we are to believe Dylan's response to Brinkley—and I do believe it, despite the humming of the rollercoaster wheels in the background—then the lyrical change retains and protects the inalterable nature of the song. If I understand correctly, Dylan won't risk improvisation because that would open the door to good or bad performances and he needs to stay consistent—either because the songs *as they were written* can't be changed or because they mean so much to him in their original nature. In every performance of every song, then, as different as the songs might sound to us, Dylan delivers unchanged versions. He plays “the same thing time after time in the most perfect way.” The word “perfect” means “complete” in Latin, and what Dylan is telling us is that every song is always already complete, finished at its core, and his performances strive to repeat that complete (or perfect) version.

But it would be literary naiveté to suggest Dylan is unique in altering his supposedly complete works. There's Henry James, for instance, whose famous revisions (according to Henrician stalwarts) didn't affect the perfection of the novels. Closer to home, perhaps, is Walt Whitman. Often compared to Dylan as a vatic influence and as an American proto-Guthrie original, Whitman added many lines to *Leaves of Grass* but kept the essence of that long poem unchanged—the “Me Myself” core.

I've always thought I heard improvisation in Dylan's performances, brilliant flashes of spontaneity—and I've thrilled in recognizing and comparing the differences from the original. But maybe I've been listening to the wrong side of the song, to the superficial side. Maybe what I've been hearing is Dylan's style of Whitmanian rewriting. That would mean I should be listening not for what seems different, but for what is unchanged.

I've also thought I was beyond surprises from Dylan interviews, and far past credulity. Yet there's something irresistible in the idea that Dylan's performances are consistent despite their appearance of inconsistency, as if in the interviews,

too, Dylan hewed to a Whitmanian model. Or an Emersonian one—“consistency,” Emerson remarked, “is the hobgoblin of little minds.”

Dylan doesn't trust improvisation, it would seem, because there's too much at stake in his art to improvise. He can change his songs—rewrite, revise, and restructure them—but the core invention remains the same. He told us long ago (in an interview, predictably) that he's just a song and dance man. I wonder: might he not have been characterizing his performance in the interview—and in the many yet to come—as much as he was describing his performances on stage? This idea would bring us full circle. Dylan's “inconsistencies” in the interviews, like the living revisions of his performed songs, are not improvised. They are dances, like Whitman's, around one core topic, with the tangents and even the fabulist's wanderings, protecting the perfection of an artist who is who he is despite the labels interviewers and audiences try to attach to him (folk singer, carnival roustabout, poet, painter, rock star, Nobel Laureate). On a typescript draft of liner notes for *World Gone Wrong*, there's a bit of telling marginalia: Dylan reports that Billy Joel had visited him backstage, wondering why there weren't notes explaining his songs anymore. There's no record of what he said to Billy Joel, but he jotted the remark, “as if the whole story isn't in the delivery.”

Dylan asks us, the folks experiencing his “delivery,” to listen to him *at the moment that he is speaking or singing*, without comparing what he's speaking or singing to some past iteration of himself or the song. He asks us to become ignorant again every time, “And see the sun with an ignorant eye / And see it clearly in the idea of it.” This is his “eternal circle.”

And the song it is long, but it has to get done.

RF

ARTICLES

“And I Crossed the Rubicon”: Another Classical Dylan

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Abstract: Continuing and updating the observations in the author's book *Why Dylan Matters* (2017), this article explores Bob Dylan's engagement with the classical world of the ancient Greeks and Romans in the songs of *Rough and Rowdy Ways*. Both in the songs which imply such engagement (“Mother of Muses,” “Crossing the Rubicon”) and elsewhere on the album, classical antiquity remains a rich resource for the intertextuality of the songwriter. The Homeric poems, and Virgil's *Aeneid*, are part of the fabric on which he weaves his own epic stories, which continue the process, begun on “*Love and Theft*”, weaving into the album the story of the Roman dictator Julius Caesar, his assassination, and the civil wars that followed his death on the Ides of March 44 BCE.

Keywords: Aeneas; *Aeneid*; Appian; assassination; Augustus Caesar; Caesar, Julius; Calliope; Cavafy, Constantine; Christ, Jesus; American Civil War; Roman civil war; classical world; Crassus, Marcus Licinius; cypress tree; Dante; Dawn; Dylan, Bob; Elysian Fields; *Frankenstein*; heroes; Homer; Ides of March; intertextuality; invocation of Muses; Johnson, Samuel; Kennedy, John Fitzgerald; Lincoln, Abraham; Latin Club, Hibbing High School; Lucan; McKinley, William; memory; Milton, John; Mnemosyne; morality; molten gold; Muses; Nobel Prize Medal; *Odyssey*; Ovid; Red River; Rome; *Rough and Rowdy Ways*; Rubicon River; Saga, Junichi; Shakespeare, William; Shelley, Mary; St. Jerome; stream of consciousness; Timrod, Henry; transfiguration; Trojan women; Troy; Virgil; Warmuth, Scott

In *Why Bob Dylan Matters* (Dey Street Books 2017), following up on my 2007 article “The Streets of Rome: The Classical Dylan” (*Oral Tradition* 22.1), I traced the ways Dylan's lyrics, particularly those since he engaged the epic of Virgil in “Lonesome Day Blues,” actively incorporated the works and words of ancient

Greek and Roman poetry. Specifically Virgil in that particular song, the Roman poet Ovid in *Modern Times* (2006), and Homeric epic, where western literature all comes from, in *Tempest* (2012). For convenience, and to remove any doubt, I here give a more extensive table than I included in the book, just for the song “Ain’t Talkin’,” the closer of *Modern Times*. Ovid’s lines are alongside the lines Dylan so brilliantly worked into the song from Peter Green’s 1994 Penguin translation of *Poems of Exile*:

Bob Dylan, “Ain’t Talkin’” Every nook and cranny has its tears	Ovid, <i>Tristia</i> 1.3.24 every nook and corner had its tears
Bob Dylan, “Ain’t Talkin’” all my loyal and my much-loved companions	Ovid, <i>Tristia</i> 1.3.65 loyal and much loved companions
Bob Dylan, “Ain’t Talkin’” I’ll make the most of one last extra hour	Ovid, <i>Tristia</i> 1.3.68 let me make the most of one last extra hour
Bob Dylan, “Ain’t Talkin’” I practice a faith that’s been long abandoned	Ovid, <i>Tristia</i> 5.7.63-4 I practice / terms long abandoned
Bob Dylan, “Ain’t Talkin’” They will tear your mind away from contemplation	Ovid, <i>Tristia</i> 5.7.66 tear my mind from the contemplation of my woes

Bob Dylan, "Ain't Talkin'"

They approve of me and share my
code

Ovid, *Black Sea Letters* 3.2.38

who approve, and share, your
code

Bob Dylan, "Ain't Talkin'"

Who says I can't get heavenly aid?

Ovid, *Tristia* 1.2.12-13

Who says *I* can't get heavenly
aid / when a god's angry with
me?

Bob Dylan, "Ain't Talkin'"

They will jump on your misfortune when
you're down

Ovid, *Tristia* 5.8.3-5

Why jump / on misfortunes that
you may well suffer yourself? /
I'm down

As I also hope to have shown, the engagement with Rome in particular goes back well into the twentieth century, as evidenced by the lyrics of his songs from the very beginning: "Long Ago, Far Away" (1962), "Goin' Back to Rome" (1963), possibly "My Back Pages" (1964, in draft titled "Ancient Memories")¹, above all "When I Paint My Masterpiece" (1971), and "Changing of the Guards" (1978).²

The current contribution is meant as an update to those two earlier studies. Dylan's astonishing new album shows that he has stayed with some of the ancients, drawing from them and from everything else in his arsenal in new ways in the process of producing an album that will take its place among the greatest he has given us. As with the book, here I explore just one part of his art, and *in no*

¹ I have long wondered whether the "corpse evangelists" of this song, for whom the girls are "memorizing politics of ancient history," along with the overly serious "self-ordained professor's tongue," not to mention the mongrel dogs who teach, might all have to do with a less-than-happy memory—by 1964 one of his "ancient memories"—of something actually experienced in a Minneapolis classroom four years earlier. Stranger things have happened.

² See Thomas, 2017, 80–84, on the presence of Virgil's fourth, messianic *Eclogue* in drafts of "Changing of the Guards."

way imply that Dylan is limited or bounded by his interest in antiquity. He contains multitudes; this album contains multitudes. That includes the classical world, evident in the lyrics of some of the new songs, so it may be useful to record my thoughts here.

There is an interesting quote in the last interview he gave, in 2015 with Robert Love, editor of *AARP The Magazine*:

Bob Dylan: His True Calling

If I had to do it all over again, I'd be a schoolteacher—probably teach Roman history or theology.³

That 2015 interview accompanied the release of the first of the five discs of American standards, the album *Shadows in the Night*. Dylan in the interviews can be cryptic. But he is generally careful with his words, and there is a lot of Roman history and a lot of theology on *Rough and Rowdy Ways*, so it is worth recalling that interview here. He has also often let out relevant oblique and cryptic information in the interviews or press conferences that immediately precede release of albums, and this has included hints about the classical tradition from which he has been drawing—especially since the Rome press conference of 2001, where he hinted at the presence of Virgil on the upcoming “*Love and Theft*”: “when you walk around a town like this, you know that people were here before you, and they were probably on a much higher, grander level than any of us are” (see Thomas 2017, 76).

It was therefore of no small interest to be greeted, on the morning of June 12 of 2020, just over two weeks before the release of *Rough and Rowdy Ways*, by the first interview in five years, with historian Douglas Brinkley. Brinkley had given one of these album-connected interviews, printed in *Rolling Stone* on May 14, 2009, a couple of weeks after the release of *Together Through Life*. I had been particularly interested in that interview since it included some very specific

³ “A Man of Strong Opinions”: <https://www.aarp.org/entertainment/music/info-2015/bob-dylan-photos.html#slide13>

mentions of classical authors, unprompted by Brinkley, who tells how he decided “to push him on the importance of Christian Scripture in his life.” Unsurprisingly, he didn’t get far with that one, since Dylan skillfully shifted the topic, keeping it well away from anything personal, particularly the events of 1979:

“Well sure,” he says, “that and those other first books I read were really biblical stuff. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *Ben-Hur*. Those were the books that I remembered reading and finding religion in. Later on, I started reading over and over again Plutarch and his *Roman Lives*. And the writers Cicero, Tacitus and Marcus Aurelius . . . I like the morality thing. People talk about it all the time. Some say you can’t legislate morality. Well, maybe not. But morality has gotten kind of a bad rap. In Roman thought, morality is broken down into basically four things. Wisdom, Justice, Moderation and Courage . . . I don’t look at morality as a religious thing.

To the disappointment of those like myself, Brinkley didn’t follow up on these pretty surprising words, or at least he didn’t do so in print, but they are in line with the aspirations he would note six years later in 2015, to teach “Roman history or theology.” And they make sense in the context of *Rough and Rowdy Ways*, where morality in those manifestations—wisdom, justice, moderation and courage—are on full display, along with their opposites.

At the close of the interview from June 2020, Brinkley asks, “How is your health holding up? You seem to be fit as a fiddle. How do you keep mind and body working together in unison?” Dylan’s response may seem like a cliché (how do you respond to such questions?), but it is more than that:

Oh, that’s the big question, isn’t it? How does anybody do it? Your mind and body go hand in hand. There has to be some kind of agreement. I like to think of the mind as spirit and the body as substance. How do you integrate those two things, I have no idea. I just try to go on a straight line and stay on it, stay on the level.

A few days later we would hear the penultimate verse of the brilliant “Mother of Muses” and the suggestion in that song that it is his muse who has taught him these things:

Mother of muses unleash your wrath
Things I can't see they're blocking my path
Show me your wisdom, tell me my fate
Put me upright, make me walk straight
Forge my identity from the inside out
You know what I'm talking about

The morality that Dylan is here talking about is something his muse taught him, what he read and listened to from his early years. Or as he put it in the Nobel Lecture, talking about his school years: “I had principles and sensibilities and an informed view of the world . . . typical grammar school reading that gave you a way of looking at life, an understanding of human nature, and a standard to measure things by” (pp. 5–6).

The 2009 interview was part of the context in which I came to the interview of June 12, 2020, particularly having myself explored Dylan's connections with Greece and Rome in the interim. The interview is among the most interesting that Dylan has given in advance of a new release, with broad-ranging questions on the upcoming album. My interest is in an exchange towards the end. For whatever reason Brinkley departs from the subject at hand and asks a question that, wherever it actually came from, seems to come from nowhere:

BRINKLEY: *Out of all your compositions, “When I Paint My Masterpiece” has grown on me over the years. What made you bring it back to the forefront of recent concerts?*

DYLAN: It's grown on me as well. I think this song has something to do with the classical world, something that's out of reach. Someplace you'd like to be beyond your experience. Something that is so supreme and first rate that you could never come back down from

the mountain. That you've achieved the unthinkable. That's what the song tries to say, and you'd have to put it in that context.

As in the 2009 interview, Brinkley shows no awareness of the classical material that Dylan himself brings up here—not the only lost opportunity in the interview—and, at least in what is printed from the actual two-hour interview, winds things up with a question about a bluegrass version of “Summer Days”⁴ and a final “How is your health holding up?” He might have noted the unusual language in the assertion that the song has “something to do with the classical world.” Bob Dylan brought “When I Paint My Masterpiece” back into his concert setlists on July 27, 2018. His reference to that world—“so supreme and first rate that you could never come back down from the mountain”—is not accidental. The song stayed there, almost always in sixth position for every regular concert he played between that night and, as of the current moment, his last concert at The Anthem in Washington, D.C., on December 8, 2019. Brinkley missed the reference, but Dylan knew those of us interested in the classical world would find bits of it in the album that was about to appear.

As noted, the classical world, the world of ancient Greece and Rome, is not the only world that Dylan enters into in *Rough and Rowdy Ways*, but it is fundamental to some songs on the album, and to its structure, as I showed it was in particular to many of the songs of *Modern Times* and *Tempest*. It is my intention here to update the findings of my book and to offer some guidance to that world in the hope of contributing to an understanding of this complex masterpiece. It is not the only world comprehended by the album, but it is one—of many—that may help in getting under the skin of what Dylan has given us.

⁴ This question seemed similarly random, and here too part of Dylan's response was tantalizing. After talking about why he and his band don't do bluegrass (as if they might!), he says, “I listen to Bill Monroe a lot, but I more or less stick to what I can do best.” Would that include Monroe's version of the song “White House Blues” (“McKinley hollered, McKinley squalled / Doc said, ‘McKinley I can't find the cause’”) on the assassination of McKinley, with which “Key West” will begin?

Intertextuality and stream of consciousness

The intertextuality that has been a hallmark of Dylan's song composition since the 1990s continues on the new album, but things have changed. In those earlier works we encounter direct verbatim quotation of Junichi Saga's *Confessions of a Yakuza*, Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and Virgil's *Aeneid* ("Love and Theft" 2001), from Henry Timrod's poetry or the exile poems of Ovid (various songs on *Modern Times*, 2006), and from Homer's *Odyssey* (also on *Tempest*, 2012). For the songs on these albums I defined intertextuality as

the process by which poets, songwriters, composers, or artists of any genre create new meaning through the creative reuse of texts, images, or sound . . . the most powerful and evocative instances of intertextuality enrich a work precisely because, when the reader or listener notices the layered text and recognizes what the artist is reusing, that recognition activates the context of the stolen object, thereby deepening meaning in the new text.⁵

Those intertexts or references were contained on songs whose titles gave no hint of what was waiting within: "Lonesome Day Blues," "Workingman's Blues #2," "Ain't Talkin'," "Pay in Blood," "Scarlet Town," and the rest. In one case, "Early Roman Kings" looked from the title as if it would give us Romulus and Remus, but the Roman Kings famously turned out to be a Latino gang from 1960s New York—although the song did give us ancient Roman kings "distributing the corn," and Odysseus's taunting of the Cyclops he has just blinded in a verbatim quote from the Robert Fagles translation of the *Odyssey*.⁶

The new album parts company with this practice. The classical world to which Dylan referred in the Brinkley interview is there, particularly in the title of two of the songs, "Mother of Muses" and "Crossing the Rubicon." But the methodology has changed somewhat, with borrowing by direct quotation

⁵ Thomas, 2017, 131–32.

⁶ Thomas, 2017, 89–91.

replaced by a freer and less precise borrowing. The result is a riotous mixing of genres that gives many of the songs a sense of stream of consciousness. The mind of Bob Dylan, like that of Joyce in *Ulysses*, flits across a variety of cultural elements, including those from the worlds of the Greeks and Romans. This incongruous mixing is something that has always been in the art of Bob Dylan, sometimes for camouflage, sometimes just for the fun and poetry of it, Mack the Finger and Louie the King, John the Baptist and the Commander in Chief, Cain and Abel and the hunchback of Notre Dame. But incongruity and genre mixing seem to reach a higher pitch on *Rough and Rowdy Ways*, with Scarface Pacino, the Trojan Women and Julius Caesar together in a heap. "My Own Version of You" may be a special case, as we'll see.

For whatever reason the intertextuality of the new album has avoided much in the way of direct quotation, though the Shakespeare quotes are all generally direct. Otherwise, where direct quotation is found, it seems to have to do not so much with literary traditions as with musical ones. This mode of quotation is apparent in the album's title, a Jimmie Rodgers song, along with his photo on the CD cover; the opening words of "Key West" as borrowed from "White House Blues"; a "world so badly bent" in "Crossing the Rubicon," shared with "Dead Presidents" by Little Walter (1964); "the wings of a snow white dove" from "I've Made Up My Mind to Give Myself to You," previously sung by Robert Duvall in the 1983 movie *Tender Mercies* (these noted by Scott Warmuth). Even the direct quote of Roman poet Juvenal in "Black Rider" is modified slightly.

Whether Dylan finally tired of all the uninformed charges of plagiarism, I cannot say. What is true is that this more oblique process is in line with the intertextual process of poets like Milton, Blake, or Eliot, for whom poetic appropriation consists of rephrasing, rather than quotation. This is a huge topic and one I cannot pursue here, though I hope to take it up in the future. For now it stands as an assertion. Now for some song-by-song observations on the classical presences of the album.

I Contain Multitudes

In general, the opening and closing frames of the album seem to be lacking in classical references. That is particularly true of the latter, since Dylan's cultural focus in "Murder Most Foul," the album's closer, is exclusively on the music from around the time of the assassination. Or the songs that someone living then, someone like Bob Dylan, might have experienced, both at the time and in the years that followed. But the first song is a slight exception. The title of course comes from Walt Whitman ("Song of Myself" 51: "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes)") and Dylan quotes closely as he fleshes out the title in the penultimate refrain of the song:

I'm a man of contradictions

I'm a man of many moods

I contain multitudes

But the Homeric hero familiar from those songs of *Tempest* is also present in this part of the song. We don't need to go to the CliffsNotes to know that this verse describes Odysseus, there described as "a living series of contradictions, a much more complicated character than we would expect to find in the stereotypical epic hero." Dylan may also in the last year or two have picked up Emily Wilson's blockbuster 2018 translation of the *Odyssey* with its opening invitation to the Muse, "Tell me about a complicated man." Even before the song list came out, with "Mother of Muses" pointing back to the Nobel Lecture and beyond, the Homeric hero—the ultimate man of contradictions—was present in these lines of the opening song. The words of this first song of the album ("I'm a man of contradictions") look most immediately to Whitman's poem, but they also take us to Dylan's own words in that lecture, where he adopts the identity of the Homeric hero, clearly referring to himself after he sums up the experiences of Odysseus: "In a lot of ways, some of these same things have happened to you." And he had

already “become Odysseus” in 2012, by way of the intertextual lyrics of *Tempest* and in his rewriting in performance of “Workingman’s Blues #2.”⁷

False Prophet

The classical presences in “False Prophet” need to be contextualized with allusions going back to “*Love and Theft*”, whose “Lonesome Day Blues” gave us the quote from Virgil’s *Aeneid*:

I’m gonna spare the defeated—I’m gonna speak to the crowd
I’m gonna spare the defeated, boys, I’m going to speak to the crowd
I am goin’ to teach peace to the conquered
I’m gonna tame the proud

I have argued that these presences involved Julius Caesar, his adoptive son, Octavian—the future Augustus, first of the Roman emperors—and the Roman civil wars that brought about the transition from republic to empire:

- “I’ll establish my rule through civil war” (“Bye and Bye”)
- “I’m here to create the new imperial empire” (“Honest with Me”)
- “I’ll avenge my father’s death then I’ll step back” (“Ain’t Talkin’”)
- “Brother rose up against brother / In every circumstance / They fought and slaughtered each other / In a deadly dance” (“*Tempest*”)
- “In Scarlet Town you fight your father’s foes / Up on a hill a chilly wind blows” (“Scarlet Town”)

The tone also looks to the words of Augustus on his final will and record of his achievements, put up in bronze and marble throughout the empire:

Those who killed my father I drove into exile, by way of the courts, exacting vengeance for their crime . . . I did not accept permanent the consulship that was offered to me (Augustus, *Res Gestae* 2, 5)

⁷ Thomas, 2017, 254–68 “Dylan Becomes Odysseus

This claim of Augustus relates to his defeats of Antony and Cleopatra at the battle of Actium (31 BCE), and before that of Brutus and Cassius at the battle of Philippi (42 BCE), following their assassination of Julius Caesar on March 15, 44 BCE. From the perspective of Augustus, Actium and Philippi were acts of vengeance; from the perspective of Brutus, Cassius, Cicero and others, the battles spelled the final death throes of the Roman republic, as the young successor to Caesar established his rule through civil war. Vengeance is a common human phenomenon, but the vengeance of Augustus for the killing of his father is a theme already in Dylan, before this album which clearly continues the themes.

The voice of Augustus is heard on “False Prophet” at a couple of points:

Well I'm the enemy of treason, the enemy of strife . . .
I'm first among equals, second to none
The last of the best, you can bury the rest
Bury 'em naked with their silver and gold
Put 'em six feet under and I pray for their souls

Augustus was proud of his claim to be “first among equals” which upheld the fiction that the system, effectively a monarchy, was still a republic—those are hard to hold onto, then as now.⁸ And this talk of burying 'em takes us back to “Pay in Blood,” its final verse with its allusion to Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, and the ominous and threatening tone brought back to life in “False Prophet”:

This is how I spend my days
I came to bury not to praise
I'll drink my fill and sleep alone
I pay in blood but not my own

That is what happened across twenty years of the Roman civil war, initiated when Caesar crossed the Rubicon in January of 49 BC: by the year 30, Augustus, “last

⁸ Augustus, *Res Gestae* 34.3: “I excelled everyone in influence, but I had no more power than my other colleagues in each office.”

of the best," buried Antony, as Antony and he buried Brutus and Cassius, they all buried Julius Caesar, and Caesar buried Pompey.

Elsewhere in "False Prophet," like Augustus, the singer has again come for vengeance:

I ain't no false prophet, I just said what I said

I'm just here to bring vengeance on somebody's head

Some have also seen in the song the particularly grisly death of Marcus Licinius Crassus:

Put out your hand, there's nothin' to hold

Open your mouth, I'll stuff it with gold

At least two Roman generals were reported to have died by having their mouths stuffed with gold. The "Choking on Gold" section of Tom Holland's popular book, *Rubicon*, tells of Manius Aquilius, the Roman general killed when Mithridates VI had molten gold poured down his throat in 88 BCE (Appian, *Roman History* 3.21.1). In 54 BCE, the defeated Marcus Licinius Crassus is said to have suffered a similar fate at the hands of the Parthians who, after they killed him, "poured molten gold into his mouth in mockery" of his obsession with wealth (Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 40.27). Dylan may have met the rich man, Crassus (a.k.a. Laurence Olivier) back in 1960, the villain in Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus*.⁹

My Own Version of You

The singer is putting together his creation, with the components of the song reflecting the composite nature of his own version. A rather grisly opening suggestion of Mary Shelley's classic *Frankenstein*, with the singer looking for "limbs and livers and brains and hearts," and quoting Shakespeare ("Well, it must be 'the winter of my discontent'" and later "Can you tell me what it means, 'to be or not to be'") has the singer drawing from a broad range of literary contexts high, low, religious and secular. The creation he will jump-start to life by sticking a knife in its

⁹ See Thomas, 2017, 54 for the likelihood of this encounter.

ribs recalls not only the original rib-creation in Genesis, but also has bits of “Scarface Pacino and the Godfather Brando” (not the Godfather Pacino) and even *Gulliver’s Travels* (getting “gunpowder from ice”). Dylan’s new creation will be made to play piano like “Leon Russell, Liberace, and John the Apostle.” St. Peter and Jerome are there, though Jerome turns out to be Bo Diddley’s from the song “Bring it to Jerome”—written by his maracas player Jerome Green—rather than (or along with?) the fifth-century theologian and historian, Eusebius Sophronius Hieronymus, who would become St Jerome. Putting these two culturally distinct Jeromes together, like turning John the Apostle into a piano player, is vintage Dylan. That more ancient Jerome translated the Bible from Greek and Hebrew into Latin (the so-called “Vulgate”), before and after the year 400, long before the First Crusade of 1096–1099, making it accessible to the Latin-speaking West. Raphael Falco suggests that Jerome, addressing God, would have thought of his translation as “my own version of You.”

The song itself is a literary Frankenstein, a work made up through its references and allusions to some of the elements that have gone into Dylan’s songwriting. Others will identify many of these, including the line “I study Sanskrit and Arabic to improve my mind,” taken it seems from Mary Shelley’s actual novel.¹⁰ The line that follows in the song (“I want to do things for the benefit of all mankind”) draws attention to Dylan’s humanistic aims, which I have noted elsewhere, and to which I will return.¹¹ The song is hugely important in Dylan’s self-revelation on this album, by which of course I mean the revelation of what has gone into his art. But in keeping with the theme of this article I limit myself to a couple of references, having to do with Julius Caesar and Virgil, the general and the poet from the first century BC, 400 years before Jerome, so “Long before the first Crusade / Way back ‘fore England or America were made”—words that come right after quoting from Virgil’s *Aeneid*. Dylan makes it clear he is going

¹⁰ *Frankenstein*, Ch. 6 (“The Persian, Arabic, and Sanscrit languages engaged his attention”).

¹¹ See Thomas, 2017, 17.

back to the classical world, a world in which he can “see the history of the whole human race.” First Virgil, Rome’s greatest poet,

Stand over there by the Cypress tree

Where the Trojan women and children were sold into slavery

This allusion is well concealed, looking at first glimpse as if it is quoting the title of Euripides’ anti-war play of 415 BC, *The Trojan Women*. But that is an old Dylan trick; remember “Early Roman Kings.” In fact it is Virgil’s epic *Aeneid* that is here put in play. The second book of that poem is narrated by the defeated Trojan prince Aeneas, who instructs his family where to meet as they leave the burning Troy: “Nearby an ancient cypress stands.” Aeneas a little later sees “Trojan boys / and trembling women stand in a long line.” That is where Dylan’s cypress tree and Trojan woman and children point us, to the same poem he quoted from in “Lonesome Day Blues”—the epic poem that will be part of the backdrop of “Mother of Muses.”

Then there is the case of Julius Caesar, who for this song has an air of authority:

I pick a number between one and two

And ask myself what would Julius Caesar do

In a few songs we will find out what Julius Caesar would do: he would and did cross the Rubicon. But I don’t think I’m alone in thinking of a different “JC” here, as in “What would Jesus do?” This is just the beginning of the merging of the two figures. “Mother of Muses” will bring it back home to Virgil.

Such merging once had a different name—transfiguration—the term Dylan would use to describe intertextuality, so applying a metaphor having to do with becoming someone else through allusion.¹² And Julius Caesar was one of the characters he had in mind, back in one of his more interesting interviews:

Who knows who’s been transfigured and who has not? Who knows?
Maybe Aristotle? Maybe he was transfigured? I can’t say. Maybe

¹² See Thomas, 2017, 119–27, “The Transfiguration of Bob Dylan”; also 164–67

Julius Caesar was transfigured. I have no idea. Maybe Shakespeare. Maybe Dante. Maybe Napoleon. Maybe Winston Churchill. You just never know because it doesn't figure into the history books. That's all I'm saying.

The transfiguration, with at least a few of these characters, continues on the new album, starting with Julius Caesar. That interview, "Bob Dylan Unleashed"¹³ also seems to take on a new life as Dylan sings, "Mother of Muses, unleash your wrath."

Black Rider

At one point I thought the song "Black Rider" had nothing to do with the classical world, and whatever it is about, that is still largely true. The song was also of interest because of the (for a Dylan song) unusual obscene line, "The size of your cock will get you nowhere." You have to go back to the *Basement Tapes* to find even an approximation of that, and even there innuendo, and Dylan's laughter, soften the effect: "Look, Missus Henry / There's only so much I can do / Why don't you look my way / An' pump me a few?" Carl Wilson, reviewing the new album for *Slate*, even tried—with what authority we are not told—to talk us out of hearing the line as it was clearly intended: "Although I do have to disappoint some listeners and say that I'm pretty sure the line here many advance reviewers have heard as 'the size of your cock will get you nowhere' actually refers to 'the size of your cockerel.'" What a cockerel would be doing in this song we are not told! The official lyrics remove any doubt. On June 22 Scott Warmuth showed us where this line of the song came from, the ninth satire of Juvenal (second century AD), the Lenny Bruce of the Roman world, who has the equivalent of a male prostitute,¹⁴ not getting much business, lament, "The

¹³ Mikal Gilmore, *Rolling Stone* September 27, 2012

¹⁴ Or, to quote Susanna Braund's description in the Loeb Classical Library Juvenal (p. 348), "The client in this poem is Naevolus ('Mr. Warty'), a man who has interpreted his duties rather broadly to include satisfying the patron's desire to be penetrated in anal intercourse, having sex with the patron's wife at the patron's request, and fathering the patron's children." This situation could also inform another striking line in "Black Rider," though the line does not seem specifically to come

fantastic size of your cock will get you precisely nowhere." Translations again are important.¹⁵ Dylan found this line in Peter Green's 1967 Penguin translation, the same translator whose Penguin translation of Ovid's exile poems he had drawn from on *Modern Times*. Dylan had already used a line from Juvenal ("the pimp was already dismissing the girls") in the song "Tempest" ("Davey the brothel keeper / Came out, dismissed his girls"). In another verse of that song the host was pouring brandy and "he stayed right to the end / He was the last to go"—just like Roman empress Messalina in Juvenal's same poem, who stays on after the girls have been dismissed: "She stayed till the end, always the last to go." So it is natural for Dylan to quote from Juvenal's poem here, but worth noting that such verbatim quotation is an oddity for this album, whereas his other albums from this century all seemed to do so freely. The oddity also explains the unusual obscenity, reserved for the Black Rider, who is no friend of the singer.

Mother of Muses

In "The Lost Land," the riveting second chapter of *Chronicles, Volume 1*, Dylan writes of the early 60s, "Invoking the poetic muse was something I didn't know about yet" (45). That had changed well before he wrote "Mother of Muses," but this song shows Dylan in full control of the epic tradition of which he is the greatest contemporary inheritor. This is hardly surprising: the opening words of this song, "Mother of Muses sing for me," pick up where Dylan left off, with the last words he published before releasing the new album, the final sentence of his brilliant Nobel Lecture of June 12, 2017: "I return once again to Homer, who says 'Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story.'" The opening verse of the song is also the introduction to the rest of the album, whose next three increasingly longer songs deliver their epic messages of assassination ("Crossing the Rubicon" 7:23; "Key West" 9:34; "Murder Most Foul" 16:55). Some have found "Murder Most

from Juvenal: "Go home to your wife, stop visiting mine."

¹⁵ See Thomas 2017, 239, on the importance of the specific translation in activating intertextuality.

Foul” to be too long. I am not one of those, but here it is worth noting that is what epics do, they go on. As Samuel Johnson wrote in his *Life of Milton*, of *Paradise Lost*, greatest of English epic poems, “None ever wished it longer than it is.” And why “Mother of Muses” (Mnemosyne, or “Memory”) instead of one of the Muses, as in the Homeric poems and in the Nobel Lecture? Perhaps so he can keep the single Muse, Calliope (“beautiful voice”), muse of epic poetry, for the special role she plays in the second half of the song—where she is more than just a muse: “I’m in love with Calliope,” a brilliant touch that is pure Dylan in its mix of tradition and originality, a touch which turns the song into a love song, a song of longing for Calliope.

Calliope’s mother introduces the epic that characterizes this song’s first half and the three songs that close out the album. Her function is traditional: “Sing of honor and faith and glory be / Mother of Muses, sing for me . . . Sing of the heroes who stood alone / Whose names are engraved on tablets of stone.” The Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and Virgil’s *Aeneid*, already put in play in “My Own Version of You,” provide examples of the invocation of the Muses as a prelude to memorializing the fighters of old. In the second book of the *Iliad*, the poet invokes the Muses for help in recalling the names of the Greek heroes who came to Troy: “Tell me now, you Muses, you who have your homes on Olympus . . . who were the leaders and lords of the Greeks” (2.484–7). And in Book 8 of the *Odyssey*, a number of whose lines ended up on the songs of *Tempest*, the bard Demodocus brings tears to Odysseus’ eyes by singing of the struggle at Troy so vivid in the hero’s memory: “the Muse inspired the bard / to sing the famous deeds of fighting heroes.”

Virgil, writing several centuries after Homer and in a different linguistic culture, adapted the Homeric catalog of ships to his Italian epic setting:

O goddesses (i.e. Muses), now open Helicon
And guide my song: what kings were spurred to war;
What squadrons filled the plain behind each chieftain;

With what heroes mothering Italy then flowered;
With what arms she caught fire. For goddesses,
You can remember and can recall; the slender
Breath of that fame can scarcely reach down to us

They can remember, because their mother, the mother of the Muses, is Mnemosyne, Greek for “Memory.” Virgil’s invocation underscores memory words (*meministis* “remember” . . . *memorare* “call to mind”). These are essential parts of poetry, as they are of song for Dylan—“memorize these lines, and remember these rhymes,” as the in-performance words of “Tangled Up in Blue” have it.

Virgil’s invocation precedes not just the almost two-hundred line catalog of Italian warriors, but, like “Mother of Muses,” the entire second half of the epic that follows. For Virgil, five more bloody books showing what it cost to build Rome; for Dylan, three songs of assassination—Caesar, McKinley, Kennedy. Dylan’s lines too, like those of Virgil, are traditional and original at the same time, rooted in their Homeric and Virgilian precedents. No catalogue of the Greek generals here though, no Italian warriors whose job it would be to “teach peace to the conquered and tame the proud.” Instead, in an updating of Homer and Virgil, Dylan invokes the heroes of modern history: “Sing of the Heroes who stood alone / Whose names are engraved on tablets of stone.” The next verse includes a list of those generals who fought for the freedoms that America enjoys, in the wars against the Confederacy and Nazi Germany:

Sing of Sherman—Montgomery and Scott
And of Zhukov and Patton and the battles they fought
Who cleared the path for Presley to sing
Who carved out the path for Martin Luther King
Who did what they did and then went on their way
Man, I could tell their stories all day

That is Dylan’s vision in this song. Whether Montgomery is James Montgomery, the abolitionist friend of John Brown, who led a troop of Black soldiers in the Civil War,

or—more likely—Field Marshal Sir Bernard Law Montgomery, aka “Monty,” the British general of World War II (played by Michael Bates in the 1970 film *Patton*), we will never know. Those are the two wars of the song, though, the wars that let Elvis Presley sing the blues and Martin Luther King go to the mountain. Zhukov might seem an oddity, but Dylan is thinking not of the Cold War warrior of Stalin, but of the Russian general who fought the Germans at Leningrad and Stalingrad. As for the Civil War heroes, certainly it is welcome to see spelled out here some of the “names of the heroes I’s made to memorize,” as he put it almost sixty years ago in “With God on Our Side.” Mnemosyne did her job well! And now he’s with Calliope, who in the brilliant and haunting second half of this song has become his lover, joining him on his odyssey home, now much more than a muse, even if Dylan’s muses have always also been his lovers:

Take me to the river and release your charms
Let me lay down a while in your sweet lovin’ arms
Wake me—shake me—free me from sin
Make me invisible like the wind
Got a mind to ramble—got a mind to roam
I’m travelin’ light and I’m slow coming home

A final thought. The song that starts with Homer and his Muse, like the Nobel Lecture that the opening of this song also picks up on, seems to end, like the lecture, with its eye on Cavafy’s great poem, *Ithaca*.¹⁶ That poem tells us not to hurry home, but likewise to ramble and roam in the odyssey which for Cavafy as for Dylan becomes life itself:

Keep Ithaca always in your mind.
Arriving there is what has been ordained for you
But do not hurry the journey at all.
Better if it lasts many years¹⁷

Or as Dylan puts it, “I’m slow coming home.”

¹⁶ See Thomas, 2017, 262–63 for the echoes of Cavafy’s poem in Dylan’s lecture.

¹⁷ Cavafy, *Ithaca* (tr. Theoharis)

Crossing the Rubicon

Whatever the various other meanings inherent in “Mother of Muses,” it is surely here functioning as Dylan’s epic invocation to the three songs that follow. So he moves to the closing epic triad of the album, each founded on political assassination: Julius Caesar (44 BCE), William McKinley (1901) and John Fitzgerald Kennedy (1963). Of the first of these, Carl Wilson put it one way in his review in *Slate*:

“Crossing the Rubicon” is a diss-track/battle-rap/crawling-kingsnake number in which, like several times here, Dylan imagines himself as a strutting ancient Roman general, promising, “I’ll make your wife a widow / You’ll never see old age.

That is to tie down the stream of consciousness to one particular actor, though who the general would be is hard to say. Not Julius Caesar, since he was the one whose wife would be made a widow, five years after he crossed the Rubicon.

Everything about the slow blues, “Crossing the Rubicon,” catches the importance of that act, particularly the voice and drama of the refrain itself, along with the momentous lines that precede,¹⁸ together making it clear the act is not just difficult, but life-changing. In crossing the river in northeastern Italy that was the boundary south of which he was not, under republican rules, to lead his army, Caesar effectively declared war on Rome. His motive was to avoid prosecution at the hands of his enemies in Rome. As Holland put it:

He finally caught up with his troops on the banks of the Rubicon. There was a moment’s dreadful hesitation, and then he was crossing its swollen waters into Italy, towards Rome. No one could know at the time, but 460 years of the free Republic were being brought to an end.

¹⁸ These are worth isolating: “I painted my wagon, abandoned all hope”; “I prayed to the cross, I kissed the girls”; “I embraced my love, put down my hair”; “I pawned my watch, I paid my debts”; “I poured the cup, I passed it along”; “I stood between heaven and earth”; “I’ll strap my belt, I’ll button my coat”; “I turned the key and broke it off”; “I lit the torch, I looked to the east.” Each of them suggests a decisive situation, its drama only heightened by the final “And I crossed the Rubicon.”

The historian Appian, writing in Greek 200 years after the events, records an anecdote, beyond the familiar “the die is cast,” that catches the moment of the crossing. Caesar is said to have stopped before the stream going back and forth in his mind pondering the results of a crossing: “My friends, if I do not make this crossing, it will be the beginning of troubles for me; if I do make it, it will be the beginning of troubles for the whole world.” Then speaking like a man inspired, he surged across, uttering the familiar phrase, “Let the die be cast.” The singer seems to have things on his mind in the first of the epic poems he sings after seeking inspiration from the mother of the Muses:

The Rubicon is the Red River, going gently as she flows
Redder than your ruby lips and the blood that flows from the rose
Three miles north of purgatory—one step from the great beyond
I prayed to the cross and I kissed the girls and I crossed the Rubicon

Again, the mixing and stream of consciousness that is a mark of the album. Dylan seems aware of the lines of the Latin poet Lucan, forced by emperor Nero to commit suicide but not before writing a poem in which the Caesars, among whom Nero, in the century after Julius Caesar’s death, would be numbered:

The bright red river Rubicon flows from modest spring
through the bottom of a valley, valleys, dividing Gaul from Italian
lands (Lucan, *Pharsalia* 1.213–14)

Why a red river? Commentators on Lucan in antiquity have thought because of the red gravel in the river bed, but Lucan is a poet, and he is playing with etymologies, real or otherwise (in Latin *rubeo* = “be red”), pointing of the rivers of the Mediterranean world that will be turned red with the blood of civil war once the Rubicon is crossed, where through that etymology the Rubicon pays in blood. Dylan, who has I think read his Lucan, picks up on all of this: “redder than your ruby lips and the blood that flows from the rose.” You won’t find red rivers in Dylan without the memory of girls who come from their shores, and the official lyrics specify that the “Rubicon is *the Red River*,” in caps, and not a red river or *the red*

river (all italics mine). Perhaps the singer still has Calliope on his mind even as he crosses the Rubicon, alluding in the process to “the one that I’ll always adore” from “Red River Shore,” the brilliant outtake from *Time Out of Mind*, to which the new album takes us back in so many ways. And finally there is the film *Red River*, which Bob Zimmerman probably saw as a boy, if not when it came out in 1948 then when it reran in one of the Hibbing theaters he regularly frequented.

Caesar also resembles Christ or some sort of Christ or Christian figure, both in the second verse (“I prayed to the cross and I kissed the girls and I crossed the Rubicon”), and in the sixth: “I stood between heaven and earth and I crossed the Rubicon.” By vote of the Senate, Julius Caesar will, after his death, become a god, the “divine Caesar.” Jesus on the cross is physically as in other ways between heaven and earth. Also in words from the fifth verse, “I poured the cup, I passed it along and I crossed the Rubicon,” it is hard not to hear the words of Jesus from Matthew 26:39, “My father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.” But the cups poured in Gethsemane and at the Rubicon were not passed on. The genre-mixing that is effected by this loose and free form of intertextuality conflates Caesar and Christ, each headed home, for the “crooked knives” of political assassination and for the cross on Calvary.

The Ides of March

“Crossing the Rubicon” is one of those songs that begins, or more or less begins, with the naming of a day. “Murder Most Foul” would not name the 22nd, since everybody knows the day, but it was similar: “’Twas a dark day in Dallas, November ’63.” Elsewhere the date can be somewhat obscure, as at the beginning of “Isis”: “I married Isis on the fifth day of May.” This is a feature of ballad, which naturally enough situates things in time or place commemorating battles or other historical events. So what to do with the beginning of this song? “I crossed the Rubicon on the 14th day of the most dangerous month of the year.” Not very helpful, but as always with detail in Dylan, there is a reason, here making us

confront the puzzle. April was for T. S. Eliot the “cruellest” month, but it could also be the most dangerous, if you happened to be Calvin, Blake, or Wilson, or the rich man Mr. Astor, the characters who went down with the Titanic on that night to remember, as Dylan told us in the second verse of the epic “*Tempest*” from 2012:

'Twas the fourteen [sic] day of April
Over the waves she rode
Sailing into tomorrow
To a golden age foretold

So April 14 might seem like a good candidate, even more so since on the evening of that same day, April 14 of 1865, Abraham Lincoln was shot, dying the following day, on April 15. But the 14th of other months are also available. And if you were President McKinley, whom we meet at the beginning of the next song in Dylan’s adaptation of the old bluegrass “*White House Blues*” (“McKinley hollered, McKinley squalled / Doctor said ‘McKinley, death is on the wall’”), then September 14 was pretty dangerous, the day he died after being shot eight days earlier.

But the 14th was also the eve of what for Julius Caesar was emphatically the most dangerous month, March, whose Ides of course fell on the next day, his death day, as was the 15th of the month for Lincoln. That’s where we could imagine being in the non-linear world of the next lines of the poem:

I got up early so I could greet the goddess of the Dawn
I painted my wagon—I abandoned all hope and I crossed the
Rubicon

Getting up early and greeting the goddess of the Dawn (*Eōs* in Greek, *Aurora* in Latin) is something Caesar shares with Odysseus, for instance in *Odyssey* 5, the book that lends many lines to the songs of *Tempest*: “When young Dawn with her rose-red [those colors again] fingers shone once more / Odysseus quickly dressed himself.” This forms a frame to the song with the last line of the song, “I lit the torch and looked to the east and I crossed the Rubicon”—*Eōs* being the word both for

the east and dawn: “east where the Goddess Dawn, forever young, has her home” (*Odyssey* 12).

And as for “I abandoned all hope,” we had already met the fleet footed guides of the Underworld back in “False Prophet,” so no surprise here to meet the Italian poet from the thirteenth century. With him come the words, “abandoned all hope,” from the third line of the third verse of the third canto of the *Inferno*, first of the three works of the *Divine Comedy*, the words painted above the entrance to Dante’s “Lasciate ogni speranza” (“Abandon all hope you who enter here”). The mixing of Dante with reference to the 1951 Lerner and Loewe musical, *Paint Your Wagon*, best known from the 1969 Clint Eastwood movie of the same name, is par for the course on this album. The number three stays in the next line, since that is where Dylan’s Caesar crosses the Rubicon: “Three miles north of purgatory, one step from the great beyond”—a place that feels like Dante again.

Bob Dylan has had connections to Julius Caesar and his death on the Ides of March, 44 BCE, for a very long time, even from before he was Bob Dylan. The evening of Friday April 5, 1957, in the little Minnesota town of Hibbing found the Shadow Blasters, the band Bob Zimmerman had put together the previous fall, performing at a talent show at Hibbing High School, the first of his performances. Whether or not his vigorous, Little Richard-style piano playing broke a pedal on the instrument cannot be known for sure, but the sophomore certainly made his mark. The school paper, the *Hibbing Hi Times*, had reported a less spectacular event three weeks earlier:

Societas Latina members today published a paper to celebrate the death of Caesar on the Ides of March (March 15). The paper included Roman history, an original poem, cartoons, and many other items with a Roman background.

Dylan was a member of that Latin Club (*Societas Latina*), and whatever his contribution to the Ides of March celebration, we may safely assume that he knew from an early age why the day mattered. That was the consequence of Caesar’s crossing the Rubicon five years earlier.

Key West (Philosopher Pirate)

There is a lot of death in *Rough and Rowdy Ways*, particularly in the epic trilogy that closes it out. Death comes for Caesar by the assassins' knives, crooked or otherwise. Death appears on the wall for McKinley. And above all, death for President Kennedy—"led to the slaughter like a sacrificial lamb" as they "blew off his head," had him killed "like a human sacrifice" and "heading straight on into the afterlife"—in a song that makes us revisit it again and again, not quite the thirty-three times that the singer has watched Abraham Zapruder's filming of the event, but enough to bring the horror of that day back home to anyone old enough to remember it. And of course death is what epic traffics in. But the middle song of the three gives us a brighter glimpse of the afterlife, at least for those who make it to Key West, where death is not the end: "Key West is the place to be / If you're lookin' for immortality."

In "Bob Dylan: Aeneas Visits Key West," on the extensive and almost always interesting website "Untold Dylan," Larry Fyffe suggests¹⁹

the song is figuratively transformed into the Underworld of Greek/Roman mythology, and the singer/songwriter takes on the persona of Virgil's Aeneas:

Key West is under the sun, under the radar, under the gun
You stay to the left, and then you lean to the right
Feel the sun on your skin, and the healing virtues of the wind
Key West, Key West is the land of light

Some may find the evidence he adduces slight, in these lines and in the instructions his guide the Sibyl gives to Aeneas: "the regions to the left . . . punished the wicked for their misdeeds. But the road to the right led to the Elysian Field." However this detail and other aspects of the song indeed resonate with Virgil's account of Aeneas' journey to the Underworld in *Aeneid 6*, and ending up in the magical Elysium, where in Robert Fagles' translation,

¹⁹ <https://bob-dylan.org.uk/archives/15749>

They gained the land of joy, the fresh green fields,
The Fortunate Groves where the blessed make their homes.
Here a freer air, a dazzling radiance clothes the fields
And the spirits possess their own sun, their own stars[.]

As with the Elysian Fields, or the parallel ancient tradition of the Isles of the Blessed, likewise immune to the troubles of the world, Key West is a land the poetic imagination creates, to evade the strife and destiny of the mortal human condition, a place that is “fine and fair,” “truly blessed,” where “winter . . . is an unknown thing,” the road to “innocence and purity,” a “paradise divine,” to quote from throughout the song. It is where immortality is to be found, but only for some.

Back in “My Own Version of You” the singer had quoted Virgil’s Aeneas as he prepares to move his people out of the burning Troy: “Stand over there by the Cypress tree / Where the Trojan women and children were sold into slavery.” Some resisters may also want to put this down to coincidence, but Dylan’s intertextuality is clear, instructions to stand by a specific cypress tree, and the presence of Trojan women and children being sold into slavery. That is a non-Homeric moment that happens as Troy falls and only in the second book of Virgil’s *Aeneid*. “My Own Version of You” is a sort of glossary and concordance for the album, its Frankenstein elements, a.k.a. intertextualities, the “limbs and livers and brains and hearts” that are the “necessary body parts” he will graft onto a number of the album’s songs, “Key West” not least.

To return to the Elysian Fields, Bob Dylan has stayed here before, not quite a thousand nights ago, and he takes us back with deliberate allusivity. On April 1, 2017, where his guide was neither the Sibyl nor Mary Lou and Miss Pearl, those “fleet footed guides from the Underworld” of “False Prophet,” but the late Sara Danius, Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy, who showed Dylan the image of the Nobel Prize Medal she and the other members of the Academy presented to him on that day. For almost six months this group, having announced

their righteous decision of October 13 of the previous year, had been buffeted by the winds of ignorance and limited vision. Now was the time for them to celebrate with their new laureate: *nunc est bibendum*. As she recalled, and as I have reported before:²⁰

Spirits were high. Champagne was had. Quite a bit of time was spent looking closely at the gold medal, in particular the beautifully crafted back, an image of a young man sitting under a laurel tree who listens to the Muse. Taken from Virgil's *Aeneid*, the inscription reads: *Inventas vitam iuvat excoluisse per artes*, loosely translated as "And they who bettered life on earth by their newly found artistry."

That Virgilian line, the one on the medal—the only illustration in my book, I note—comes from the same description of the poets now in the Elysian Fields, described in the line that follows as "those we remember well for the good they did mankind." Or in the words of Dylan learning Sanskrit and Arabic (not Greek and Latin?) in the same "My Own Version of You": "I want to do things for the benefit of all mankind."

Virgil was himself something of a philosopher pirate, or at least a pirate philosopher. For his Elysian Fields, he raided the eschatological thinking he found in Platonic philosophy, Eleusinian, Orphic, and Jewish mystery writings, all available to him in Greek. Christianity would provide a different solution, but the mind of Virgil, who died in 19 BCE, created its own possibilities, its own intertextually created version of the afterlife. In his account, the souls of the dead will revisit the world after a thousand years, years which "cleanse our hard, inveterate stains and leave us clear / ethereal sense, the eternal breath of fire purged and pure" (6.863–640). Dylan the philosopher pirate has in turn stolen these ideas and put them into his own version, the land he creates in "Key West", the "gateway key / To innocence and purity."

²⁰ Thomas, 2017, 12.

The song, already taking its place as a masterpiece among the very greatest he has written, is a testament to Dylan's immortality, with Ginsberg, Corso and Kerouac, to be sure, but also with Homer, Virgil and Dante, with a final nod to Milton. So "If you're lookin' for immortality / Key West is paradise divine." *Paradise Lost* and the *Divine Comedy*, both in that phrase. Once upon a time, 40 years ago, Bob Dylan struggled with perfecting another masterpiece, now available as more than one masterpiece in bootlegged and official versions. In "Caribbean Wind," set somewhere where that wind blows "from Nassau to Mexico" and not so far from the real Key West, Dylan was "playing a show in Miami in the theater of divine comedy." Milton was there with Dante, by way of the elusive "rose of Sharon from *Paradise Lost*." They have joined the classical poets in the mind of Bob Dylan. Paradise lost or paradise regained, on the horizon line of Key West, it doesn't much matter. "If you lost your mind you'll find it there." So ends a song that starts with a 1901 presidential assassination—"McKinley hollered – McKinley squalled"—an old, though not-so-old folk song, recorded by Charlie Poole in 1926, and rewritten and recorded by bluegrass artist Bill Monroe in 1954. Old, new, high, low, all meaningless terms for an art that refuses to be tied down: "Don't make a bit of difference, don't see why it should."

"Something that is so supreme and first rate that you could never come back down from the mountain." So said Dylan to Douglas Brinkley of the classical world that he saw behind "When I Paint My Masterpiece," the song he wrote 50 years ago. The Muses live on mountains, and that is where you get inspiration, whether you are Moses, Milton, or Martin Luther King. The Muses live on Mt Helicon, sometimes on Parnassus, and that is where the Greeks and Romans visited them. It is good to see Bob Dylan still spends time on those particular mountains, to hear how he has brought down from them new songs, handed to him by Calliope and her mother, and transfigured with much else into this remarkable new album.

With thanks for valuable suggestions and corrections to the editors, to friends and colleagues in Dylan, old and new, Terry Gans, John Henderson, Andrew Muir and Marco Zoppas, to Harvard students past and present who know their Dylan, Vivian Jin, Sam Puopolo, Ben Roy, and Joan Thomas, none of whom are responsible for remaining deficiencies.

Young Goodman Dylan: *Chronicles at the Crossroads*

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Abstract: Although usually categorized as a memoir, Bob Dylan's *Chronicles, Volume One*, is better understood as a work of autobiographical fiction. Like James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Dylan uses a fictional avatar (referred to here as Young Goodman Dylan) to explore key junctures in his development as an artist. In the "New Morning" chapter of *Chronicles*, Dylan draws heavily upon the literary and musical trope of selling one's soul to the Devil at the crossroads. Dylan the Chronicler depicts Young Goodman Dylan at a crossroads where he must choose between collaborating with Archibald MacLeish on the diabolical play *Scratch* or remaining out of the public spotlight to protect his family. On the surface, this conflict is depicted as a battle of darkness versus light, with the Everyman figure choosing the path of light and family over the path of darkness and public reengagement. However, Dylan the Chronicler complicates this moral dilemma by equating darkness with truth in this case, and light with an abnegation of artistic responsibility. Elderly Dylan's ambivalence toward his younger self's decisions is epitomized in his underwhelming assessment of the album *New Morning*.

Keywords: *Chronicles, Volume One*; crossroads; Devil; Dylan, Bob; MacLeish, Archibald; morality play; *Scratch*

Bob Dylan won the Nobel Prize for Literature almost entirely for his work as a songwriter and performing artist. However, he is also the author of one great literary work of fiction—and no, I'm not talking about *Tarantula*. I am referring to *Chronicles, Volume One*. By labeling the work fiction, I do not mean to pass negative judgment on Dylan as a plagiarist, although it is well documented by now that he "borrowed" scenes and passages from dozens of unattributed sources in the book. Far from dismissing *Chronicles* as a fraud, I admire it as a deeply truthful fiction. The book is best approached not as memoir but as

Künstlerroman, an apprenticeship novel about the growth and development of an artist. The author Bob Dylan's relationship to the character Bob Dylan in *Chronicles* is similar to James Joyce's relationship to the character Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Both protagonists bear striking resemblances to their authors, and both writers draw generously from their own lives for raw material. But these are fictions: highly selective, substantially reimagined, aesthetically stylized, deftly veiled self-portraits. As Timothy Hampton asserts in *Bob Dylan's Poetics*, "To study Dylan's art and its combinatory power, we need to take into account the different ways in which he uses the 'I' who appears in his compositions. This 'I' is, of course, a fiction. . . . It is a character that Dylan invents anew for each song. Sometimes that character knows many things. Sometimes it knows little. Sometimes it thinks it knows more than it does. Sometimes it says more than it knows" (18). The same holds true for Dylan's depiction of "Dylan" in *Chronicles*.

One sign of the fictional status of *Chronicles* is the way in which Dylan bends his memories and molds his reconstructions to fit with preexisting myths, legends, archetypes, and literary tropes. A paradigm he uses to great effect in *Chronicles* is the crossroads. On multiple occasions, he stages life-altering encounters where the protagonist stakes his soul and must choose a path toward either salvation or damnation. The crossroads tradition has many variations and is centuries old. Perhaps the oldest example comes in *Oedipus Rex*, when Oedipus kills his father where three roads meet, sealing his fate before completing the prophecies down the road to Thebes. In medieval morality plays the trope involved an Everyman figure tempted toward Hell by figures of Vice, but ultimately choosing the pathway to Heaven pointed out by figures of Virtue. Later in the Renaissance, most famously in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, hubris leads Faustus to sell his soul to the Devil in exchange for secret knowledge and power. In early American literature the classic expression of the trope is Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," where a young Puritan is torn between staying at

home with his young wife or wandering into the dark woods with a distinctly American Devil associated with the young country's original sins. The most famous example from twentieth-century American literature is "The Devil and Daniel Webster" by Stephen Vincent Benét, where Jabez Stone of Cross Corners, New Hampshire, sells his soul to the Devil but then convinces famous orator and politician Daniel Webster to defend him. I don't know if Dylan has read or seen any of these works, but he has clearly absorbed the tradition from somewhere. Of course, we know that he was intimately familiar with the blues tradition of selling one's soul at the crossroads. Robert Johnson allegedly did so in exchange for superhuman musical gifts, inspiring songs like "Me and the Devil Blues," "Hellhound on My Trail," and "Cross Road Blues." Dylan's own most extensive and slyly subversive treatment of the crossroads theme occurs in the third chapter of *Chronicles* titled "New Morning."

In this chapter the protagonist—let's think of him as Young Goodman Dylan—finds himself at the crossroads after his motorcycle accident, when he stopped touring and started focusing instead on his new marriage and family. The young husband and father saw the choices before him in stark moral terms of good and evil, the pathway of light splitting off sharply from the pathway of darkness. However, it is important to draw distinctions between the protagonist's perspective and that of his author. The older Dylan who writes *Chronicles* takes a longer view and has a fuller sense of where these divergent paths lead. His quasi-autobiographical younger self chooses a path away from celebrity and public engagement in favor of home, family, and some semblance of privacy. Old Dylan defends those decisions as right at the time; but he also foreshadows different decisions at crossroads farther down the road, leading him eventually back to the world stage.

Archibald MacLeish is a crucial figure in Dylan's crossroads morality play. Prior to the publication of *Chronicles*, most readers knew very little about the failed collaboration between the two, other than the fact that a few songs written

for MacLeish's play eventually made their way onto Dylan's next album *New Morning*. It was therefore a surprise when Dylan chose to feature MacLeish so prominently. Factual inaccuracies abound in Dylan's reconstruction of their encounters. He sets their first meeting in the summer of 1968, but Clinton Heylin shows that it couldn't possibly have happened before late 1969 or early 1970 (402). He gets important biographical information about MacLeish blatantly wrong, like identifying him as a West Point classmate of General MacArthur (that was actually Carl Sandburg). And he rips off lines from MacLeish's poetry and prose and falsely presents them as snatches of dialogue between the elder statesman and the upstart crow.¹ Dylan's depictions are completely inconsistent with contemporary accounts. In his letters, MacLeish insists that Dylan had lost focus and suffered from writer's block; and in his autobiography, producer Stuart Ostrow describes Dylan as drunk, rude, lazy, and duplicitous throughout the ill-fated collaboration.² In short, the account in *Chronicles* is unreliable in terms of factual accuracy. As a work of crossroads mythology, however, the chapter is tremendously effective and revealing.

Dylan's creative decision to roll back the initial meeting to 1968 has several effects. It locates the action in the most tumultuous year of Sixties unrest. Dylan describes this context in classic crossroads terminology as putting his soul at risk:

The events of the day, all the cultural mumbo jumbo were
imprisoning my soul—nauseating me—civil rights and political
leaders being gunned down, the mounting of the barricades,

¹ Scott Warmuth and Edward Cook have done more than any other investigators to discover and document the countless instances in *Chronicles* where Dylan alludes to, paraphrases, or outright plagiarizes passages from unacknowledged sources. For a distillation of Warmuth's findings, including references to the MacLeish scenes (74-75), see his article "Bob Charlatan: Deconstructing Dylan's *Chronicles*, Volume One," *New Haven Review* (January 2008): 70-83. For Cook's specific references to the "New Morning" chapter, see his blogpost "Bob Dylan, Carl Sandburg, and the 'Borrowing' Problem," *Ralph the Sacred River* (June 3, 2010).

² See Archibald MacLeish, Letter to Dorothy de Santillana (October 7, 1970), *Letters of Archibald MacLeish, 1907 to 1982*, ed. R. H. Winnick (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983), 430; and Stuart Ostrow, *Present at the Creation, Leaping in the Dark, and Going Against the Grain* (New York: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2006), 59-62.

the government crackdowns, the student radicals and demonstrators versus the cops and the unions—the streets exploding, fire of anger boiling—the contra communes—the lying, noisy voices—the free love, the anti-money system movement—the whole shebang. (109)

Set against the general turmoil, Dylan also experienced a great personal loss with the death of his father in the summer of 1968. At the dawn of the “New Morning” chapter he recalls, “I had gone back to the town of my early years in a way I could never have imagined—to see my father laid to rest. Now there would be no way to say what I was never capable of saying before” (107). Abe Zimmerman’s untimely death at the age of 56 led his grieving son to conclude “that my father was the best man in the world and probably worth a hundred of me, but he didn’t understand me” (108). Dylan claims he returned home from the funeral to find an invitation letter waiting for him from MacLeish. This would have made Dylan 27 years old, the fateful year that claimed Brian Jones, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison and others; the same age when the Devil’s bill came due for Robert Johnson. With chaos and death as his harbingers, enter the Father of Night.

Dylan draws a sharp contrast between humble Abe Zimmerman and the celebrated patrician poet who invites him for an artistic collaboration:

MacLeish, Poet Laureate of America—one of them. Carl Sandburg, poet of the prairie and the city, and Robert Frost, the poet of dark meditations were the others. . . . These three, the Yeats, Browning, and Shelley of the New World, were gigantic figures, had defined the landscape of twentieth-century America. They put everything in perspective. Even if you didn’t know their poems, you knew their names. (107)

Dylan’s reverence may be sincere, but from a literary perspective he is also at pains to establish the morality play parameters of the encounter. He depicts

himself as an innocent, an amateur hack and overmatched schlemiel compared to MacLeish. There is doubtlessly a dimension of ethnic sensitivity and defensiveness on display here. Timothy Hampton recognizes this same dynamic at play in Chapter Two of *Chronicles*, "The Lost Land." Dylan recalls his awe and envy in the presence of folk singer Mike Seeger. He reflects, "What I had to work at, Mike already had in his genes, in his genetic makeup. Before he was even born, this music had to be in his blood" (71). According to Hampton,

Seeger's parents were distinguished musicologists and composers; his father was a Harvard professor. Dylan paints him as an aristocrat. Like a member of the nobility in some ancient kingdom, Seeger embodies his greatness and identity. The music is essential to his very being, 'in his blood.' A member of the WASP elite, he has been raised in the culture of left-wing folk music. He is tradition, in several senses of the word. For Dylan, a provincial and a Jew, such ease and familiarity seem beyond reach, no less than nobility is beyond the reach of the peasant. (26)

Hampton's interpretation is persuasive and applies equally well to Dylan's depiction of MacLeish. The young poet respects his elder for his artistic integrity and significant accomplishments, but he is also acutely aware of (and intimidated by) his host's aristocratic pedigree: "He had the aura of a governor, a ruler—every bit of him an officer—a gentleman of adventure who carried himself with the peculiar confidence of power bred of blood" (110).

Most of the elder poet's erudite references sail over Dylan's head, highlighting the chasm of wisdom and experience separating Dylan from his illustrious host. Young Goodman Dylan has lost his father and is seeking guidance from a mentor. He is the naïve and uninitiated Everyman. MacLeish possesses secret knowledge and power, and he uses it to lure Dylan down a potentially treacherous path, away from the storm shelter of family and back out into the

maelstrom of a sordid and rapacious world. By dubbing MacLeish “the Poet Laureate of America,” he installs his elder as the embodiment of a nation then overtaken by forces of darkness.

The signs are subtle at first. Dylan describes MacLeish as “the poet of night stones and the quick earth” (107) and “the man of godless sands” (109). These are images taken from MacLeish’s own poetry, so Dylan the Chronicler has clearly done some homework. It is telling that he plucks out lines that connote dark magic. MacLeish needs somber songs for his latest play, and he thinks Dylan is the right man for the job. He suggests some diabolical titles, including “Red Hands,” “Lower World,” and “Father of Night.” Like any good Mephistopheles, MacLeish flatters and cajoles his mark. He tells the young poet how much he admires his work and how compatible he finds their views: “MacLeish tells me that he considers me a serious poet and that my work would be a touchstone for generations after me, that I was a postwar Iron Age poet but that I had seemingly inherited something metaphysical from a bygone era. He appreciated my songs because they involved themselves with society, that we had many traits and associations in common and that I didn’t care for things the way he didn’t care for them” (111-12). It’s a match made in Hell. Young Goodman Dylan catches a whiff of brimstone at the crossroads and hesitates to choose the path leading toward *Scratch*.

Dylan mentions the name of the play in passing and notes that it was based on a Stephen Vincent Benét story (108). But he never mentions the fact that the name “Scratch” is an alias for Satan, or that the play is about a man who is trying to win back his soul after selling it to Scratch. Dylan adopts the playwriting maxim, “Show, don’t tell.” He never directly announces the theme of confronting the Devil at the crossroads, but he dramatizes precisely that in scenes with MacLeish, where he “felt like two parts of my self were beginning to battle” (129). Young Goodman Dylan is flattered at first by the elder poet’s offer to collaborate, but he soon recoils from the temptation. In a particularly vivid passage, Dylan describes the apocalyptic vision of *Scratch*:

This play was dark, painted a world of paranoia, guilt and fear—it was all blacked out and met the atomic age head on, reeked of foul play. . . . The play spelled death for society with humanity lying facedown in its own blood. MacLeish's play was delivering something beyond an apocalyptic message. Something like, man's mission is to destroy the earth. MacLeish was signaling something through the flames. (113)

Dylan's macabre distillation only tells half the story of *Scratch*. Yes, the Devil is given a platform in the play, and he lodges some scorching critiques of American hypocrisy, mendacity, violence, and ruthlessness. Old Scratch calls out Daniel Webster in particular, mocking him for selling out the abolitionist cause by accepting the Fugitive Slave Act as part of the Compromise of 1850. Scratch delights in driving a wedge between the founding principles of Liberty and Union. However, it is important to note that Webster actually defeats the Devil in MacLeish's play and wins back his client's soul and his own. The play endorses Webster's manifesto from the 1830 Webster-Hayne Debate: "Liberty *and* Union, now and forever, one and inseparable" (Webster 144).³ These are principles that Dylan supports, too. He declares, "Being born and raised in America, the country of freedom and independence, I had always cherished the values and ideals of

³ In his Foreword to the published script of *Scratch*, MacLeish proposes that the tension between Liberty and Union continued to animate civic crises in contemporary America:

By 1970, however, though the Union still survived and slavery had—ostensibly—disappeared, it was no longer certain that the contradiction at the heart was healed. There were indications that it might have become more cancerous than in Webster's day. Men on the contemporary left echoed the New England Abolitionists who put Liberty first and Union after, and were as ready as Abolitionists had ever been to bring the Republic down in the name of freedom. At the same time there were those on the contemporary right who repeated the Copperhead cries of Union first and Liberty nowhere, proposing to surrender human freedom itself to something they called law-and-order. (viii-ix)

These similarities inspired MacLeish to revisit his friend Stephen Vincent Benét's mythical Webster with an eye and ear toward re-historicizing him in ways that spoke to the issues tearing the country apart in the late Sixties and early Seventies.

equality and liberty. I was determined to raise my children with those ideals" (115). A fair reading of *Scratch* should place MacLeish and Dylan on the same side. So why does Young Goodman Dylan perceive MacLeish as an opponent and threat?

Throughout the chapter, Dylan stresses his fierce commitment to his new family. He had spent much of his youth running away from home, reinventing himself, rejecting his roots, crafting a mercurial persona always in flux which owed nothing to the bourgeois values hammered into him in Hibbing. But getting married, having kids, kicking his rock-n-roll habits, and settling down to clean country living had radically altered his perspective. As Dylan concedes in *Chronicles*, "Having children changed my life and segregated me from just about everybody and everything that was going on. Outside of my family, nothing held any real interest for me" (114). Abe Zimmerman's death seemed to trigger an identity crisis in Dylan. Without his father around as embodiment of authority and model of assimilation, Dylan stopped rebelling and temporarily reinvented himself as his father's son. It is shocking to read Dylan proclaim: "I don't know what everybody else was fantasizing about but what I was fantasizing about was a nine-to-five existence, a house on a tree-lined block with a white picket fence, pink roses in the backyard. That would have been nice. That was my deepest dream" (117-18). How can the author of "It's Alright Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)" suddenly buy into this vanilla suburban fantasy, sleepwalking through the consumerist WASP American Dream? It is so transparently banal, and so contrary to the values he endorses in his adult life up to this point, that Dylan the Chronicler may be satirizing Dylan the Character here.

Nevertheless, the moral stakes are high, and Young Goodman Dylan sees them in black and white absolutes. In one of the most revealing passages of the chapter, he declares, "I wasn't going to go deeper into the darkness for anybody. I was already living in the darkness. My family was my light and I was going to protect that light at all cost. That was where my dedication was, first, last and

everything in-between. What did I owe the rest of the world? Nothing. Not a damn thing" (123). The battle lines are drawn in stark terms: the family is light; the world is darkness; young Dylan embraces the light of family and rejects the darkness of the world. Simple. Way too simple. The 30-ish protagonist thinks he owes the world nothing, but his 60-ish chronicler knows better. MacLeish admired Dylan's early work, and he beckoned him back out of exile. But Young Goodman Dylan shunned this calling in 1970. He conflated MacLeish's offer with the pressures he felt from the public, the media, and fellow musicians to be their prophet and savior. He gave them his songs but they wanted his soul.

Or so the story goes. But even as Dylan delivers that narrative, he simultaneously undermines it. Take for instance the one time in *Chronicles* when Dylan quotes directly from *Scratch*. Having cast MacLeish in the role of the Devil trying to ensnare our young hero's soul, Dylan selects a passage commenting upon the nature of evil. According to Dylan,

Scratch utters the lines, "I know there is evil in the world—essential evil, not the opposite of good or the defective of good but something to which good itself is an irrelevance—a fantasy. No one can live as long as I have, hear what I have heard and not know that. I know too—more precisely—I am ready to believe that there may be something in the world, someone, if you prefer—that purposes evil, that intends it."

(124)

Although he makes some minor errors in the transcription, Dylan's quotation from the play is basically accurate (cf. *Scratch* 94-95), with one crucial exception: the lines he attributes to Scratch, the champion of darkness and despair, are in fact spoken by Daniel Webster, the defender of light and hope. This makes a big difference. The passage does not represent the Devil bragging about his evil stranglehold over the world; it is a rallying cry for the forces of light. But then Dylan inserts an ellipsis and continues on with the quotation: "' . . . powerful nations

suddenly, without occasion, without apparent cause . . . decay. Their children turn against them. Their women lose their sense of being women. Their families disintegrate'" (124). Remarkably, none of this second half of the quotation appears in the play *Scratch*. My research so far has uncovered no source. I frankly don't know where Dylan got this quotation. It smacks of the apocalyptic rhetoric of Hal Lindsey⁴, but the passage may be entirely fabricated. In any case, it doesn't come from *Scratch*. Why would Dylan insert this fake quotation? The invention is so egregious, and so easily detected by simply reading the play, I can only assume Dylan planted this false evidence knowing that it would be exposed as such. But to what end?

Dylan shares MacLeish's concerns about America's turmoil and what it may augur for the nation's future. But look at the other worries voiced via ventriloquism in this fake quote: children rebelling, women getting lost, families falling apart. Young Goodman Dylan straightforwardly associates his family with all that was light, good, and true. Accordingly, he associates all rivals to the family as dark, evil, and false. Old Dylan has the advantage of hindsight, however. He can look back and see that his crossroads dilemmas are far more complicated, nuanced, and ambivalent. Black-and-white becomes tangled up in gray.

In one of the most telling passages of the "New Morning" chapter, Dylan admits that MacLeish was a truth teller. The elder poet was trying to communicate devastating truths, but the young family man was in no mood to hear them:

The play itself was conveying some devastating truth, but I was going to stay far away from that. Truth was the last thing on my mind, and even if there was such a thing, I didn't want it in my house. Oedipus went looking for the truth and when he found

⁴ During Dylan's born-again Christian period, he was strongly influenced by the writings of Hal Lindsey. In *The Late, Great Planet Earth* (1970), Lindsey interprets the Biblical books of Daniel, Ezekiel, and Revelations as prophecies that the end of times and the second coming of Christ are close at hand. Lindsey followed up this surprising best-seller with *Satan Is Alive and Well on Planet Earth* (1972), where he identifies various infiltrations by the Father of Lies in contemporary society and proposes methods for combating the influence of the Devil.

it, it ruined him. It was a cruel horror of a joke. So much for the truth. I was gonna talk out of both sides of my mouth and what you heard depended on which side you were standing. If I ever did stumble on any truth, I was gonna sit on it and keep it down. (125-26)

The conventional binaries break down. MacLeish is on the side of darkness, but he is also on the side of truth. Dylan, on the other hand, stands in the light but sits on the truth. Oedipus pursued the truth no matter where it led, and it left him ruined. Young Goodman Dylan was determined not to make that same mistake, even if the cost was a temporary abdication of artistic responsibility by ignoring or suppressing the dark truths confronted in *Scratch*.

Dylan the Chronicler reinforces this view through his self-assessment of *New Morning*, a luminously titled album that signifies his choice of the light over the darkness but which he damns with faint praise. Dylan uses abandoned songs from the failed *Scratch* collaboration to form the nucleus of this 1970 album. He said no to MacLeish's calling, but when producer Bob Johnston called to ask if Dylan wanted to make a new record, he answered yes. Apparently Young Goodman Dylan doesn't see the outright contradiction here, but Old Dylan wants the reader to notice it: "Johnston asked over the phone if I was thinking about recording. Of course I was. As long as my records were still selling, why wouldn't I be thinking of recording?" (134) Why wouldn't he? Oh, yeah, because he's just spent the whole chapter telling us how he's trying to recede from the limelight into privacy and anonymity. Going back into the studio and releasing an album of original songs was an obvious stepping stone toward reengaging with the world. Either Dylan was too naïve at the time to see the gap between his rhetoric and his actions—or, what's more likely, he was already beginning to feel an inner tug to return to public consciousness by sharing his art with the world. He takes steps toward that other road, the one he rejected with MacLeish, even as he continues telling himself that he is just a simple country husband and father now.

New Morning was a critical and commercial success, but Dylan himself doesn't rate his effort so highly. These are modest songs, nothing as momentous and earth-shaking as his previous work, and he knows it. "Message songs? There weren't any. Anybody listening for them would have to be disappointed" (138). Having produced previous works of genius, Dylan knows *New Morning* falls well short of that standard. "Maybe there were good songs in the grooves and maybe there weren't—who knows? But they weren't the kind where you hear an awful roaring in your head. I knew what those kind of songs were like and these weren't them" (138). The album isn't bad, and at times it's pretty good. Something crucial is missing, though. As Paul Williams astutely observes, "*New Morning* is Bob Dylan pretending to be Bob Dylan, not in any obvious way . . . but in a very subtle way: he goes through all the motions and touches all the bases, but leaves out Ingredient X" (259-60). The first gentle breeze of inspiration may be stirring again, but Dylan admits that he is still a long way from the gale-force tempest: "It's not like I hadn't any talent, I just wasn't feeling the full force of the wind. No stellar explosions. I was leaning against the console and listening to the playbacks. It sounded okay" (138). What Dylan leaves unsaid is that he would not feel the full force of those creative winds again until the marriage, for which he had put his career largely on hold, was falling apart. It may be the responsibility of a family man to head toward the light. It's the responsibility of the artist, however, to descend into the darkness, navigate the lowlands of orphic mystery, confront inner demons and expose hard truths. Dylan isn't ready to do that yet when MacLeish asks, and he is only capable of sidelong glances into the depths on *New Morning*. Still, certain signs suggest that he is beginning to sense the future direction of his art, after his season in the sun ends.

The dark linings can occasionally be glimpsed behind the silver-clouded songs on *New Morning*. A good example is "Time Passes Slowly." Heylin cites this song as one of three (along with "New Morning" and "Father of Night") which Dylan began composing for *Scratch* before withdrawing from the project (402).

In its initial incarnation for the play, perhaps it was intended for Jabez Stone, the New Hampshire farmer who enjoys seven years of prosperity before Scratch returns to collect his soul. Within the context of *New Morning*, however, the song sounds like self-commentary on Dylan's own rural exile and prolonged sabbatical from his artistic vocation. Everything seems idyllic at first:

Time passes slowly up here in the mountains
We sit beside bridges and walk beside fountains
Catch the wild fishes that float through the stream
Time passes slowly when you're lost in a dream

Pretty and peaceful, right? Yet the line about being "lost in a dream" hints at the illusory, ephemeral quality of such a life. It soon becomes clear that the wild fish isn't the only one who has been captured, removed from the flow, suspended in time. How does it feel to be a stone that has stopped rolling? How does it feel to have found a home, no longer on your own, and yet still have no direction? It feels like this:

Ain't no reason to go in a wagon to town
Ain't no reason to go to the fair
Ain't no reason to go up, ain't no reason to go down
Ain't no reason to go anywhere

Sure, the singer has sloughed off the yoke of unwanted obligations; he no longer works on Maggie's farm. But the idyllic is devolving into the merely idle, and Dylan knows that "Too much of nothing / Can make a man ill at ease." In *Dylan's Visions of Sin*, Christopher Ricks uses "Time Passes Slowly" to represent the deadly sin of sloth. He comments on the verse above: "This is obdurate, blockish, an evocation of a dangerous state of mind. Indifference can harden, before long, into something damnable" (126). Morality play conventions dictate that, in choosing the light over the darkness, Dylan selected the path toward salvation. However, this song sounds more like a seductively placid off-brand of damnation.

Dylan's foreboding imagery is most insidious in the final verse, where the emphasis shifts from torpor to the inevitable passage of light into darkness and life into death:

Time passes slowly up here in the daylight
We stare straight ahead and try so hard to stay right
Like the red rose of summer that blooms in the day
Time passes slowly and fades away

The singer must try awfully hard to remain on the so-called right path and to convince himself that he is happy with his new life. Summer isn't over and the sun hasn't set, but that emblematic rose at the end will not stay forever young. Laura Tenschert, host of the *Definitely Dylan* radio show and podcast, provocatively asks: "Is it time that's fading like a wilting flower—or is it the singer, who somewhere in his subconscious might be feeling like he should be something else, maybe something more?" (Tenschert). In the alternate ending to an earlier version of "Time Passes Slowly" [included on *Another Self Portrait (Bootleg Series Vol. 10)*], Dylan paints his growing self-doubts in signature hues of light and darkness: "Like a cloud drifting over that covers the day / Time passes slowly then fades away." As Tenschert perceptively observes of this conclusion, "He is literally throwing shade on the sunny disposition of the previous two verses" (Tenschert). The dissonant, contradictory, ambivalent undertone of "Time Passes Slowly" is representative of a subterranean current running throughout the album, troubling its deceptively bright tranquility. *New Morning* is not dark yet, but it's getting there. The next intersection is already faintly visible on the horizon where Dylan will find himself again at the crossroads, forced to choose between staying or going, between devotion to family or sharing his unfettered art on the stages of the world.

Chapter Three of *Chronicles* ends by contrasting the fates of Dylan's album and MacLeish's play. The chronicler notes of *New Morning*, "All this was in what critics would later refer to as my 'middle period' and in many camps this record

was referred to as a comeback album—and it was. It would be the first of many” (141). On the other hand, the play which first inspired those songs was ignored: “The MacLeish play *Scratch* opened on Broadway at the St. James Theatre on May 6, 1971, and closed two days later on May 8” (141). A blues aficionado like Dylan surely knows that May 8th is Robert Johnson’s birthday, and that the patron saint of crossroads would have turned 60 the same day *Scratch* closed. The first time I read *Chronicles* as a memoir, this chapter’s conclusion felt like Dylan rubbing it in, as if to say, “See, Archie, my approach worked better than yours.” After coming to appreciate the “New Morning” chapter as a milestone in crossroads fiction, however, I now see my initial reaction was wrong. The salient point is that Dylan wasn’t ready to face dark truths and neither was the majority of the American public. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that Dylan’s uplifting music was praised while MacLeish’s solemn play was panned. The relative success of *New Morning* compared to *Scratch* may constitute a minor victory of the light over the darkness, but that’s little consolation in the topsy-turvy moral universe of this chapter, since the victory of light goes hand in hand with the defeat of truth. Dylan the Chronicler might well feel embarrassed that a comparatively lightweight work like *New Morning* would be deemed successful while a mature work of devastatingly dark truths like *Scratch* folded within a week and was forgotten. Well, it had been forgotten, until Dylan situated it at the juncture of his own crossroads morality.

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SONG CORNER

“Murder Most Foul”

Anne Margaret Daniel, New School

*Well, my telephone rang it would not stop
It's President Kennedy callin' me up
He said, "My friend, Bob, what do we need to make the country
grow?"
I said, "My friend, John, Brigitte Bardot
Anita Ekberg
Sophia Loren
Country'll grow"*

— Bob Dylan, “I Shall Be Free,” 1962

In November 1863, as the Civil War blazed on, an eighteen-year-old Baltimorean named David Bachrach traveled in a buggy to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania to photograph President Abraham Lincoln as he delivered what would be known as the Gettysburg Address. The young man quickly made a name for himself as a prominent portraitist in the relatively new medium. Almost a century later, in 1959, David's grandson Fabian Bachrach was hired to photograph his Harvard contemporary, Senator John Fitzgerald Kennedy. Fabian's portrait of Jack would become President Kennedy's official White House photograph.

Bob Dylan released his first original song in eight years on March 27, 2020, just after midnight. “Murder Most Foul,” which centers on and circles around Kennedy's November 1963 assassination, uses the Bachrach Studios portrait as its associated image. It's a crop of the portrait, sepia-toned, what one would normally but cannot in this case call a headshot without cringing. The song's title

appears in Gothic sans, in gold, right under Kennedy's chin. The song is one second short of being seventeen minutes long. Staring into the young president's clear eyes, with the care lines to come not yet present, looking at his perfectly combed thick hair and smooth half-Windsor knot to his tie and what you know to be a Brooks Brothers two-button pinstripe suit, becomes overwhelming quickly if you know the history of which Dylan sings. If you're just learning it, you'll be overwhelmed by the end, too.

Once upon a time, a very young, nervous, and intoxicated Bob Dylan was roundly booed at the National Emergency Civil Liberties Committee's Bill of Rights dinner. The committee was giving him the Tom Paine Award at the Americana Hotel in New York, with a writer he much admired, James Baldwin, in attendance. The night was December 13, 1963, and in closing his short speech Dylan babbled out, "I'll stand up and to get uncompromisable about it, which I have to be to be honest, I just got to be, as I got to admit that the man who shot President Kennedy, Lee Oswald, I don't know exactly where—what he thought he was doing, but I got to admit honestly that I too—I saw some of myself in him." This Everyman attempt utterly failed, particularly before a liberal audience deep in mourning for JFK, not yet a month dead.

Dylan tried to explain himself to Nat Hentoff in June 1964 by pleading that both he and Oswald were "up tight" and that was what *he'd meant*. In 1977, he hypothesized to Jonathan Cott about things forever-mysterious: "It's something you can only feel but never really know. . . . Any more than you can know who killed Kennedy for sure." In his autobiography, *Chronicles, Volume 1* (2004), Dylan speaks of Kennedy with praising grace.

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From that first seventeen minutes to subsequent quarter-hours-plus, one does not so much listen to "Murder Most Foul" as be washed over by it. The song ebbs and flows. It comes at you not in lines or verses, but in ripples and waves. "Tempest" may be his song about the *Titanic*, but "Murder Most Foul" is titanic,

oceanic. You stand not on a smooth beach but a rocky shore, nowhere to sit or to safely set your feet, and the song comes at you like the sea. The litany of the long ending—all the lines beginning with the word “play”—comes at you with a beating rhythm, incessant, insistent, really more a catechism than a litany, for what you’re being told is didactic and instructive, and meant to be repeated: the last line of the song is the directive to replay it.

The instrumental opening is quiet, baritone, and very like the instrumentals backing Dylan’s Nobel Lecture in Literature, recorded in Los Angeles on June 4, 2017. Tony Garnier’s big bass bow (or is it Donnie Herron playing a low cello?) resounds. And then come delicate keyboards, multiple keyboards, in a manner not unlike Dylan’s, but with a far lighter, brighter touch. His flat-fingered jazzy, sometimes boogie-woogie style is different. Fiona Apple and Alan Pasqua play piano on “Murder Most Foul,” while Benmont Tench mans the Hammond organ. Dylan’s statement, coincident with its release, that the song was recorded “a while back” could have meant anything, but evidently “a while back” meant early 2020.

The tune, a stately *grazioso* suited to the gravity of the matter, is pleasing but unremarkable, neither memorable nor danceable. The import, and importance, of “Murder Most Foul” is in the lyrics. Its words are short, easy to understand, and land with great force, particularly when describing Kennedy’s murder. Ann Wilson of *Heart* recently termed them “Hemingwayesque.” In the past, Dylan’s official website has not released the official words of new songs for months or even years. The lyrics to “Murder Most Foul” were posted there within days. This swiftness emphasizes the importance of knowing what he’s saying, of reading the lines and rhymes, and remembering them.

“Murder Most Foul” is composed in rhyming couplets, which Dylan has reveled in for decades, and an intermittent anapestic tetrameter. Dylan has an ear for rhyme as keen as Lord Byron’s or Alexander Pope’s, and he knows well the

rhythms of scansion and the power of prosody. The song starts with two quotations, altered and combined:

'Twas a dark day in Dallas—November '63

The day that will live on in infamy

Tommy Durden's 1967 song "Dark Day in Dallas" begins: "'Twas a dark day in Dallas, a dark day indeed / When death walked the streets of big D and then reaped the fruit of the Devil's seed." Kennedy's most popular Democratic predecessor of the 20th century was a president also known by his initials: FDR. Franklin Delano Roosevelt called December 7, 1941 "a date which will live in infamy" in his Pearl Harbor declaration of war address. November 1963 brought America another infamous day, also inflicted on its own soil, and as catastrophic in its consequences as the attack that finally brought America into the second World War. Dylan has borrowed Durden's start, with the archaic and therefore eternal-sounding "'Twas," and made of Kennedy's assassination day not "a date" but "the day" of infamy.

To treat the entire song as I've just done the first two lines not only would take many pages, but would also be a disservice to Dylan's song. He is not composing a poem to be parsed, but a song to be listened to and taken in in its entirety. This essay will accordingly continue to be about "Murder Most Foul" and the connections that both compose it and hold it together, discussing it as a mosaic whole, instead of zooming in on the fragments of which the art is made. I do think of Dylan's songs as mosaics, as collages, akin to those tactile arts but composed of words and music. "Murder Most Foul" is a mosaic like those made by Antoni Gaudí that now are synonymous with Barcelona, like those by Squire Vickers and Eric Fischl, Yoko Ono, and Willie Birch that greet New Yorkers in MTA stations. It is an American mosaic made of cultural, historical, and musical references. "Murder Most Foul" could be a quilt, in the windmill or double wedding ring patterns for the way it rolls in circles and returns to concepts as it unfolds, but

a quilt is comforting and warm. The song is neither. Though it sometimes reassures with familiarity, it leaves you unsettled, sad, and thoughtful.

Pay very close attention to not just the words, but their linguistic forms, in “Murder Most Foul,” this song whose title leads off with a word that can be a noun or a verb. From its opening, the ongoing act on a “good day” of “to be living” ends hard, with the imperative stating that is ultimately a good day “to die.” Dylan’s pronouns, as ever, refuse to be nailed down. A line reads “Say wait a minute boys, do you know who I am?” and it’s shocking: Dylan is ventriloquizing a man about to be “shot down like a dog in broad daylight.” When the “I” returns, it slips and slides, from the singer / narrator (“I’m goin’ to Woodstock, it’s the Aquarian Age”) to the dying President (“Got blood in my eyes, got blood in my ear / I’m never gonna make it to the New Frontier”). Who are the “we” and the “they,” styled as a collective of killers? Dylan deploys “they” to intense effect in his songs, and it generally stands for whoever the ominous opposition might be: “They’re selling postcards of the hanging / They’re painting the passports brown” or “They’ll hang you in the morning and sing ya a song” or “They’ll be drowned in the tide / And like Goliath, they’ll be conquered.” Is he saying, here in “Murder Most Foul,” that Lee Harvey Oswald did not act alone? Dylan always engenders more questions than he’ll ever answer. Even when answers come, if they come in this song it is usually from the “they.” Don’t trust them. Flee and condemn their actions and words.

Can a murder be a “perfectly executed” magic trick? The execution is in the phrase itself. The foul murder of old King Hamlet looks like a trick; someone pouring poison in the porches of the ears. Like killing words it enters, in a gross parody of one of the most common artistic constructions of the Virgin Mary receiving the Annunciation. Dylan takes the song’s title from Act I Scene 5 of *Hamlet*, in which the father’s ghost informs his horrorstruck son that his death was a murder “most foul, strange and unnatural,” a fratricide. His own brother Claudius, young Prince Hamlet’s uncle—and now married to his former sister-in-

law, old Hamlet's widow and young Hamlet's mother, Gertrude—has killed the king. Dylan knows his Shakespeare as well as any leading actor; I'd have given a lot to see him enact the title role in *Hamlet*, when he was suited most to it, for my money, in his wild spring season of 1966. Now in the older years of a Lear or Prospero, Dylan continues to find in Shakespeare, as well as in classical and contemporary literature, ageless fire that he uses for his own purposes.

Like James Joyce, however, Dylan will never use a word or phrase that means one thing, when he can use a word or phrase that means two things, or more, or has a homonym meaning something completely different. Yes, "murder most foul" is a phrase from *Hamlet*. It is also the name of a wacky 1964 movie starring Margaret Rutherford as Agatha Christie's detective Miss Marple. The (very loose) plot of *Murder Most Foul* concerns a repertory acting company putting on murder mysteries in which real murders occur. Shards of the unlikeliest literary works crop up in the film, including Robert Service's "The Shooting of Dan McGrew." Were Service's poem, in spectacular rhyming couplets, or his widely popular volume *Rhymes of a Rolling Stone* (1912), works Dylan has known well for a long time, ever on his mind as he wrote?

Section 2 of the song, as divided up in the official lyrics, sweeps through the rest of the 1960s from the "English Invasion" and arrival of The Beatles in February 1964, to Woodstock and Altamont. Echoes of lines from Warren Zevon, whom Dylan admired and celebrated by performing his songs live as Zevon was terminally ill in 2002, appear here, and later, in "Murder Most Foul." The imaginative landscape of this section spreads wider, with quotations from Kennedy and Nellie Connally, the First Lady of Texas in 1963, mixed together with three bums in rags, shooters aiming for the Invisible Man, and Robert Johnson's crossroads. The line "Black face singer—white face clown" is a reminder not only of minstrel shows and Al Jolson movies, but Dylan's own Rolling Thunder Revue, and scenes in his 2003 movie *Masked and Anonymous*. Still, the setting, if that is the right word, of this section remains primarily Dallas: the triple underpass, grassy

knoll, Dealey Plaza, Elm Street, Deep Ellum. A concluding mention of “Oswald and Ruby”—killer and killer—as sources for “the truth and where did it go” keep things tied firmly to Kennedy’s assassination.

Section 3 begins to fragment into the musical references, or playlist, that constitute most of the rest of the song. The framing text is still, chillingly, from Kennedy’s point of view. Lyrics from other songs clash against the frames of William Zapruder’s film: I’m ridin’ in a long black Lincoln limousine; I’m leaning to the left, got my head in her lap. Why is the Zapruder film, if that is the “it” in question in the lyrics, “deceitful”? Because it does not show the truth of who shot Kennedy? Or does that truth not matter, and only the fact of the man’s death that begins the “age of the anti-Christ”? Lyndon Baines Johnson was sworn in on Air Force One, and a nation threw in the towel. Johnson did, too. A master of the Senate, Kennedy’s vice president was elected easily by the stunned nation he was leading in 1964, after getting the Civil Rights Act passed. However, Johnson hated being president and as the Vietnam War escalated and the Democratic party fragmented, with Robert F. Kennedy running against him, he announced in March 1968 that he would not seek the nomination. After Bobby was assassinated in Los Angeles on June 5, 1968, just after midnight, Johnson refused to change his mind, and Richard M. Nixon was elected.

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Robert Weston Smith of Brooklyn, New York, known from 1963—the year of Kennedy’s death, as if we needed reminding—as Wolfman Jack, one of America’s best known disc jockeys and radio personalities, is called upon to spin the long list of songs, sprinkled with movie, literary, and cultural mentions, that ends “Murder Most Foul.” Although *What’s New Pussycat* seems at first a throwback to the classic movies Dylan has referred to by mentioning characters without naming them, as in *Gone With the Wind* and *On The Waterfront*, to me it is more a recognition of the triviality of pop culture, post-November ’63, in the poppiest of ’60s movies. *What’s New Pussycat?* (1965), with a screenplay by

Woody Allen and the title track sung by Tom Jones, stars Allen, Peter O'Toole, Peter Sellers, Romy Schneider, Capucine, Paula Prentiss, and a host of famous cameo faces from Ursula Andress to Richard Burton. It centers on psychotherapy and adultery, and it features the silliest of all the silly 60s-movie car chases (go-karts; a rural French village; women in leopardskin catsuits and Valkyrie costumes complete with spear). And Dylan goes and rhymes the mention of this farce with "I said the soul of a nation been torn away." He's a king of 18th-century twisted chiasmus, Dylan is, welding the sublime and the ridiculous together like Pope or Jonathan Swift, John Wilmot or John Gay. He has always been good at this in his lyrics, but "Murder Most Foul" astounds. Why is it specifically "thirty-six hours past judgment day"? Perhaps because of *36 Hours*, another 1965 movie, starring James Garner and Eva Marie Saint. The film *36 Hours*, though set during WWII, runs along the lines of its far more famous 1962 predecessor, *The Manchurian Candidate*. Its lobby poster tagline was "Give me any American for 36 hours and I'll give you back a traitor."

Litanies are part of religious responses, and of children's rhymes. The rhythm and rhyme and repetition make us remember them. "Murder Most Foul" ends with a litany that, as I've said, is more a catechism. It's didactic and instructive, directing Wolfman Jack and you on what to listen to. It also puts you into a trance. You don't want to dance. Sit still and listen. You're not given any other choice.

Dylan eschews the potential triple rhyme of Jack—black—Cadillac for a simple "long Cadillac," which is, possibly, a line from the dirtiest car song ever recorded, "Mr. Thrill" (1954). Dylan, assuming Wolfman Jack's seat as dj, played Mildred Jones's classic version on the "Cadillac" episode of his *Theme Time Radio Hour* in 2007, and then cracked, "A song that's kinda like a single entendre." Every single song mentioned in "Murder Most Foul" will carry with it different connections, different meanings and memories, to every listener. If you're familiar with the music he's speaking of—and he wants you to be, saying "write down the names"—it's a week of music shoehorned into fifteen minutes, filling your head

with everything. It's personal for every listener. For example, "Tom Dooley," in the Kingston Trio's 1958 version, was the second ballad I ever learned to sing, after "Barbara Allen," from my North Carolina mountain grandmother. Dylan has personal connections, too, to the songs he chooses. "St. James Infirmary" has been sung thousands of times by Dave Van Ronk, and, after him, by Rambling Jack Elliott. It's a cornerstone in Dylan's own musical history that involves both men.

Actual people always occupy space with Dylan's lyrical phantasmagorias: think of Einstein and T.S. Eliot sharing the song with Dr. Filth, the superhuman crew, and lovely mermaids in "Desolation Row." "The Man with the Telepathic Mind" was William McCaffrey, a card magician extraordinaire. McCaffrey, of Cratfon, Pennsylvania, dazzled America in the 1930s and 1940s with his magic tricks. While blindfolded, he could tell mystified people at parties the serial numbers on dollar bills they held. The musicians Dylan names here are real—Carl Wilson, Etta James, Stan Getz, Beethoven, and so many more—but then there are "Mr. Mystery," "the Lord of the Gods," a dog with no master, and merchants of death. These names break the flow of the song titles and the playlist, keeping you jumpy, on edge, waiting for the unfamiliar or weird to drop. And Dylan keeps on with his use of portmanteau phrases that contain multitudes. John Lee Hooker's "Scratch My Back" is actually Slim Harpo's "Scratch My Back." Guitar Slim (New Orleans bluesman Eddie Jones) was dead in New York City when he was just 32. Dylan chooses Slim's dismal song "Goin' Down Slow" to be played for "me and for Marilyn Monroe." It's suited to a woman some believe to have been destroyed by her association with the Kennedy family. Who, though, is the "me"—the singer of the song? JFK? The listener? Monroe predeceased Kennedy; she died in her Los Angeles home on August 4, 1962. How can she be listening? History is become topsy-turvy in the wake of JFK's assassination. Nothing is linear anymore. Remember that Dylan once sang "I have no sense of time," something he shares as an artist with Hamlet ("Nay, 'tis twice two months, my lord"). Time is confining. Be not for an age, but for all time.

In two 1965 interviews, Dylan praised Eric Burdon and The Animals and their recording of “Don’t Let Me Be Misunderstood,” which is a song written for Nina Simone. Which version does he want played for the First Lady, who in massive understatement “ain’t feeling that good”? Either? Both? Does it matter? Eric Burdon tells a great story about the song. “Paul McCartney’s wife at the time [Linda Eastman], dragged me to Hunter College” in April 1969 to hear Simone perform. After the show, they waited backstage to meet Simone and her husband, Burdon recalled: “She said, ‘So, you’re the little white motherfucker who took my song and ruined it.’ I said, ‘Yes, ma’am, I knew I shouldn’t have come here.’” Both performers had a hit with the song; both made it part of music history in the years after Kennedy’s death.

Don Henley and Glenn Frey are here. Randy Meisner, however, who sang lead on “Take It to the Limit” and wrote most of the song, doesn’t make it into “Murder Most Foul” along with his Eagles bandmates. The Eagles make a subtextual connection to the next couple of musicians, Carl Wilson and the unnamed Warren Zevon. “Desperado” is one of the Eagles’ best-known songs. Dylan’s lyric bridges into Carl Wilson’s fade-out on his collaboration with Zevon, “Desperados Under the Eaves”: “Look away down Gower Avenue, look away.”

“Take Me Back to Tulsa” should be its rollicking, jolly self thanks to Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys. They held court at Cain’s Ballroom in Tulsa for decades, and still smile down from the walls—along with Dylan, who has also played there. Yet Cain’s is situated on dark and bloody ground. The strip of downtown Tulsa called the Greenwood District was once also called the “Black Wall Street” of America: it was the wealthiest African American community in the country. But over Memorial Day weekend, 1921, nearly 40 blocks of downtown Tulsa were sacked and burned. Hundreds were killed and thousands injured in what Greil Marcus, speaking at the first World of Bob Dylan symposium in Tulsa in 2019, rightly called not the Tulsa race riots but “the Tulsa pogrom.” Scene of the crime, indeed. The new Bob Dylan Center, housing Dylan’s own archives, will be situated in the Greenwood, fronting on what is today called Reconciliation Way.

The succeeding hymn can't quell the pain, though it's a good golden standard. "The Old Rugged Cross" is surely something to cling to. But the line ends with "In God We Trust," the official motto since 1776 of "America," and what's been written on our American money since 1864—money, which is the secondary cause, after racism, of the Tulsa pogrom in the first place. Everything circles back in "Murder Most Foul," lyrics spinning out in what looks like a widening gyre, and then collapsing back into a flashpoint focus on a connected detail. The next spin begins with *Ride The Pink Horse*, which is a 1946 novel and 1947 film noir with Robert Montgomery, a merry-go-round, and a lot of shady doings down in Mexico. "Long, Lonesome Road" is an unrelated song, but the concept of the lonesome road can't be confined to just one song. Doc Watson and Frank Sinatra both looked down it, and Paul Robeson sang it best in "Show Boat." Then, suddenly, when you have no idea at all what will come next, "wait for his head to explode" is a horrific reminder of the Zapruder film. Dylan's not going to let us forget for one moment the man who is staring at us as we listen to the official video and try to understand why these songs, and why in this order.

"The man who fell down dead, like a rootless tree" ends in an arresting phrase, with its powerful natural image of fallen greatness. It turns out to be a line from the Finnish poet Arvid Genetz, which Alan Lomax learned in Minnesota, translated in full as "When anyone scorns the people / he topples like a rootless tree." The motley crew of the Reverend, the Pastor, and the dog that's got no master give way to jazz musicians and the Allman Brothers. Movies and movie stars, Shakespeare and Fleetwood Mac, Nat King Cole are all washing against each other, cultural flotsam and jetsam. Thelonious Monk is here; his name rhymes with junk, the heroin that destroyed the great Charlie Parker, the next musician namechecked by Dylan. The connection of "all that junk" leads to "All That Jazz," and a swing away from music back to movies, and the Birdman of Alcatraz. Yes, it was an Oscar-nominated movie in 1962, but Robert Stroud, "the Birdman," was

a real person who stayed in prison most of his life for murders—and who died on November 21, 1963. It all comes back to that dark day in Dallas. Bringing it all back home.

The internal circles of the song continue, accumulating, building, layering, pressing you down with the weight. Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd should make a moviegoer laugh, but are as apt to make you cry. Gambler Bugsy Siegel and bank robber Charles Arthur “Pretty Boy” Floyd, adopted as a Robin-Hood hero in Oklahoma and celebrated by Woody Guthrie in a song Dylan has performed and recorded. The Merchant of Venice and Lady Macbeth appear for a moment, but vanish in the threat from a spooky dialogue about brothers: “Tell ‘em we’re waiting—keep coming—we’ll get ‘em as well[.]” JFK’s death heralds RFK’s, and everyone listening to this song should know it. “Murder Most Foul” shaves off, or spins back into itself, with a final scattershot recitativo of songs and compositions in genres from croon to classical, military marches and love songs, and, in the end, “Murder Most Foul” itself: “Play the Blood Stained Banner—play Murder Most Foul[.]” Sharing space with either an American Civil War flag of the Confederacy, or “l’entard sanglant” of “La Marseillaise”—or both—“Murder Most Foul” wraps in on itself, starting all over again, taking it from the top, *da capo al fine*. In my end is my beginning.

INTERVIEWS

DR spoke with Mark Davidson, librarian of the Bob Dylan Archive®, via telephone in April 2020, with some follow-up questions in the ensuing months. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

DR: I'm wondering about the archive in the time of coronavirus. Are there any safety measures (at the archive) that need to be put in place? Are there any other considerations of how to preserve the archive in case of, you know, whatever might come down the line?

MD: All of the archival environments are stable and remotely monitored, so the materials themselves are doing fine. In terms of the work that I've been doing, and Kate Blalack, archivist for the Woody Guthrie Archive, has been doing, this is not the worst thing in the world for us because we're able to focus on stuff that we've been wanting to get done for quite a long time. With the Woody Guthrie Center, and the Bob Dylan Center as well, both of those social media outlets have been very active lately. From the Bob Dylan side of things, we've been working through the backlog of filmed interviews that curator Michael Chaiken has conducted over the past few years and we've been posting those on social media. So hitting the pause button on all of this has been not a bad thing.

DR: What's your official title and role at the Bob Dylan Archive?

MD: I'm the archives director for the Woody Guthrie Center and the Bob Dylan Center®. So the Bob Dylan Archive, Cynthia Gooding Archive, Woody Guthrie Archive, Phil Ochs archive, and various other smaller collections that we have.

DR: What did you get your degrees in and how did that prepare you for this position with these archives?

MD: I did a PhD in Cultural Musicology at the University of Santa Cruz. I started in 2007 and the degree was sort of a blend of historical ethnomusicology and ethnomusicology. I went into their PhD program out of an undergrad in music

history and classical guitar from Florida State (University). I had some time in between my degrees, quite a gap of time, where I messed around in my twenties and played in bands and went on tours and made records before I went back to grad school.

DR: Cool.

MD: Like I said, I started that program in 2007. I was studying American modernist classical music—Henry Cowell, John Cage, Charles Seeger, Ruth Crawford—and I ended up writing a master's thesis on a woman named Sidney Robertson Cowell, who was a folk song collector in California and happened to be married to Henry Cowell. She was an incredibly fascinating figure, a force of nature, and very forward-thinking on her folk song collecting and field work practices. That became the starting point for my dissertation on government-sponsored folk music collecting, so all the stuff under the Works Progress Administration from about 1936 – 1941, which was my incredibly big, incredibly unwieldy and seldom read or referenced 700-some page dissertation, which I completed in 2015.

In 2012, I moved to San Francisco while I was A.B.D., moved to Austin to start a second master's degree in archiving and library science, a master's of science in information studies at the University of Texas at Austin. It also happened to be one of the few schools that had an audio preservation program, which was enticing. I did a capstone project on the recordings associated with the John A. Lomax papers archive at the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History. I was also a research assistant for Doug Brinkley, who's a professor at Rice and a presidential historian who has written on a bunch of different presidents and conservation issues. He's a fascinating figure—he appears on CNN as their presidential historian—and he's done some research into Bob Dylan.

DR: Gotcha.

MD: And then I was on the academic job market. I was writing about the Blurred Lines copyright case and provisionally thinking about turning my dissertation into

a book when the George Kaiser Family Foundation (GKFF) bought the Bob Dylan Archive and they needed a librarian, or rather I was hired as a librarian. They needed an archivist and I just happened to be at the right place at the right time with the right degrees knowing the right people, and I moved up to Tulsa in August of 2017.

DR: It sounds like you traveled the country quite extensively through your touring band and through all of your academic pursuits. Did you have any hesitation about moving to this middle-sized city of Tulsa, Oklahoma at the time?

MD: Well, you know, I grew up in the Chicago suburbs, the very far-north Chicago suburbs, and finished up my undergrad at Florida State in Tallahassee. Lived in Santa Cruz, San Francisco, and Austin. And then moved to Tulsa. It was a transition, size-wise, but it's been an incredible experience getting to know this city and all of the communities that are here making it vibrant and exciting.

DR: In all those travels with live music and looking at archives, studying copyright and ethnomusicology, did you have any encounters with Dylan's work along the way?

MD: Well, I identify as a musicologist and not as an ethnomusicologist, because my scholarship and my work and my research interests are not field work-based in the same way an ethnomusicologist's is. As far as Bob Dylan is concerned, growing up for me it was the Beatles, and I was born in 1975, so let's say 1986, 1987, you have the twentieth anniversary of Sgt. Pepper's. The Traveling Wilburys came out around that time. The Grateful Dead made a comeback. Paul McCartney's doing *Flowers in the Dirt* and that record is getting quite a bit of press. There was a real sort of romance with these rock bands of the '60s, but also sort of a feeling of, "Oh my God, I can't believe that the Grateful Dead is still making music. I can't believe that Starship is so horrible." Most of those bands were either revered as a bygone thing, or were looked at as washed up, over the hill, totally not relevant anymore musically, culturally, and I think that that was actually kind of true.

So I knew Bob Dylan's importance to the Beatles' story. When grunge hit and I was in high school, there was the (Bob Dylan 30th Anniversary Concert Celebration in 1992), and Neil Young had a career resurgence with Pearl Jam. And that was another situation where it was like, I know who this guy is, I know why he's important, but I don't understand why he's still doing it now. All of that is to say, growing up, it was a very different time in terms of how these people were viewed. They were maybe revered for their old work, but they weren't really expected to do new, good stuff.

In college I began listening to early Dylan. I became politically conscious, which is kind of hard to do for a kid from the whitest, remotest northern suburbs of Chicago. So being in school, performing with ensembles, living in Oxford, Mississippi and listening to "Oxford Town" and being there—that's a moment. Or relating to "Last Song for Woody Guthrie," the spoken-word recording of Dylan. That was one of my favorite recordings ever, and it still is, of anything recorded in sound history. And (I was) playing that on my radio show at Florida State pretty much every time I had my show, which was Saturday night / Sunday morning, two a.m. to six a.m. I started listening to *Highway 61 Revisited* religiously. P.J. Harvey's cover of "Highway 61" was revelatory for me, and hearing her talk about the importance of Bob Dylan in the same breath as talking about the importance of Captain Beefheart while playing the kind of rock music that I wanted to hear at the time, in the Rid of Me era. That was really important. That's me growing up with Bob Dylan.

DR: It sounds like you have a foundation in folk music and rock 'n' roll and American music, and also in archival recordings. Now you're working with some of the most detailed Dylan scholars in the world. How important has it been for you to get to a place where you're conversant on the minutia of the Bob Dylan catalogue?

MD: Coming in off the street, if you put me in the Beatles archive and said, "Okay, deal with the foremost expert of the Beatles world," I would've been much more

conversant. There are few artists of any era that have inspired the kind of lunacy and obsessiveness around every bit of detail as has Bob Dylan, so it's a different deal. I've had arguments with people about what's more important, being a Dylan savant or being a competent archivist. It falls somewhere in the middle, but Dylan savants would say no, it's the knowledge of Dylan that's the important part. Now all of that is to say, I've worked here for two and a half years or more, and my knowledge of all of it increases like a thousand-fold every few months. It's really incredible.

DR: As you've gained this Dylan knowledge, are there any findings, or discoveries, or new understandings of him and his career that have especially stuck out to you?

MD: The thing that I've been thinking about a lot lately, and the thing I'm consistently impressed by, is how much of a traditionalist Dylan is, and how much he takes existing traditions and forms and recreates those in his own particular way. It's an extension of a folk process that can be found across the span of his career, through his latest recordings. And there are folks out there who have dedicated huge amounts of time to unearthing all of the references in his music and lyrics, or album artwork, or writings. It gets incredibly deep incredibly quickly. The breadcrumbs Dylan leaves, and the interpretation and reinterpretation of his work is all fascinating and remarkable.

Not only that, but with Dylan coming out with *Rough and Rowdy Ways*, the story gets richer and richer. His excellent, recent interview with Douglas Brinkley in the *New York Times* is testament to all of these ideas.

DR: What are some of the biggest challenges you face working in the archive day-to-day?

MD: The challenges, without getting too far into the weeds, (include) having a Dylan researcher saying, "We know where Bob was on May 2nd, 1964, and we know that this date can't be that." Getting that level of detail into the collection while up until a few months back, it was a staff of one.

When GKFF purchased the Dylan archive, it had been put up for sale and sent to us in a set of boxes, and these boxes were arranged in a very practical way—manuscripts of interest were maybe frontloaded in the first box and they gradually just put stuff in. And then you have a box like, “Well all these notebooks need to go somewhere so they’re all gonna go in this box, they fit in this box.” And so we got all these materials, and part of me coming on was that they wanted to get the Dylan archive open for researchers, and so a lot of the materials had been processed to the best of the ability of the person working on them at that moment. Essentially, there’s a lot of work we need to do as our knowledge has grown about the collection and where things came from and where things should be put. We’re rearranging materials and putting them in the order that they should be and making things as easy for researchers to access the physical materials as possible while building a digital archive system up to the highest archival standards in terms of metadata and the like that will allow them to see the archive in six dimensions. So you’re looking at manuscripts but you’re also able to look at these recordings associated with them. We’re able to do that in an online or at least digital realm that will make the archive come alive for researchers and interested parties.

DR: Will that be available online or will people still have to go to Tulsa to access it?

MD: It won’t be available online for any number of reasons. We hope the archive serves all of the unreleased stuff and stuff that nobody’s ever seen. Dylan’s probably the most bootlegged artist ever—you know, people are freakish about all of this stuff. Like somebody having a recording they shouldn’t have and somebody else being like, “Oh I want to hear that,” and the next thing you know it’s up on the internet—that still happens in Dylanland. It’s an insane landscape. But that’s part of the work that we’re doing, and we have all of the other archival collections that we’re working on too. But we’re getting ready to open the Bob Dylan Center in 2021. That’s our target date. The current coronavirus and quarantine situation—it’s actually been the best thing in the world for me, and

also I think for Kate, because we've been able to totally focus on the kind of stuff that I've been saying for well over a year, "As soon as I get the time, I'm going to do this." And my God, we've got the time now, so there's no shortage of work for us to do.

The point is, putting this archive together in the right way and going through it and gaining knowledge of the materials and acquiring things that we need is all currently for the service of making the future Bob Dylan Center an incredible experience, so the plan is to make a ton of stuff available so people still have the research component of the Bob Dylan Archive but in the Bob Dylan Center people will still be able to dive down really, really deep into the footage and the session tapes and the materials that we've got manuscripts for, and presenting those materials in this multi-dimensional way.

DR: In terms of the Bob Dylan camp, are they still sending stuff to Tulsa for the archive? Is there a steady trickle of things coming in, or was it a one-and-done proposition?

MD: There was the initial sale-and-donation situation. We had I think three shipments of materials, and we have gotten everything that was part of that initial deal. That's all now in Tulsa. We have a very good relationship with them. And I'm sure that there are more things out there that we would love to get. "Murder Most Foul" was just released and it would be awesome to—I don't even know if there's a manuscript for that stuff.

DR: There must be!

MD: Yeah, one doesn't know.

DR: If not from the Bob Dylan camp, then where else might new archival materials be coming from?

MD: So here's the thing. There are private collectors throughout the world who have been amassing Dylan materials, photographs or manuscripts or ephemera. And that doesn't take into account the stuff that has been produced around Bob

Dylan, like magazines and fanzines, albums and all of that. There's a ton of that stuff out there that would be great to have. I think there's an expectation that—and I think we would like this to be the case too—that Tulsa is and should be the place for all this stuff to live.

On the other hand, I think that archives in institutions can be colonial and cut-throat and the measure of their success is oftentimes based upon what they acquire in this sort of ever forward-moving shark of acquiring collections. And I can say that it is not our desire to keep projecting our worth as a matter of what we buy, what we have, but rather how we use the materials that we do. So, in terms of what we have at the Dylan archive, manuscripts are sexy. Recordings, unseen footage, especially when it's Bob Dylan, all of that is incredibly alluring. But being able to stitch all that together in a way that makes those materials, and Dylan's life and career, and the idea of creativity in general, to make those things sing is the challenge. You can do that with a small collection. It doesn't matter how big your collection is. It's how well you use it. Point being, the Leonard Cohen exhibit that has been in Montreal, it was in New York—brilliant. It wasn't based on sitting there and examining Leonard Cohen manuscripts under glass and having this “I'm looking at the Declaration of Independence” deal. It was (brilliant) because the media around it was so powerful. And you could have a display of incredible rock memorabilia under glass and have us all totally flat because there's no context and there's no life to it. It's just you looking at the bones of dead animals.

DR: So you're talking more about curation and presentation, and even a kind of analysis to present to viewers. Context. Can you sense a philosophy emerging from the Dylan Center about how this material might be presented?

MD: Yes. Another nice thing about our current stay-at-home situation is that we're having lots of meetings to discuss how to make the material that we have live and how to engage people where they are with Bob Dylan. Last year I guest-lectured in a class at the University of Tulsa and there were two dozen undergrads. I was

ten minutes into my lecture and somebody was like, "Hang on, uh, can you tell us who Bob Dylan is?" And I was like, "Oh. How many of you know who Bob Dylan is?" And two people in the class of maybe thirty students were like, "I know who he is," and one of the two said, "Well, I googled him before class."

DR: That's wild.

MD: The person who doesn't know who Bob Dylan is, we need to appeal to that person. We also need to appeal to of Dylan fanatic-level people. I think it's going to be impressive on any level, for anybody who comes in. Even if Dylan's style of music isn't interesting (to them), the presentation of the materials and the discussion of creativity and songwriting and the underlying philosophy of what it means to be someone who creates will come through.

DR: What is Michael Chaiken's role in this, and what is your working relationship with him?

MD: Michael is the curator of the Bob Dylan Archive. He's currently in quarantine in Brooklyn. He has been for some years working to bring artists and musicians and other actors, various characters to Tulsa to do events here and to do oral-history interviews with various people and to put on programming. He is on the front lines of talking with people when acquisitions are in front of us. He's been there since the beginning, so when the archive was sold, Michael essentially came with the archive. He helped sell it, and he had a knowledge of the materials that was so great in the way of talking about things. He has been a natural fit. Up until now, with the quarantine, he's been coming every month and splitting his time in Tulsa and in New York.

DR: What are the dynamics between the Dylan archive and the Tulsa community? There are so many entities involved, and you've brought up so many of them in the course of this interview. How does everyone ensure a positive and vital role for Dylan studies and Dylan tourism in Tulsa?

MD: The Bob Dylan Center will be the museum associated with Bob Dylan based on the materials from the Bob Dylan Archive, and you're right—culturally, especially in the arts district in Tulsa, there are a ton of things going on. There are a bunch of museums. There's the Woody Guthrie Center. There's going to be OKPop, the Oklahoma Historical Society's popular culture museum going in by Cain's. On the Dylan side of things, you have the Institute for Bob Dylan Studies at the University of Tulsa which is run by Sean Latham. And he put on the (World of Bob Dylan Symposium, 2019). He's been incredibly active with the institute and the board associated with the institute and, you know, what Sean is doing is separate from what we are doing with the Bob Dylan Center and the archive, but we work very closely with them in the same way that we work very closely with Dylan, his management team and that side of things.

DR: Before you moved to Tulsa, were you aware of the Tulsa Race Massacre (of 1921)? Had you encountered anything about it in your research?

MD: I'd heard about it, but not through my research or in school or anything. It's a truly heinous chapter in our nation's history, and it's one that has been historically under-reported. I think HBO's *Watchmen* series brought the story to a much wider audience, but the real reckoning is coming from Tulsa itself, in the run up to the centennial of the Massacre. So many people in the arts and cultural communities here in Tulsa have been working to honor the legacy of Greenwood/Black Wall Street and the lives lost and upended by the events in 2021. My colleague, Dr. Stevie Johnson, has been instrumental in organizing a regional hip-hop collective called "Fire in Little Africa," which tackles Tulsa's long history of racial division and the continued silencing of Black humanity. It's been a really inspiring project to watch come together and the album will launch early next year to coincide with the wider Tulsa Race Massacre Centennial commemorations.

DR: The Bob Dylan Center is moving into a space that was previously a museum. How did that come about?

MD: We were incredibly fortunate with the timing of it all. We'd been trying to decide where the Dylan Center would live when the Philbrook Museum decided it wanted to consolidate its collections at its main museum. The location offers us two museum-ready floors with archival storage, a library and reading room, and tons of options. And the fact that it's two doors down from the Woody Guthrie Center, and across from Guthrie Green makes it an ideal location for us.

DR: Is there anything else you think *Dylan Review* readers should know about the Bob Dylan Archive and the Bob Dylan Center, including how they interact with Bob Dylan's legacy and the Tulsa community?

MD: As I've mentioned, the Dylan Archive is incredibly rich and deep. It's changed the nature of Bob Dylan scholarship already in the short time it's been open to researchers. Numerous books and articles will be appearing in the coming years based upon the work that a handful of dedicated researchers have done here in Tulsa. That in itself is a boon for the city—it's become *the* critical hub for Dylan studies. With the opening of the Bob Dylan Center, the general public will be able to engage with these materials in a substantive manner. Part of the challenge there is offering enough for the diehards to be satisfied while also making sure that people with only a passing knowledge of Dylan can get a good idea of who he is and why he's so important. That in itself has been an incredibly rewarding challenge. And we want to ensure that this isn't a one-and-done museum experience—that people can come back again and again and see and discover new things. Undergirding all of this is Dylan's own restless creativity, and creativity and the creative process are the common themes for the entire Center, allowing us to look at creativity in a variety of ways. The Archive and Center are designed to be inspiring and thought-provoking to everyone who walks through the door.

LETTERS

The editors invite letters and comments for future issues. We encourage lively discussion but please confine commentary to topics raised in articles or interviews in the *DR*.

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