

# DYLAN REVIEW, SUMMER 2021

## MASTHEAD

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

**FORUM: DYLAN AT 80 (IS THIS JUNCTURE SIGNIFICANT?)**

Anne-Marie Mai, "Bob Dylan as a Challenge to Literary Studies..... 4  
Timothy Hampton, "'Nothing, really nothing, to turn off': A Listening Guide  
for Octogenarians.....7  
Alessandro Portelli, "Where Have You Been, My Blue-Eyed Son?" ..... 10  
Michael Gray, "Just Like That Bird" .....16  
Alessandro Carrera, "Bob Dylan Is Going Home" .....21  
Andrew Muir, "Dylan at 80: Is This a Significant Juncture?" .....26  
John Hughes, "I Forgot to Remember to Forget You: Bob Dylan at 80" .....29

**REVIEWS**

David Thurmaier, *Bob Dylan 1970*.....32  
Christopher Rollason, *World of Bob Dylan*.....37  
Michele Ulisse Lippardini, *Bob Dylan in Hell*.....48  
Michele Ulisse Lippardini, *Bob Dylan, pioggia e veleno* .....51  
John Serembus, *Decoding Dylan*.....54

**THE DYLANISTA**.....58

**POEMS**

Jacqueline Osherow, "For Dylan at 80" .....63

**ARTICLES**

Jim Salvucci, "Bob Dylan and Wallace Stevens in Conversation" .....64  
Jeffrey Lamp, "The Hal Lindsey Effect: Bob Dylan's Christian  
Eschatology" .....87

**SONG CORNER**

Sarah Gates, "'The Truth Just Twists': Psychedelic Irony in 'The Gates  
of Eden' ..... 112

**INTERVIEWS.....122**

**LETTERS**

    Spencer Leigh.....123

**CONTRIBUTORS.....127**

**BOOKS RECEIVED.....131**

**BOB DYLAN LYRICS, COPYRIGHT INFORMATION.....132**

## FORUM: DYLAN AT 80 (IS THIS JUNCTURE SIGNIFICANT?)

FORUM CONTRIBUTION BY Anne-Marie Mai, University of Southern Denmark

### Bob Dylan as a Challenge to Literary Studies

Bob Dylan turns 80, still active and still the subject of controversy. The old songwriter, musician, and Nobel Prize winner is one of the world's biggest celebrities; a riddle who prefers to surprise rather than to live up to the expectations of the audience or the media. His songs have long since become classics in the songbooks of the world. But have we grasped the challenges he has presented not only to his audience but also to the Humanities and to literary studies? Research in Bob Dylan's oeuvre is a rapidly growing field, his archives are safe at Tulsa University in Oklahoma, and it is time to take a closer look at how Dylan's work can renew the study of literature.

Bob Dylan does not seem happy when his songs are described as literature. He emphasized this when he received the Nobel Prize in 2016. In his "Nobel Banquet Speech," he explained that he had never asked himself whether his songs are literature, and in his Nobel lecture, he ended up pointing out that songs are different from literature. They are meant to be sung, not read. Should literary scholars not simply keep their fingers off Dylan's work and leave his songs to musicology? The question is, of course, rhetorical: the literary scholars and poets of the Swedish Academy should be proud to receive Bob Dylan's thanks for answering a question he has never asked himself. After all, being able to ask a question that a genius of arts has not even thought of must be considered a sign of an intellectual capacity.

In his Nobel lecture, Dylan tells the audience how, in addition to country and western, rock 'n' roll, and rhythm and blues, literature has been his spiritual baggage. He rounds up his lecture by a reading of three works that have been particularly important to him: Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, Eric Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and Homer's *The Odyssey*. Dylan's reading focuses on

the voices of the texts, their many sources of inspiration, their plots, themes, and symbols. But it is also characteristic that he shifts his interest in what the texts mean to what they do.

Literary studies have tended to treat Dylan's lyrics as close-reading goodies. We have practiced interpretation and deconstruction on the lyrics, tracing their direct and indirect quotes and loans in long, learned lines, but perhaps we should learn from Dylan and look at what the songs do and what their creative potential for the audience may be. Perhaps we have overlooked that interpreting is fundamentally about creating a connection to the text, which is exactly what the audience has done for ages and what they still do when they review Dylan's songs in social media and at digital bookstores, describing how they have been emotionally engaged in Dylan's songs. One Amazon reviewer expresses how he has been moved by Dylan's 2020 album, *Rough and Rowdy Ways*: "Dylan erupts with words that evoke feelings of confusion, chaos, anxiety, and our/his never-ending desire for love and meaning and purpose." Bob Dylan's songs encourage literary scholars to not only study what a work of art means, but also, as Professor Rita Felski has put it, to study what it does, what feelings it awakes, what relations to other people and other artworks it creates, and how it changes the literary culture. We should not leave out the intertextual studies of the text, the close readings, and the literary critique, but we also need to study what the songs create and how they are used.

Dylan's lyrics are often a network of modernist and romantic imagery, of everyday speech, ballads, folk songs, classical poetry, slogans, and commercial language, and as such, his lyrics have contributed to changing literary culture, making a rich and experimental poetry known to a wide audience. Modernist poetry is with Dylan no longer reserved for academia, and its medium is not only the book, but also the album, the rock concert, the festival, and the movie. The contrast between high and low culture, which characterized the first half of the twentieth century, has been weakened. Something has changed, and Dylan's

contribution to the changes of literary culture seems important and interesting to study.

Dylan's memoir, *Chronicles, Volume One*, can also be seen as a call for new literary studies. The memoir questions a traditional understanding of artists' autobiographies as stories of the man or woman behind the artwork. Dylan's book is something different. It is more about the man with the songs, and it represents a biographical turn to the musical and artistic environments and events that gave Dylan's art its direction. The main character of the story is Dylan's own artistic process more than it is a story of his life, and it opens up new ideas in contemporary biographical studies, paying special attention to relationships between people, things, and circumstances and how they hook up, as Dylan has put it.

It seems that digitalization has made the audience more eager to get backstage and meet the artist. The audience is fascinated with the intersection of the performative personality, interpretations of the personal life in media documentations, and the living person, as we have seen with Whitney Houston. A kind of biographical public media mist settles, and the artist might end up as a virtual zombie, a living dead, whose hologram haunts the world.

As for Bob Dylan, there has been no shortage of stories about his personal life. New details emerge, old friends, colleagues, and supporters report. Dylan himself is mostly silent. And he has said that people ask him, "Are you who I think you are? Are you really him? No, you are not him?", and these questions go on and on (Bradley 2003). But in Scorsese's movie *Rolling Thunder Revue* (2019), Dylan takes part in the creation of a funny autofiction, where fictional characters and episodes become part of the story of the show. In *Chronicles*, destiny is often pictured as a feeling and a personal understanding but also as an outer unknown power. Perhaps this is a contradiction — but as Dylan sings in 2020: "I'm a man of contradictions and a man of many moods." Which can, of course, be considered as another invitation to further studies.

FORUM CONTRIBUTION BY Timothy Hampton, University of California, Berkeley

“Nothing, really nothing, to turn off”: A Listening Guide for Octogenarians

Bob Dylan's epochal recording, *Blonde on Blonde* (1966) hits its stride on its third track, the majestic “Visions of Johanna.” Here the great themes of the album — memory, debt, betrayal, fidelity — come into focus, against the backdrop of a smoky room, after hours:

Lights flicker from the opposite loft  
In this room, the heat pipes just cough  
The country music station plays soft  
But there's nothing, really nothing, to turn off.

The rhymes of the four lines beautifully reflect the sense of stasis that penetrates the song. The vowels of the four rhyme words link up through assonance. But within this sameness there is difference. The first and third rhyme exactly, as do the second and fourth. There's stasis, but also change, in the rhymes, as there is in the story of the song.

What strikes one most powerfully, however, is the final line. There's nothing to turn off. We get it. But why is there “nothing, *really nothing*” to turn off? Why the insistence? Why the herky-jerky clause? It is true that the line mirrors the metrics of what precedes — two short syllables followed by a long syllable, ta-ta-taaa. But it gives us too much information. Dylan could just as easily have sung, “But there's nothing to turn off.” The melody would have worked fine. What kind of sentence is this, anyway? Would you ever say “there's nothing, really nothing, to turn off” in a normal conversation? In what context? It's a line that calls attention to its own artificiality, to the fact that it is colloquial diction, used in a completely uncommon way.

This little verbal blip teaches us a number of things that we can recall, now, at Bob Dylan's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, as we listen as fully as we can to the whole range of his music. In the moment of *Blonde on Blonde* it announces the curious, conversational mode of that album. After the somewhat grand public

pronouncements of 1965's *Highway 61 Revisited*, we are now moving to a quieter, more private lyric mode, in which the lyricist seems to be talking to intimates, or in some cases, as here, to himself. It's a new step forward in Dylan's marvelous mastery of English poetic diction.

But it also delivers a message about what makes up art, and about the relationship between poetry and social experience. Though Dylan plays with "Visions of Johanna" on various outtakes (released, now, on *The Cutting Edge*), "nothing, really nothing" appears to have been part of the lyric throughout the different versions. Either way, by its emphasis, it calls our attention to what we might "turn off" if we were, for example, in the business of turning things off. We could turn off the flickering lights. We could turn off the heat to keep the old radiator from rattling. Or we could turn off the country station. But the point is that to turn off any of these things would be to shut down the moment, to impoverish the density of this scene, this instant, this memory. There is *really* nothing to turn off.

We are being educated here, taught about poetry and the senses. There is no "I" in the scene, so far. Only a vague "we," an undefined "you" ("tempting you to defy it"), and a mention of a mysterious woman called Louise. The real story only begins a few lines later, when the singer announces that he's overcome by visions of Johanna. Dylan is here working as a stage manager, a manipulator of décor. As the poet Rimbaud reminds us, poetry is built out of a mixing of all senses, a confusion of our learned categories for making sense of the world. Here, Dylan is applying this disorientation to set a scene in which there is no hierarchy of the senses. Everything, from the most irritating radiator noise to the most beautiful country ballad, is essential to the moment. The extra language, "really nothing," is, thus, not really nothing at all. It is, in fact, the most important detail in the scene, since it reminds us that *everything* is music, that sensory experience makes up the material of art.

This is one of the lessons that Dylan has taught us — to open our ears, not only to the grand multi-part harmonies of the Staple Singers, or the zinging guitar

solos of the Butterfield Blues Band, but to the music of everyday life. And of everyday speech. Not only do the songs blend high culture and street speech, Blake and Bebop, but the performances are marked by moments where we learn to listen to things we never thought were music. We hear it in the mumbled lyric of “Stuck Inside of Mobile,” “When, uh, he built a fire on Main Street,” where the “uh” is as important as anything else in the line. Or in the interjection in the chorus of “Like a Rolling Stone,” (“to nnnnnahh, be on your own”). Or in the rickety vocal duets on *Desire*, where Emmylou Harris struggles to harmonize with Dylan’s eccentric delivery. All of these bits of sound — these grunts, groans, hesitations, rattles, misplayed notes, urgings — are as integral to Dylan’s work as the harmonica solos. They are the stuff of everyday speech, but also, when integrated into the form of the song, the stuff of great art. Like the subway tickets stuck into the paintings of Picasso, or the bits of advertising talk in the sonnets of Ted Berrigan, they are Dylan’s way of teaching us that beauty is all around us. The poetry of the everyday is part of the compositional world of his songs. They are not the only place it can be found. But without them, we might not pay attention to it. Listen! There is really nothing to turn off. With Dylan, we can hear music everywhere, in the heat pipes, in the country music station — but, also, in the sky above, in the tall grass, and the ones we love.

FORUM CONTRIBUTION BY Alessandro Portelli

### Where Have You Been, My Blue-Eyed Son?

In 1964, I was given the opportunity to play one record of American folk music a week on the all-Italy state radio station. The first song I chose was Bob Dylan's "A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall." I still brag about having been the first to play Bob Dylan on the Italian radio.

At age 80, Bob Dylan has been part of the life of several generations across the world. I was born in the same year as Dylan, and I first heard his voice in 1963, when I brought home *The Times They Are a-Changin'*. The Italian singer-songwriter star Francesco De Gregori — a Bob Dylan fan and translator — learned about him from an older brother who gave him a record of *Blowin' in the Wind* around 1966. In Shillong, India, I heard about the local rock singer Lu Majaw, who turned into a priest of the Bob Dylan cult after he heard the same song in Calcutta in 1965. Silvia Baraldini, a revolutionary activist in 1960s America, first heard Dylan in *Nashville Skyline* (1969). Alessandro Carrera, one of the finest international Bob Dylan scholars and critics, writes: "I have been listening to Dylan since 1970." Marco Rossari, a 1973-born author and translator, first heard him in 1979, and bought his first album, *Oh Mercy*, in 1989. Gaia Resta, a 1979-born teacher and translator, discovered Dylan in 1993, at age 14, "from some TV program where they played excerpts from Rolling Thunder Revue Tour."

I remember the thrill when I first realized that the opening lines of "A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall" ("Oh where have you been, my blue-eyed son / Where have you been, my darling young one?") were identical to those of a ballad I had heard as "Lord Randal" on a Harry Belafonte record six years before and a Ewan McColl album I bought in 1961 ("O whaur hae ye been, Lord Randal my son? / O whaur hae ye been, my bonnie young man?"), and on a 1963 record by Italian folksinger Sandra Mantovani, as "Il Testamento dell'Avvelenato" ("the last will of the poisoned young man") in Italian ("Where did you go last night, my flowery and gentle son?").

The ballad is first mentioned in an Italian play in 1629 and in a Scottish manuscript in 1715, and is included in the canonic collections of *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* by Francis James Child (1882-88) and Costantino Nigra's *Canti popolari del Piemonte* (1888). Both have spread across Europe and the Atlantic and lived on in oral tradition into the third millennium. It was collected in Northern Italy as late as 2005; in 1973, I recorded a version in a working-class neighborhood in Rome, sung by a Southern Italian farm worker. On the one hand, the connection between the ballad and its long, cross-Atlantic history gave me a sense of the depths and width of Bob Dylan's connection to the historical past. On the other hand, as it has stayed with me all these years, "Hard Rain" has represented both an apocalyptic vision of the future and key to the meaning of contemporary events as they unfolded. It made a lot of sense to me that the song I had chosen in 1964 to inaugurate my brief radio career would also be the one chosen by Patti Smith to celebrate Bob Dylan at the Nobel Prize ceremony in 2016.

All Bob Dylan scholars and critics recognize the connection between the *incipit* of "A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall" and "Lord Randal"; yet, in most cases, they go no further. Thus, Alessandro Carrera comments that the ballad "has evidently very little to do with what Bob Dylan made of it." The dialogue between Dylan's classic and the ballad, however, goes much deeper than that.

Both "Lord Randal" and "Hard Rain" are dialogues between a mother and a son who leaves home, walks and crawls through dangerous unknown lands and deadly encounters, discovers evil, violence, deception, death, and comes home to tell the tale and die. In the ballad, the young man has been out hunting in the wild woods, has been poisoned by his "true love," and asks his mother to make up his dying bed before he makes his final will. "Hard Rain" resets the story to a different context and time, but here, too, the hero tells about the horrors he has encountered out in the wilderness and prepares to sing his last song before he starts sinking. Both the ballad and the song are about the relationship between the home and the wilderness, the safe familiar present and the dangers of the

alien future, the meaning of history as possibility or nightmare. Much of the power of Dylan's masterpiece, then, lies in the way in which it incorporates the historical depth of the ancient ballad, projects it toward a modern and post-modern imagination, and illuminates both. It springs out of a magical moment in which Bob Dylan was between worlds and in touch with both, still part of the folk music revival but ready to leave it for shores unknown.

Here, however, I would like to focus less on what song and ballad have in common than on an apparently minor yet revealing difference. In the over two hundred English and Italian variants of "Lord Randal" that I have been able to consult, the hero is "bonnie" in Scotland, "handsome" in Kentucky and North Carolina, "gentle" and "flowery" in Italy. But never "blue-eyed."

The blue-eyed son, like a new-born baby, has the clear eyes of innocence: he does no evil, indeed he does not even know that there is such a thing as evil in the world ("we never thought we could get very old. . . the thought never hit that the one road we traveled would ever shatter or split," he sang about his youth in "Bob Dylan's Dream"). The loss of innocence as the price for adult experience is a classic theme in American literature: the naive adolescent hero goes out into the world, like Huckleberry Finn down the Mississippi, and is initiated to the knowledge and the presence of evil and death. In his initiation journey, Dylan's blue-eyed son meets icons of innocence violated: a newborn baby surrounded by wolves, young children wielding guns and sharp swords, a child near a dead pony. The one road he travels on shatters into "six crooked highways" and the idyllic "home in the valley" becomes the gothic "damp dirty prison."

Like Emerson's eyeball, the blue-eyed son's pupil is transparent — but only in one direction: it denotes the inner purity of his soul, but no "misty currents" (Emerson) connect it to nature outside. The mountains are "misty," the oceans are dead, the forests are "sad," reminiscent less of Emerson's benevolent woods than of the "wild wood" where Lord Randal meets his fate, or even of those "dark, demonic woods" out of which Dylan himself says he has come. About the same

time as Emerson found vision and illumination in the woods, Nathaniel Hawthorne reminded his contemporaries that “[t]he founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognized it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the site of a prison.” The mouth of a graveyard is where the blue-eyed hero steps at the beginning of his journey; and the “damp dirty prison” is what he will meet in the end.

But there is more. Not long after Dylan sang of the blue-eyed son, Toni Morrison debuted with *The Bluest Eye* (1970): the story of an African American child obsessed with the dream of having blue eyes, like the child icons she sees in movies and ads. As a rule, Black people do not have blue eyes. Which is why, in their gospel version of “Hard Rain,” the Staple Singers change it to “my wondering son” (2015), and Jimmy Cliff’s 2011 reggae version is about a “brown-eyed,” not to a “blue-eyed” son.

Bob Dylan’s blue-eyed son, then, must be white. The difference, however, is less about color than about the expectations that go with it. Black children and mothers do not need journeys into the unknown in order to know what awaits them in the wilderness outside. In Bruce Springsteen’s “Black Cowboys,” little Rainey Williams makes his way to the playground through spaces as filled with danger and death as those discovered by Dylan’s hero; his mother does not ask him who he met, what he saw, what he heard — she just wants him to come home and stay inside. Unlike the mother in Dylan’s song, Black parents speak to their children *before* they leave home. As mayor Bill DeBlasio, who has a Black son, explained after the police killed Eric Garner in New York: “[My wife] Chirlane and I have had to talk to [our son] Dante for years, about the dangers he may face . . . we’ve had to literally train him, as families have all over this city for decades, in how to take special care in any encounter he has with the police officers who are there to protect him.” And Bruce Springsteen’s *American Skin*: “On these streets, Charles / You’ve got to understand the rules.”

Only those who believe in innocence — their own, and others' — only those who leave home believing that they have rights and are safe — can be shocked by the revelation of violence and evil. Student activists of the 60s were surprised when they realized that the police didn't beat only the workers but them, too: "You know, the big demonstrations were those of the workers, not us students, so we were totally naïve. At first the march was playful, a holiday, a game. Then it turned out that it was no game at all. They gave us a real serious drubbing." Or the tragic events, the killing of a young man, the police riots during the 2001 Big 8 conference in Genoa, when the "gentle" and "flowery" young people of the third millennium lost their "innocence":

We were out in the street, dancing, playing living theater and all. They come at us from behind. . . . And I couldn't understand what was going on. . . . I mean, shedding all at once the belief of twenty-one years that the police is there to protect you. . . . I was wondering — why are they attacking us? . . . Here I am, dancing, with sunflowers in my hair, and you beat me up? Why?

Of course, Bob Dylan wasn't thinking of Genoa, 2001, when he wrote "Hard Rain" in 1963. But he possessed the vision that can turn a historical moment into a timeless archetype — which is, in the end, the "inner substance" that makes a song a *folk* song and keeps it alive. Bob Dylan can wreak this wonder without even having to wait for the years to pass. He hardly ever writes "topical" songs, and when he does they are not his best; but out of historic events — the murder of Medgar Evers, the lonesome death of Hattie Carroll, the atomic nightmare of the 50s and 60s — he distills warnings for all time. His songs never lose touch with immediate events, but reach for the deep forces that shape them. They consign the news of the day to the long duration of archetype or myth, so that the story of the present foreshadows that of the future. The "guns and sharp swords in the hands of young children" announce the child soldiers of the civil war in Sierra Leone; and we have all seen "a white man who walked a black dog" in the

images from Abu Ghraib. The “one hundred drummers whose hands were ablazin’” foreshadow the police squadrons marching in formation in Genoa, the dark visors of their helmets lowered to cover their eyes because, as we know, “the executioner’s face is always well hidden.”

The twenty-one year old Bob Dylan of 1963 stays with me as we both turn 80, and still helps me make sense of the tragedies of today. In a widely-seen set of photographs, African migrants (many from the former Italian colony of Eritrea) face helmeted police on the boulders by the shore of Ventimiglia, near the French-Italian border. There they are camped precariously, waiting in vain to cross over. Today’s world migrants are the ones who literally walk and crawl over crooked highways, step in the middle of deserts and sad forests, stand in front of oceans filled with death, are met by police with bleeding hammers or white men walking black dogs, whisper and speak unheeded with broken tongues and end up in damp dirty prisons. The faces of the police are well-hidden, but those of the migrants are clear, and they all have in common one thing: their eyes are brown.

FORUM CONTRIBUTION BY Michael Gray, Independent Scholar

### Just Like That Bird

I'm starting this on May 14, 2021 — fifty-five years to the day since I first attended a Bob Dylan concert. It was at the Odeon Cinema, London Road, Liverpool, England, May 14, 1966, 7pm. I was 19. And, lawdy, now I'm heading for 75 and I find Bob Dylan still alive, productive and 80 years old.

If you'll pardon the avian pun, I'm ducking out of overviews and grand comparisons to focus on one small but typically interesting aspect of his enormous body of work: the invoking of birds — birds in general and birds of particular species — and to consider how he deploys them.

I'm prompted by the happy way the white dove with which he flew into so many people's consciousness back near the starting-point — *Yes, 'n' how many seas must a white dove sail / Before she sleeps in the sand?* — returns on his most recent album, again invoked as a symbol of peace: *If I had the wings of a snow-white dove / I'd preach the gospel, the gospel of love.*

Having had that prompt, I suppose I assumed there'd be the handful of bird allusions recurrently in my head and perhaps as many again. How wrong I was: there are dozens!

In performance he has sung traditional and other people's bird-centered songs: "The Cuckoo Is a Pretty Bird" very early on, Stanley Carter's "White Dove" in 1997-2000 and "Humming Bird" in 2001-2. Polly Vaughan is shot when mistaken for a swan in the traditional song so exquisitely sung by Dylan at the 1992 Dave Bromberg Chicago sessions and perversely kept unreleased. At the Supper Club, NYC, a year later, one performance included Blind Boy Fuller's "Weeping Willow," in which Dylan brilliantly conflates Fuller's line, *That weeping willow and that mourning dove*, to sing the Baudelairean, *The weeping willow mourning like a dove*. There's another dove simile in the often revisited traditional "Pretty Peggy-O," first sung live by Dylan in 1961 and studio-recorded on his debut album. On *World Gone Wrong* a wily parrot is center stage in Dylan's superb re-creation of

the traditional “Love Henry.” In “Pretty Saro” (on *Another Self Portrait*) Dylan sings of wild birds in a lonesome place. In 2016 at Berkeley he sang the Lynyrd Skynyrd anthem “Free Bird.” In “Corrina, Corrina,” sung live in 1962 and included on *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, a captive bird whistles and sings, but its company is, like all else, meaningless in Corrina's absence.

Those last three were unspecified sorts of bird. Such undelineated feathered friends make their presence felt in a number of Dylan's own officially released songs across the decades. Sometimes they're mere similes — *Girls like birds fly away* — on “’Til I Fell In Love With You” (from *Time Out Of Mind*); *Fly away little bird, fly away, flap your wings / Fly by night like the Early Roman Kings* (from *Tempest*); and implicit in “Watching The River Flow,” in which he sings *If I had wings and I could fly. . .* At other times these birds are offered as both real and to be identified with — singer as simile for bird — as on “You're A Big Girl Now”:

Bird on the horizon, sittin' on a fence  
He's singin' his song for me, at his own expense  
And I'm just like that bird  
Singin' just for you.

On “Sign On The Cross,” the song's fleeting mystery includes *The bird is here*.

On more than one other *Blood On The Tracks* song, too, he sees his troubled plight in similar terms. On “Meet Me in the Morning” (as on “Don't Think Twice, It's All Right”) there's a rooster (poultry made poetry) and the singer feels *just like that rooster*; meanwhile other, unspecified birds are *flyin' low* and he feels so exposed. On a more important track, he is *like a bird that flew / Tangled up in blue*.

That wasn't the first song in which the bird symbolizes the human creature, ostensibly yet not truly free, like *Freewheelin' Bob*: he was comparably trapped in “Ballad In Plain D,” posing that song's great final question: *Are birds free from the chains of the skyway?*

At times Dylan's birds are nicely present, out there in the dark, part of a song's atmosphere, heard but not seen. There's no specific bird more beautifully

depicted than this, from “Blind Willie McTell”:

Well, I heard that hoot owl singing  
As they were taking down the tents  
The stars above the barren trees  
Was his only audience.

In “Workingman's Blues #2,” on *Modern Times*, we're told that, *In the dark I hear the night birds call*, and on “Under Your Spell,” on *Knocked Out Loaded*, *Well it's four in the morning by the sound of the birds*. It's a sound he misses in the dark part of the year in “Moonlight” on *“Love and Theft”*: *The seasons they are turnin' / And my sad heart is yearnin' / To hear again the songbird's sweet melodious tone*.

It's a sound he envisages being unable to hear at all without his lover's presence in “If Not For You” on *New Morning*: *Winter would have no spring / Couldn't hear the robin sing / I just wouldn't have a clue*. But as with the hoot owl, doves, cuckoos and roosters, that's a specific bird, the American robin (its eggs Bob Dylan blue).

It's striking how many other species are netted in the songs — literally netted, in the case of *every sparrow falling* in “Every Grain Of Sand.”<sup>1</sup> In “The Gates Of Eden,” while “wicked birds of prey” pick up on “breadcrumb sins,” the singer tries *to harmonize with words / The lonesome sparrow sings*. In “Moonlight,” there's not only those songbirds but also the specific *the geese into the countryside have*

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<sup>1</sup> In *Song & Dance Man III: The Art Of Bob Dylan*, 1999, I note the context of Christ's words in Matthew to which Dylan alludes: “Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father.” The reference is to sparrows being sold. Birds were caught in snares like fishes in nets. The phrase “on the ground” here may be a mistranslation from the Ancient Greek, in which “to the earth” is almost identical to “into a snare,” which may have been intended. And Christ seems to have borrowed his “one of them shall not fall . . . without your Father” from the ancient Hebrew manuscript “Bereshith Rabba” (Section 79, Folio 77): “sitting at the mouth of the cave, they observed a fowler stretching his nets to catch birds . . . Then the Rabbi said, ‘Even a bird is not taken without Heaven. How much less the life of a man!’”

In “Father Of Night” on *New Morning*, that same God is the *Father, who teacheth the bird to fly*.

flown, and here Dylan is echoing that lovely line from “When I Paint My Masterpiece,” *When I ran on the hilltop following a pack of wild geese* (in turn an echo of the pre-war blues songs in which wild geese fly west). Dylan’s “Country Pie” cites a singular goose.

There are other species galore, real and symbolic: quail in “Cattfish,” an eagle in “You Changed My Life”; a mockingbird in “I’ll Be Your Baby Tonight”; a bluebird in “Up To Me”; more swans — “Ballad Of The Gliding Swan” and a black swan in “Highlands,” another rooster in “New Morning,” the cuckoo’s return in “High Water,” and further parrots in “Farewell Angelina” and “Simple Twist Of Fate.” Bob as Alias gives us “Turkey Chase.”

There are more stalwart doves in “Dink’s Song” and “Shelter From The Storm”; seagulls in “When The Ship Comes In”; a duck and a ducktrapper in “I Shall Be Free” and “Floater (Too Much To Ask)”; crows in “Black Crow Blues” and “Tiny Montgomery”; the raven in “Love Minus Zero / No Limit”; a peacock in “Caribbean Wind”; and pigeons in “Quinn The Eskimo” and “Three Angels.” In an early “Visions of Johanna” there is Keats’s *nightingale code*, which flies back to us in “Jokerman.” Between those two magnificent songs comes “Changing Of The Guard,” in which *A messenger arrive[s] with a black nightingale*.

Finally, while I may have forgotten still further examples<sup>2</sup>, I haven’t forgotten the birds in the title track of *Under the Red Sky*. Perhaps, though Dylan doesn’t say so, they’re blackbirds: that’s implied, given that nursery-rhyme tradition has it that they are the birds, four and twenty of them, baked in a pie. Here, though, it is the unfortunate girl and boy who get baked in the pie, while the birds escape. You can hear that as Dylan’s own story. So many of those who taste even a modicum of his level of fame, or even brush against his, fall victim to catastrophe and early death. *A lot of people gone, a lot of people I knew. He has escaped death so*

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<sup>2</sup> I’m grateful to my wife, the foodwriter Sarah Beattie, for finding a number of my examples.

*many times*, surviving to become a still-active octogenarian. He has indeed obeyed his own injunction: *let the bird sing, let the bird fly*.

FORUM CONTRIBUTION BY Alessandro Carrera, University of Houston, Texas

### Bob Dylan Is Going Home

Bob Dylan is eighty, and he is on his way home. His thoughts are still fixed on wandering (“Got a mind to ramble, got a mind to roam”), but he did begin his journey home (“I’m travelin’ light and I’m slow coming home”). This is how “Mother of Muses” ends, from *Rough and Rowdy Ways*. But his home isn’t the one he left in Minnesota. Maybe he will want to go back there, sooner or later, or maybe not because, as he says in “Mississippi,” “You can always come back, but you can’t come back all the way.” Minnesota is home, but not his “real” home. He said it very clearly in the interview that punctuated Martin Scorsese’s *No Direction Home*: “I had ambition to set out and find like an odyssey of going home somewhere. I set out to find this home that I left a while back, and I couldn’t remember exactly where it was, but I was on my way there. And encountering what I encountered on the way was how I envisioned it all. I was born very far from where I’m supposed to be and so, I’m on my way home.”

In another century, Dylan asked Miss Lonely, how does it feel to be on your own, with no direction home, like a rolling stone? Perhaps he was also asking himself about the paradox of being homeless yet having to go back home: Ulysses has been far from home for such a long time that for all he knows he could be homeless now. Yet after the siege comes the return, which is just as dangerous; some jealous god can always stop you before you touch the land. When Dylan took it out on Miss Lonely for having lived a life that was too protected and had never learned to survive in the street, he was also angry with himself for having deluded himself into thinking that the noble profession of folk hero, always on the side of the angels, would protect him from the cursed blessing of the street (or better, the road), where you never know if what you believed yesterday is still sacrosanct tomorrow. The teaching of the road is that everything changes — the encounters, the feedback from life, and above all, the style, which you must be able to wear and discard like a dress when the weather changes. The young may

think that living on the road has the road itself as its destination. Who needs home after all? Indeed, there is no word in Dylan that has more resonance than “road” (the others are “wind,” “rain,” and “train”; “home” is not among them), but those who are no longer young know that this is not the case.

Being on the road is exciting, intoxicating, heroic. If you are persistent, and lucky enough, the road gives you three thousand concerts all over the world, yet you still end up not having a home. But could it be otherwise? An artist (Dylan’s words again from *No Direction Home*), “has got to be careful never to arrive at a place where he thinks he is at somewhere” because the false security achieved would make him forget the duty to be “constantly in a state of becoming.”

Jamie Lorentzen, a Kierkegaard scholar who teaches at St. Olaf College in Northfield, MN, believes he has figured out which house Dylan wants to go to. It’s not unfamiliar to him at all, and he needs no secret map to get there. It is the South of the United States, the place where all the good and all the bad of the great country were born, between Mississippi and Louisiana, where Highway 61 goes to die at the gates of New Orleans — the only place in America that before Hurricane Katrina “was better than America” (Leonard Cohen, *Samson in New Orleans*). Dylan has already written in *Chronicles, Volume One* that the highway that brought the blues from south to north, from Memphis to Chicago and from Chicago to Duluth, where Dylan was born, was his road: “It was the same road, full of the same contradictions, the same one-horse towns, the same spiritual ancestors. The Mississippi River, the bloodstream of the blues, also starts up from my neck of the woods. I was never too far away from any of it. It was my place in the universe, always felt like it was in my blood.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bob Dylan, *Chronicles Volume One*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004, pp. 240-241. Quoted (like the interview excerpts from *No Direction Home*), in Jamie Lorentzen, “Dylan’s Direction Home through the World’s Might Opposites,” in *Tearing the World Apart: Bob Dylan and the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Nina Goss and Eric Hoffman, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2017, p. 129.

Lorentzen is right, except that a question arises: if Dylan knows where his home is, then why hasn't he already gone back? Why does his Never-Ending Tour deny the very possibility of arriving *at* somewhere if the last home, which is also the first, can only be the South? Well, because Dylan knows, and all his work is there to prove it, that that house is already occupied. He can only borrow it, and it will never be his. It is the home of the blues, but he did not create the blues and neither did the Jews nor the Anglo-Saxons, the Irish nor the Italians — although all can say, each in their own way, that they have learned from it. It was created by the poorest African Americans and no one can take it away from them, not even by learning all their guitar licks note by note.

Dylan said he stayed in Mississippi one day too long. He sang it right in “Mississippi,” a song recorded in 2001 that recreates obliquely the landscape of the early 1960s. In the fall of 1963, when Dylan was already a name and nothing more than a name, he had actually gone there, to Greenwood, Mississippi for a voter registration rally, something for which you could be shot, and even today it might not be an easy ride. It was, possibly, the only authentic militant act in his life, yet it left its mark. He may have never absorbed the arcana of political struggle, but from the faces of the Black sharecroppers to whom he sang “With God on Our Side” and “Only a Pawn in Their Game,” he learned what dignity is. And he meditated on it until he wrote “Dignity”:

Fat man lookin' in a blade of steel  
Thin man lookin' at his last meal  
Hollow man lookin' in a cottonfield  
For dignity.

Freedom can sometimes be twisted for ambiguous political means; dignity cannot.

In his personal odyssey, Dylan has found many houses, all made of music. But Bob Dylan's real house exists only if he continues looking for it, and there is reason to fear that when he stops no one will be able to resume the journey from

the place where he interrupted it. In the meantime, a map of Dylan's America can be drawn: New York through the eyes of the young man who went there to meet Woody Guthrie, Baltimore where Hattie Carroll met a death that was as racist as it was careless, many rows of desolation — the only place where something worth telling happens — the lowlands of the sad-eyed lady, the watchtower on top of which princes learn that Babylon has fallen, the Mexican Egypt where the goddess Isis prowls, the Garden of Gethsemane where none but One understands that something is happening there and you don't know what it is, the Caribbean of Jokerman the idol-juggler, the infinite Texas of the pearl-toothed girl from Brownsville, and then again the Highlands of Scotland (but there are "highlands" in the U.S. as well), Scarlet Town which is Desolation Row four centuries earlier, and Key West, a place that has the consistency of a postcard yet is the source of all clandestine radio broadcasts like the shortwave radios that from Mexico and Louisiana reached at night the room of teenager Robert Zimmerman who listened to Lead Belly and Muddy Waters wondering from which fiery universe those voices might have come.

These are Bob Dylan's "stations." Some he visited only once; in others, he stayed longer and then left again. And it will be no coincidence that the house where he lives, in Point Dume, Malibu, has never entered any of his songs. Therefore, the question is, how can you go back to where you've never been?

If I don't come back,  
you should know that I've never  
left.  
My travel  
was all about staying  
here, where I have never been.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> "Se non dovessi tornare, / sappiate che non sono mai / partito. / Il mio viaggiare / è stato tutto un restare / qua, dove non fui mai." Giorgio Caproni (1912-1990), *Biglietto lasciato prima di non andar via* ("Note Left Before I didn't Leave"), in *L'opera in versi*

If Dylan could read these lines by Italian poet Giorgio Caproni, perhaps he would see something of himself in them.

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("The Poetic Works"), ed. by Luca Zuliani, introd. by Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo, Milan: Mondadori, 1998, p. 427.

FORUM CONTRIBUTION BY Andrew Muir, The Leys School, Cambridge, UK

### Dylan at 80: Is This a Significant Juncture?

Is turning 80 any more a “significant juncture” than turning 79 or 81? No, it is not. Nevertheless, people are in thrall to the “0,” and thus we attribute spurious significance to it. In doing so, we grant ourselves an opportunity to pause and reflect. Here, I add to that impulse by taking stock of Dylan's life and times and applauding his unparalleled achievements.

There have been other significant 0's for Dylan. Back in 1971, Schulz's *Peanuts* cartoon strip ran the following exchange: “Bob Dylan will be thirty years old this month.” “That's the most depressing thing I've ever heard.” A simple exchange that, characteristically, contained much of import. It was saying goodbye to the perceived “golden age” of the 1960s. Dylan's name was synonymous with that decade to such a degree — a seemingly unbreakable connection still haunts him to this day — that this cartoon poignantly portrayed children acknowledging the passing of naïve, youthful dreams.

Twenty years later, Dylan reached 50 to an outpouring of acclaim for his work at a time when his stock had been at an unusually low ebb. There was also a new “birth” on this “special” birthday, that of *The Bootleg Series*. That first set was a collection of immense artistic value and, yes, “significance,” both in itself and for all the releases in the series it kick-started.

Now Dylan is 80, yet another generally accepted “milestone year” and one that encourages reflection on the life so far lived. Bob Dylan's has so far encompassed the reigns of the following presidents: Franklin D. Roosevelt / Harry S. Truman / Dwight D. Eisenhower / John F. Kennedy / Lyndon B. Johnson / Richard Nixon / Gerald Ford / Jimmy Carter / Ronald Reagan / George H. W. Bush / Bill Clinton / George W. Bush / Barack Obama / Donald Trump / Joe Biden. That is quite a list, and “significance” can be attributed merely to having lived through so many, especially from an American perspective, with the country itself being so young. At 80, Dylan has been alive for almost a third of the USA's history. That

is an astounding concept from my outsider's perspective; living, as I do, in a city with a university over 800 years old. Furthermore, although Dylan's significance and influence are global, he is first and foremost an American artist, and he has been the country's pre-eminent artist for approximately a quarter of its existence.

Such scopes of time are difficult to keep in perspective. Here is a framework to help in that regard, especially for younger readers unburdened by the unstoppable passing of decades. Even restricting ourselves to Dylan's professional life, his 1961 concert in New York stands midway between today and 1901, a year which began with Victoria on the British throne and McKinley, assassinated that September, as detailed at the beginning of "Key West," as President of the US. If you extend the same contextual concept to Dylan's life, then his year of birth, most aptly, especially considering his twenty-first-century output, stands midway between today and 1861, the year the US Civil War began.

Lifespan aside, it is the work itself that matters and wherein lies Dylan's mighty "significance." There is no need to list his extraordinary achievements in a publication such as this. To name but one, Dylan taught us that popular music could express anything and everything about the world and human existence. It could ask and answer the question "how does it feel" by conveying the reality of living in these times and how we can (try to) transcend our time-bound, mortality-conscious condition. "Not bad for starters," as they say, and, as we know, there is so much more besides. It would take very many volumes to cover all of Bob Dylan's significant achievements; many have been written, and very many more are heralding this particular birthday. The surface is being scratched; decades of further studies lie ahead.

Dylan's influence on others is another "significance"; not just his towering presence in nearly all popular music fields but also on other artists from varied disciplines. Such as novelists (e.g. Rushdie, Ishiguro), actors (e.g. Nighy and Rylance), and poets, including Maya Angelou, another of "America's great voices of freedom," as Jack Nicholson said of Dylan. Angelou is another artist who

was still creating new work into her eighties. She once claimed that “Shakespeare must be a Black girl,” and she has also referred to Dylan in eye-catching phrases. Her words, a fitting place to finish this humble note on the occasion of Dylan's 80<sup>th</sup>, came ten years ago, celebrating yet another "0" ending, Bob's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday:

The truth is, Bob Dylan is a great American artist. His art, his talent is to speak to everyone, and when I say American, I think he's a great African American artist, he's a great Judeo-American artist, he's a great Muslim American artist, he is a great Asian American artist, Spanish-speaking artist — he speaks for the American soul as much as does Ray Charles.

That mention of Ray Charles resonates “significantly” as I type this, with recent events in “Georgia, on my mind.” Angelou concluded her prescient remarks with these soberingly apt words for the situation we find ourselves in a decade later (*italics mine*):

There was a time when Bob Dylan was the new boy in the neighborhood. . . . When Bob came everyone loved him because he was what we all intended; he spoke for all of us. . . . He supported the people and the spirit of being American — to know that the mountains, the streams and *the voting booths belong to us all* at all times.

FORUM CONTRIBUTION BY John Hughes, University of Gloucestershire

I Forgot to Remember to Forget You: Bob Dylan at 80

If “nostalgia is death,” as Bob Dylan famously asserted, then how do we commemorate his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday? Any member of the commentariat, however humble, is aware of the responsibility at moments like this to offer some assessment of Dylan’s impact and lasting significance, mapping the man or his work onto some cultural, artistic, socio-political, historical, musicological, or literary critical context . . . Yet such assessments can also seem partial, or wrong-headed. They might help us remember, but they don’t capture what we need to celebrate. Equally unhelpful, the inner fan might feel embarrassed by a contrary impulse, simply to mumble words of gratitude. The comedy, of course, is that both responses are pure anathema to Dylan himself, who is famously allergic both a) to being lauded as the voice of his generation, and b) to fans’ eager desires for the-moment-they-have-waited-for-all-their-lives, ambushing the Nobel Laureate outside his hotel in Copenhagen, Chicago, or Cardiff.

My guiding thread here is to meditate on these things by emphasizing the kinds of forgetting that have always been internal to Dylan’s art. If Dylan is worthy of celebration it is perhaps because — arguably like all truly historical or creative figures — he changed his times, his art, and his audience by refusing to accept any of them, and by making us forget ourselves in the process. In his famous and evocative January 1988 speech inducting Dylan into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, Bruce Springsteen talked of how as a teenager he was both “thrilled and scared” by Dylan’s voice, as he first heard “Like a Rolling Stone” on WMCA on his mother’s car radio. And most of Dylan’s admirers will have some similar story, telling of that moment, song, friend, or incident which suddenly put them on the wavelength of this music. For such listeners, like young Bruce, or like Dylan at Newport, or Miss Lonely, one loses oneself to reappear, in ways that mix loss and renewal, even exhilaration and peril. Those who respond like young Bruce did may never be the same person again, with his excitement at that “snare shot that

sounded like somebody had kicked open the door to your mind" (Hedin, ed., 202). However, one needs also to acknowledge the intractable divisiveness that has always been part of the package, and to remember that no amount of commentary is going to convince Bruce's mother that Dylan can sing, any more than one can argue Irving Welsh into believing the singer deserves the Nobel Prize.

Biographically speaking, it is unnecessary here to reiterate Dylan's own talent for self-forgetting, which has famously and successively defined his life as a series of wiped slates ever since he left Hibbing. Whether or not nostalgia is death, certainly a very extensive kind of creative forgetting has been life for Dylan himself, in so far as this self-styled "mathematical singer," has always begun with subtraction and multiplication, deducting the self from its social conditions, in an emancipating embrace of self-uncertainty that finds ever new ways of contesting social fictions of identity, and of gauging the complexities of private experience. In the 1960s, when Dylan first took possession of his artistic empire, his songs appeared time and again to be staking out some utterly new ground zero from which to voice new beginnings. The magic of his compact with the listeners was paradoxically to be totally oblivious of them, but while sweeping them up by an audacious insurgency in which he was equally utterly forgetful of himself. The songs' air of coming "as if out of nowhere," in Greil Marcus's terms, involved their drawing the listener into the slipstream of a voice that sought to sweep past the existing state of things, as it expanded into the vacuum of all that was yet to be invented in the turbulent politics, art, and audience of his time. Such extraordinary alignments of historical and artistic opportunity as took place in the 1960s are no more repeatable than youth itself, but one can still be amazed at the sheer mesmerizing inspiration of Dylan's art in those times, and at its own capacity for self-difference. Over and again, his voice took down the old world to announce or imply new ones, imperiously coming through the air waves to summon his audience in utterly unforeseen and divergent ways: now voicing apocalyptic

vision and reckoning (“A Hard Rain ‘s a-Gonna Fall”), now inaugural proclamation (“The Times They Are A-Changin’”), now emancipating vituperation (“Positively 4<sup>th</sup> Street”), now the irresistible courings of desire (“I Want You”). . .

Undoubtedly, in recent years Dylan’s voice and the songs have lost this abandon, this imperious sway and reach, and his art has become narrower. In compensation, one might argue that the songs go deeper. The voice is cured and steeped in a lifetime’s accumulated craft and experience, and albums like *Tempest*, or *Rough and Rowdy Ways* sound out our fallen world and mortality with a compelling authority. The pendulum of self-forgetting still swings in these songs, if more locally, in the artful disjunctions at play within phrases, or a line, or pair of lines. Often on these two later albums, for example, this will take the form of a distinctive bait-and-switch technique that dislocates register, perspective, and tone by another small turn of the kaleidoscope. Within this narrower compass, though, the songs weave their effects of humor, beauty, and revelation, mixing up comedy and darkness, tradition and originality, the demotic and the profound. This artfulness of late Dylan is perhaps yet to be fully described, but at this juncture it is enough to express gratitude that it is yet another dimension to his immense and manifold achievement: as his work continues to provoke us to live and progress, by teaching us first to forget.

## REVIEWS

### **Bob Dylan. *Bob Dylan 1970*. 3 CDs, Sony Legacy, Columbia Records, 2021.**

REVIEW BY David Thurmaier, University of Missouri, Kansas City

In *Chronicles, Volume One*, Bob Dylan casually describes the two albums he released in 1970 (*Self Portrait* and *New Morning*): “I released one album (a double one) where I just threw everything I could think of at the wall and whatever stuck, released it, and then went back and scooped up everything that didn’t stick and released that too.” Dylan’s methods of working in the studio are legendary, quickly recording batches of songs, but these sessions were somewhat different. For one thing, many of the songs included on *Self Portrait* (released in June 1970) were covers, and not just from the expected traditional folk repertoire; instead, Dylan covered songs by his contemporaries like Paul Simon’s “The Boxer,” and Gordon Lightfoot’s “Early Mornin’ Rain,” in addition to oddities like Rodgers and Hart’s “Blue Moon,” live cuts from his Isle of Wight performance with The Band the previous year, and several songs credited to “traditional.” In addition, the songs featured more unusual arrangements, some with choirs and strings, resulting in a markedly different sonic experience. Some of the songs were delivered in Dylan’s “crooning” *Nashville Skyline* voice, whereas others displayed his usual raspy vocal timbre (occasionally both appear in the same song). The result was an album largely panned by critics, though it experienced some chart success, climbing to #4 in the US and #1 in the UK. When *New Morning* was released in October 1970, and was comprised of all original songs, critics and the public exhaled strongly, pleased that Dylan was “back.” Not clear at the time of release was that some of the songs for both *Self Portrait* and *New Morning* were recorded during the same sessions, as Dylan alludes to in the earlier quote. And this new release of *Bob Dylan 1970* (hereafter *1970*) helps complete the genesis and development of these two recordings.

Ostensibly released as a copyright-extension set for Sony/Universal to protect the recordings from going into European public domain, *1970* follows in a series of similar Dylan albums with titles of years (e.g., *1963*, *1964*, etc.) containing numerous alternate takes presented in one collection. This three-CD set unearths 74 tracks of previously unreleased material presented chronologically from ten different sessions in 1970. If one were to combine the tracks from *1970* with those from the same sessions released on 2013's *Another Self Portrait (1969-71)*, a reasonably complete picture of Dylan's studio activities during 1970 emerges. Whereas *Another Self Portrait* was curated to provide a more varied and flowing listening experience, containing music from 1969 and 1971 as well, *1970* presents its sessions in order, with multiple takes, jams, and some studio chatter so the listener can feel like a fly on the wall hearing the songs take shape. Though there are a few cuts from *Self Portrait* (e.g., "Alberta" and "Woogie Boogie"), most of the set consists of myriad diverse covers, the session with George Harrison, and many alternate versions of songs from *New Morning*.

First, let's get the "star power" aspect of the collection out of the way. One could reasonably assume the collection would attract fans of Dylan and the Beatles due to the cover billing of "special guest George Harrison." As is well known, Dylan and Harrison were friends for many years, beginning when Dylan infamously introduced the Beatles to marijuana in 1964, followed by a Thanksgiving holiday Harrison spent at Dylan's Woodstock house in 1968, Dylan's rousing performance at Harrison's Concert For Bangladesh in 1971, and becoming bandmates in the Traveling Wilburys in the late 1980s/early 1990s. When Harrison joined Dylan in Columbia Studio B in New York on May 1, 1970, the Beatles had officially broken up and Harrison would not commence work on *All Things Must Pass* for another month (incidentally, starting the album with a Harrison-Dylan original, "I'd Have You Anytime"). Harrison happened to be in New York that day doing an interview with Howard Smith, and he joined Dylan in the studio. The thought of two friends and icons spending the day in the studio together sounds

tantalizing. *Rolling Stone* even published a story in their May 28, 1970 issue called “Bob Dylan’s Secret Recording Session with George Harrison and Friends.” The story notes that the session was “kind of a nice, loose thing,” Dylan sang Beatles songs, and Harrison sang Dylan songs. Add Charlie Daniels on bass, producer Bob Johnston on keyboards, and session drummer Russ Kunkel and one *should* have the formula for a solid musical collaboration.

What did the quintet play that day? The selections can be divided into three categories: old Dylan originals (“Song To Woody,” “Mama, You Been On My Mind” [which Harrison would also record, later released on *Early Takes, Vol. 1*], “Just Like Tom Thumb’s Blues,” “One Too Many Mornings,” “Gates Of Eden,” “I Don’t Believe You (She Acts Like We’ve Never Met),” “I Threw It All Away,” “Honey, Just Allow Me One More Chance,” “Rainy Day Women #12 & 35,” “It Ain’t Me Babe”); seemingly random covers by other artists (“Yesterday,” “Da Doo Ron Ron,” “I Met Him On A Sunday,” “Cupid,” “All I Have To Do Is Dream,” “Matchbox,” “Your True Love,” “Ghost Riders in the Sky”); and some recent Dylan originals (“Telephone Wire,” “Fishing Blues,” “Sign On The Window,” and “If Not For You”). To say that most of this material is essential or even rewards repeated listening would be an overstatement. If one did not know Harrison was at this session, his contributions could easily be missed. He sings background vocals on nine of the songs, though his parts are understated and often barely audible. By contrast, Harrison’s guitar work occasionally shows some of his idiosyncratic touches, but sounds mostly like he is learning the songs (or asking others for the chords). On the one hand, hearing two music legends plow through a plenitude of Dylan and rock classics can be occasionally interesting and fun — “Song To Woody” is transformed into a rollicking waltz, “Mama, You Been On My Mind” is refashioned as a country march with some tasty guitar from Harrison, Dylan and Harrison have fun on a pair of Carl Perkins songs, and the duo does a fairly successful Everly Brothers imitation on “All I Have To Do Is Dream” — but on the other hand, many of the songs are marred by plodding bass by Daniels, as well as some truly

desultory performances (e.g., “Yesterday”). But, despite its lack of varnish, it is nice to have an official release of this session for historical completion.

If the Dylan/Harrison jamming is not really worth the price of admission, how does the rest of the material stack up on *1970*? As someone who enjoys hearing the creative process of a song or album take shape, I would argue that there is some valuable material on these discs. For example, one can trace the development of several songs from *New Morning* that appear here in multiple takes. Let’s consider “If Not For You,” a song that Dylan recorded numerous times, and which Harrison later covered on *All Things Must Pass*. The session on May 1 with Harrison includes the version already released on *The Bootleg Series, Volumes 1-3*, but *1970* also contains four additional takes done that same day:

- Take 1 features Dylan on piano, is fairly slow with lots of bass noodling and the musicians learning the parts, ending in a breakdown.
- Take 2 has Dylan on acoustic guitar, is even slower, with busier bass and some awkwardness in the drums.
- Take 3 improves substantially, with more parts added, including the harmonica. This take is similar in spirit to the version on *The Bootleg Series, Volumes 1-3*.
- Another take is included (track 17), and the band reverts to the slow version, with lumbering drums and Dylan back on piano.

When the sessions reassemble on June 2, with David Bromberg, Ron Cornelius (guitar), Al Kooper (organ), Daniels, Kunkel, and unidentified background vocalists, the sound of the song becomes more countrified as heard in two takes. We hear a jaunty piano part, dobro, and a particularly raspy Dylan vocal familiar on *New Morning*, accentuated by a summer cold. The final versions of “If Not For You” appear on the August 12 session, where Dylan completely rerecords the song with Buzzy Feiten, Harvey Brooks, and Kooper in a different key, much faster, and similar to the final version on *New Morning*. Even though Dylan’s recording methods were often brisk, this set reveals his experimentation with “If Not For You”

over several months in different styles. Beginning with the Harrison session on May 1, and ending with the August session, listeners can hear the song's transformation to its final form on *New Morning*. For Harrison fans, this process is interesting because his own conception of the song on *All Things Must Pass* seems to originate in the May 1 session, and would later get the full Phil Spector treatment, whereas Dylan took the song in a completely different direction.

With this material in mind, is *1970* worth getting? It was not released on streaming services, so one has to buy the three-CD set (reasonably priced on Amazon at \$16.79). One also gets liner notes by Michael Simmons that allude to the poor reviews of *Self Portrait* and give basic details and insights about the songs recorded on these sessions, highlighting how Dylan “recovers traditional folk, country, and blues, and then-current pop and country music.” Complete information for each session is also included, with the dates, titles, and personnel, as well as some photos from the era. For anyone interested in this mysterious and often-overlooked period in Dylan's career, *1970* will be valuable as a reference and for its history. One may not listen often to the repetitive and ragged sessions, but this set is recommended for Dylan fans.

**The World of Bob Dylan. Ed. Sean Latham. Cambridge University Press, 2021, xix + 349 pp. Hardback. ISBN-13. 978-1-108-49951-4. GPB 20.<sup>1</sup>**

REVIEW BY Christopher Rollason, Independent Scholar, Luxembourg

The volume under review is a multi-author study of the figure and work of Bob Dylan from an extremely wide range of points of view. It is edited by Sean Latham, Walter Professor of English and Director of the Institute for Bob Dylan Studies at the University of Tulsa, Oklahoma. Tulsa — also home to the Bob Dylan Archive and the Woody Guthrie Center — hosted the major conference held from 30 May to 2 June 2019 under the title “The World of Bob Dylan” (in which this reviewer was a participant), although it should be stressed that this volume, despite the shared name, is *not* the proceedings of that conference. It may also be useful here to distinguish between: the *Institute for Bob Dylan Studies* (an academic research cell); the *Bob Dylan Archive* (a collection of over 100,000 objects for consultation on appointment, purchased in 2016 by Tulsa’s George Kaiser Family Foundation in partnership with the University of Tulsa, and held at the city’s Gilcrease Museum); and the *Bob Dylan Center* (to be the public face of Dylan in Tulsa, scheduled for opening to the general public in 2022).

*The World of Bob Dylan* is presented as “the first published project to emerge from the Institute for Bob Dylan Studies” (xiv). It brings together 28 texts (introduction, chronology and 26 chapters proper) by a total of 26 contributors, the editor included. 18 are male and 8 female, while 22 are described as based in the US, one in Canada, two in the UK and one in Denmark. Most chapters appear to have been purpose-written for the volume. Two at least, however, originate in the 2019 Tulsa conference. The chapter by Greil Marcus is explicitly credited to his Tulsa keynote speech; that by Ann Powers, another keynoter, reads as if the publication of her text from the event; and there may be more. The role of the archive as a new determinant in Dylan studies is reflected in the fact that

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<sup>1</sup> As contributors to this collection, *Dylan Review* editors Raphael Falco and Lisa O’Neill Sanders recused themselves from any involvement in the procuring and editing of this review.

two of the contributors quote and formally credit material retrieved via their personal research activities there. The chapters read in general as fresh and new, although several have not been updated insofar as their authors refer to Dylan's Never Ending Tour as if it were still never ending, rather than forced into stoppage by the circumstances of which we are all aware.

Sean Latham introduces the volume, recalling the multiplicity of Dylan's work and stressing how each chapter offers a different approach to understanding its "depth, complexity and legacy" (2). He states that the collection aims at a broad readership: while written by experts and scholars, the essays are designed to be accessible both to long-term fans and to the curious. After the introduction comes a six page-plus chronology, the joint work of Latham and Kevin J. Dettmar. The essays that follow are grouped into five parts: "Creative Life," "Musical Contexts," "Cultural Contexts," "Political Contexts," and "Reception and Legacy."

Part I ("Creative Life") opens with the chronology and continues with "The Biographies," an essay by Andrew Muir, author of several Dylan-themed books, including most recently *The True Performing Of It*, a study of Dylan and Shakespeare. Here, he examines the merits and characteristics of the various published lives of Bob Dylan — those by Anthony Scaduto, Robert Shelton, Clinton Heylin, Bob Spitz, Howard Sounes, and Ian Bell — coming down in favor of Heylin as best biographer, thanks above all to his "formidable" research (27). The essay contains detailed comparative analysis and will surely be found useful by future students, as I am not aware that this particular task had been done before. Muir also stresses the "game-changing" role of the Bob Dylan Archive, henceforth a must-consult stopping-place for all aspiring biographers: "the future of Dylan biographies is clearly going to be 'post-Tulsa'" (30).

The next chapter is by Sean Latham and is entitled "Songwriting." The author ranges over Dylan's "massive" song catalogue (32), noting how the songwriting process of "Like a Rolling Stone" can today be followed in detail

thanks to the *Cutting Edge* release, and offering fresh and careful readings of the likes of “Song to Woody” and “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall.” He praises the Basement Tapes as amounting to a “graduate seminar in American music,” and “*Love and Theft*” as showing an “extraordinary depth of learning,” to be juxtaposed with Dylan’s selections on his *Theme Time Radio Hour* (41). In this area too, the research benefits of the archive are stressed, alongside its “sheer size and depth,” and Latham forecasts that now we have it, “unraveling Dylan’s writing processes will take decades of work” (33).

Keith Negus offers an essay with the title “The Singles: A Playlist for Framing Dylan’s Recording Art.” Dylan is known primarily as an album artist, but here Negus focuses on the single, viewing the 45 as a conduit to a more general listening public and thus as historically a means of broadening the audience for at least some of Dylan’s songs. Ten singles (some as recorded by Dylan, some in cover versions) are examined in detail, not from the viewpoint of sales or chart statistics, but from that of the messages communicated through this format. They range from “Blowin’ in the Wind” (in the Peter, Paul and Mary cover) through “Subterranean Homesick Blues” and “Like a Rolling Stone,” to the Grammy-winning “Things Have Changed.”

There follows part II, “Musical Contexts,” whose essays trace Dylan’s relationship to an unfolding series of musical genres: folk, blues, gospel, country, rock, roots music and the Great American Songbook. To start with the first, Ronald D. Cohen’s chapter “Folk Music” examines Dylan’s relationship with that genre. Cohen shows (leaning, legitimately enough, on *Chronicles*) how Dylan — described by Nat Hentoff in the *Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan* sleeve notes as “so powerful and so personal and so important a singer” (69) — gradually became part of the folk milieu to the point of being a seeming fixture there (Cohen quotes from Suze Rotolo’s *A Freewheelin’ Time*: “the folk world was his oyster” (70)), until he dramatically dissociated himself from that same milieu. The story is scarcely new, but Cohen’s is a sound retelling.

The next chapter is by Greil Marcus and, as we have seen above, replicates his keynote lecture at the Tulsa conference, beyond any doubt one of the highlights of that event. Marcus entitles his text: "The Blues: 'Kill Everyone Ever Done Me Wrong'" (the subtitle is a reference to the blues number "Railroad Bill," recorded in 1929 by Will Bennett, and in 1961 by Dylan on the Minneapolis party tape). The chapter opens, with a somber sense of place, by recalling the notorious white supremacist massacre of 1921 which decimated the African American community in Tulsa — "the worst single racial crime in the United States after slavery" (73). What follows is, despite the title, not some kind of conspectus of Dylan's multifaceted relationship with the blues (a herculean task, best attempted to date by Michael Gray). Rather, the author looks closely at three chosen aspects of the subject, namely: "Railroad Bill" in the Bennett and Dylan versions and its significance as an "outlaw blues"; Blind Lemon Jefferson's "See That My Grave Is Kept Clean" and Dylan's cover of the song on his first album; and, leaping to 1997, *Time Out of Mind*, seen by Marcus as "Bob Dylan's great blues album" (74) and of which he comments: "I can't recall a major artist . . . offering people anything as bleak, as barren, as hopeless as this record" (84-85). As always, Greil Marcus, as music writer and cultural commentator, approaches his subject-matter with simultaneous expertise and passion, brought to bear on both the details and the bigger picture.

Gayle Wald's chapter, "Gospel Music," examines what the author considers to be the "least examined" and "most poorly understood" of Dylan's musical modes (88), and notes the crucial role played by African American female artists in that side of his work. She stresses the importance of the women backup singers for Dylan's live performances in his "Christian period," seeing them as "co-creators" of that phase of Dylan's work (95), and also examines Dylan's later personal and professional relationship with Mavis Staples.

Leigh Edwards, in her chapter, "Country Music: Dylan, Cash, and the Projection of Authenticity," looks at the Dylan/Johnny Cash relationship and how

their collaborations “activated new potential” in country music (110). She also unearths a song recorded by Cash in 1965, “Hardin Wouldn’t Run,” about the original John Wesley Hardin, as a point of comparison with the title track of Dylan’s *John Wesley Harding* — a work which she sees as reflecting a “mixture of folk and mass culture” (108). This chapter makes for useful reading alongside the 2019 Bootleg Series issue *Travelin’ Thru*.

Ira Wells writes on “Rock Music” — a well-worn Dylan theme on which it is not easy to say something new. The author retraces the familiar Newport 65 story, but also stresses, with the benefit of hindsight, how the poetic turn in Dylan’s lyrics as he embraced rock conferred a “new intellectual credibility” on the emerging genre (118), heralding the “exploration of the individual self within a mass cultural form” (119). Kim Ruehl, in the chapter “Roots Music: Born in a Basement,” finds a comparable turning-point in 1967, viewing the Dylan/Band collaborations that became famous as the Basement Tapes as the effective creation of a new genre, namely roots music, and the marking — here evoking Greil Marcus in *Invisible Republic/The Old, Weird America* — of a “pivotal moment in the history of American music” (124).

The final essay on musical genre is provided by Larry Starr’s “The Great American Songbook: Better Duck Down the [Tin Pan] Alley Way, Lookin’ For a New Friend.” The wordplay in the title reflects the author’s contention that we should not have been surprised by Dylan’s turn to the Great American Songbook in the three “Sinatra albums.” Clearly an admirer of the trilogy, Starr believes it contains “potential material for several books” (134), meanwhile offering his chapter as “a modest guide for future investigation” (134). He goes on to analyze several cases of Dylan’s recourse to the Songbook: the Rodgers and Hart standard ‘Blue Moon’ from *Self-Portrait* in 1970, “the only Great American Songbook selection to appear on any officially released Dylan album prior to [2015]” (135-136); “Beyond the Horizon” from *Modern Times* in 2006, which (this was news to me) takes its tune and its atmosphere from the Bing Crosby classic “Red Sails in the Sunset”; and

“Autumn Leaves” and “That Lucky Old Sun,” viewed in their context on *Shadows in the Night*. Starr concludes that “Dylan is helping to keep this repertoire alive” (143).

In part III (“Cultural Contexts”), two essays take on the issue of the literary Dylan, inevitably in a post-Nobel context. The Danish academic Anne-Marie Mai — incidentally the volume’s only contributor from outside the Anglosphere — has a particularly wide brief in a chapter entitled “World Literature.” She lists key literary references in the songs and *Tarantula*, and, in an analysis that needed doing, dissects Dylan’s Nobel lecture, stressing the points in common between the three classics he focuses on (the *Odyssey*, *Moby Dick* and *All Quiet on the Western Front*). Mai concludes that with Bob Dylan, “world literature came within reach for a growing audience” (168). Florence Dore, in her contribution “American Literature,” poses the question of Dylan’s intellectual respectability as songwriter: “What are the Bob Dylan Archive and the Tulsa University Institute for Bob Dylan Studies doing within university walls?” (148-149). While incidentally noting the Dylan references in contemporary US authors, most notably Don De Lillo, as well as Dylan’s place on the faultline between “high” and “low” culture, Dore, rather than as might be expected examining Dylan’s debt to classic writers like Whitman or Poe, foregrounds the literary claims of a less obvious protagonist, namely Huddie Leadbetter or Leadbelly. She narrates how the blues artist was invited in 1934 to play before a panel on “Popular Literature” (including no less a folklorist than Alan Lomax) at the convention of the Modern Language Association, an episode that advocates for the blues as a form of literature. Dore thus effectively contends that popular music lyrics could be part of American literature well before Dylan, let alone his Nobel — which award, she concludes, “confirms the deep overlap between American literature and rock’n’roll” (156). Still in the literary register, the chapter “The Beats” by Stephen Belletto examines in fresh detail a familiar textual current, namely the influence on Dylan of Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and the rest of the Beat Generation writers. Belletto includes close

contrastive analyses, pairing Ginsberg's "Howl" with "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall," and Kerouac's novel *Desolation Angels* with the song known to have absorbed elements from it, "Desolation Row."

The contribution by Damian Carpenter, "Theatre," moves us away from the music/literature dyad and into Dylan's wider multimedia world. The author looks at various aspects of Dylan and the theatre, including the influence of major theatrical figures like Bertolt Brecht, using biographical material from *Chronicles* and *A Freewheelin' Time*, Dylan's later collaborations with Jacques Levy and Sam Shepard, and Conor McPherson's 2017 play *Girl from the North Country*; we also, intriguingly, learn of Dylan's own "abandoned play manuscripts" (182).

With the chapter "Visual Arts: Goya's Kiss," Raphael Falco broadens the discussion to include Dylan's production in the plastic arts (the Goya reference is to a comment in a 2001 letter to Dylan from Tony Bennett, retrieved from the archive). Falco enumerates the half score or so exhibitions of Dylan's visual art that have taken place since the first in Chemnitz (Germany) in 2007, in prestigious venues including New York's Gagosian Gallery, as well as London's Halcyon Gallery and even its National Portrait Gallery. He stresses the multigeneric nature of Dylan's visual art production, from paintings and drawings to metal gates. Falco notes that this "flurry of exhibitions in the last fifteen years testifies to the surprising productivity of Dylan the visual artist" (198), also drawing attention to the visual art references in the songs ("When I Paint My Masterpiece" being but one example) and concluding that "Dylan's songs will always be his first art" but that "when he alludes to the other arts in his songs they are often the same arts he himself practices and exhibits," thus suggesting a holistic view of Dylan as creator.

Kevin Dettmar's chapter, "Borrowing," homes in on the by now well-trodden issue of plagiarism versus intertextuality. The subject has already been ably examined, from the intertextuality side, by scholars including Richard Thomas, and Dettmar, while mentioning the best-known cases (Junichi Saga,

Henry Timrod, Ovid), does not analyze them in detail. He positions himself in favor of the intertextual, invoking literary theory (T.S. Eliot and Roland Barthes) and refuting the notion of plagiarism as being a “pretty blunt instrument” (205). Dettmar goes on to demonstrate the sophistication of the intertextual model with a concrete example — a careful reading of Dylan’s “You’re Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go” and how it harks back, through the keyword “lonesome,” to Hank Williams.

The two remaining essays in this section return to the motif of religion, this time from a point of view more textual than musical. Elliott R. Wolfson, in his chapter “Judaism,” offers a detailed argument reading the Dylan oeuvre as infused with concepts from Jewish theology, while Andrew McCarron’s “Christianity: An Exegesis of *Modern Times*” offers a Christian reading of that album — coherent enough within its own terms, though containing what I would regard as an error in twice linking “Spirit on the Water” (230 and 233) to the Cain archetype: Dylan’s song has “I can’t go back to paradise no more/I killed a man back there,” but the biblical Cain, born after his parents’ fall, was never in paradise in the first place.

Part IV (“Political Contexts”) opens with “The Civil Rights Movement” by Will Kaufman. This is well-known territory, but the author offers some useful focuses, stressing that while African American musicians (Odetta, Leadbelly, Harry Belafonte) were major influences on Dylan’s early career, it was never his intention to speak directly for their community: he preferred to narrate as a witness. Kaufman also reminds us that the never fully resolved “lack of certainty over Dylan’s ‘commitment’ to the civil rights movement . . . is one of the defining features of the critical response to his work” (239). Michael J. Kraemer’s piece entitled “The Counterculture” is in fact mostly focused on *John Wesley Harding*, in which album he finds Dylan symbolically embodying a newly rural and traditionalist model for that social movement, in opposition to the extraverted psychedelia embraced by the Beatles in *Sergeant Pepper*. Putting Dylan’s 1968

opus under the microscope, he concludes it was “less a repudiation of the counterculture than an exploration of new directions in which it might move” (253). Kraemer also offers us tantalizing glimpses of how the archive’s notebooks for this period shed a fascinating light on the *John Wesley Harding* songs, their composition and their biblical sources.

Ann Powers’ keynote address from Tulsa is entitled “Gender and Sexuality – Bob Dylan’s Body.” The well-known music critic breaks down Dylan’s projection of his body into four phases — in his early career, the “soft body”; from 1966, the “mod body”; from 1975, the “star body”; and from 1997, the “mortal body.” The author demonstrates an in-depth knowledge of Dylan’s career and a creative use of diverse biographical sources. A cross-career perspective is also offered by Lisa O’Neill-Sanders in her chapter “Justice.” Her analysis offers what scholars should find a useful catalogue of the recurring themes of criminality and criminal justice in the songs, from “The Death of Emmett Till” and “Seven Curses” through “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll” to “Hurricane” and “Political World,” noting that these are motifs that “persist throughout his career” (278). The author concludes by hailing a song from recent times, “Early Roman Kings” from 2012, as embodying a universal inheritance of crime, in a world where — as Dylan said in 1975 – “justice is a game.”

Part V (“Reception and Legacy”) rounds off the book with four essays. Two focus on the more commercial aspects of Dylan’s career and his relationship with the world of marketing. Advertising professor Devon Powers, in “The Bob Dylan Brand,” examines the phenomenon of the mercantile Dylan, from Cadillac commercials to his own Heaven’s Door whiskey, arguing that “‘Bob Dylan’ is in many ways more symbol than person, in the past as a flashpoint for ‘generational sentiment and attachment’” (293) and today as an emblem of longevity and a living legend. This chapter is complemented by David R. Shumway’s “Bob Dylan: Stardom and Fandom,” where it is argued that Dylan was central to the formation of the notion of the rock star as artist, although by the end of the 1960s he had

become “a star defined by his changes rather than the consistency of his persona” (313). Shumway also stresses the “peculiar devotion” and the “cerebral” nature (323) of Dylan’s fan base, with his mutability and unpredictability accepted as part of his stardom.

In the chapter “The Nobel Prize: the Dramaturgy of Consecration,” James F. English takes us back to the world of literature and rehearses the by now familiar story of the vicissitudes of Dylan’s 2016 Nobel. This story has of course been told before, notably by Richard Thomas and Stephen Scobie, but it bears retelling as the author guides us through its various phases — the initial shock (for many) of the award, the multiple reactions for and against, Dylan’s famous delay in responding, Patti Smith’s performance at the ceremony and Dylan’s last-minute Nobel lecture. He also reminds us that this was hardly Dylan’s first major award, recalling the Pulitzer citation, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the Polar Prize and more, all of this being scarcely a precedent for imitating Jean-Paul Sartre and refusing the Nobel (as some suggested). English also takes a commendably original line in reading the entire Dylan/Nobel thread as a dramatic exercise, a form of living the world of literary prizes as spectacle. He concludes that “the 2016 prize lives on as a particularly vivid and well elaborated ‘storm of controversy’,” and as part of the Nobel’s inherent “dramaturgy” (312).

The closing chapter, “The Bob Dylan Archive,” is contributed by the archive’s director, Mark A. Davidson. The volume thus concludes by foregrounding the topic which has studded it as a leitmotif across its pages. Davidson outlines the BDA’s history, calling it “one of the most important collections ever constructed” (328), and stressing its “multifaceted and three-dimensional” nature (330). He stresses that the material it holds is not transparent — it calls for interpretation, like Bob Dylan himself, and is “more sphinx than oracle” (331). As examples of its richness, Davidson cites multiple drafts of *Tarantula*, the footage of *Don’t Look Back*, or 19 manuscript pages of lyrics for “Jokerman.” He concludes by hailing the BDA as a challenge for “exploring what archives mean

in the 21st century" (334). Davidson's case for the significance of the archive for researchers is irrefutable. I would, however, enter the caveat that not all Dylan scholars have the resources or the availability to make frequent visits to Tulsa, and it would be unfortunate if a two-tier hierarchy was created in the Dylan community according to whether or not one has consulted the archive — recalling also, as I write, the current environment of travel restrictions, as well as the fact that this is not an online archive. That said, it is clear that the creation of the archive has ushered in a whole new era in Dylan studies.

*The World of Bob Dylan* may itself be seen as a publication geared to the existence of the archive, offering multiple pathways for future research around it. This is an excellent volume, and the different contributions are of a uniformly high standard. The range of aspects of Dylan studies covered is impressive. Some facets of Dylan's world are absent or only touched on in passing, for instance his relationship with the cinema or his reception in the non-Anglophone world. However, all in all I consider this one of the best collective volumes on Bob Dylan that I have read in a long time, and indeed one of the most interesting publications of any kind on Dylan that have come my way in recent years. For anyone seeking an up-to-the-moment Dylan book that opens many a door with valuable information and new insights, this volume is indeed right on target.

**Luca Grossi. *Bob Dylan in Hell: Songs in Dialogue with Dante – part I*. Arcana, 2018. 128 pps.**

REVIEW BY Michele Ulisse Lipparini

Lately there has been a new flow of Bob Dylan books. Maybe this stream is a little bit of a Nobel aftermath, or maybe it's simply Time that going by helps us to put things in the correct perspective. Either way, Bob seems to be settling in among the Classics, or at least knockin' on their door, and this short essay surely points us in that direction, from Hell to Heaven, following an Italian poet from the thirteenth century's tracks. The book is the result of a university dissertation and it had to be edited for publishing purposes. Indeed, the original project was supposed to examine the three *cantiche* and, allow me to say, we long for the complete project to be released.

This book's original nature is one of its weak points. While the author's voice is clear and intriguing, what we can perceive, from time to time, is that he addresses an audience of people who are familiar with the subject of Dante, while a more divulgative approach would have been the proper choice to draw more readers and to draw them to both poets. Unluckily, as relevant as Dante is in modern culture and history, he's not everybody's bread and butter. His language is, alas, archaic, and it needs more paraphrase and context than what is found in this book. Don't get me wrong, the author dwells upon the notions he means to propose long enough to make his point clear, but sometimes the reader can feel a lack of details that would be useful for comprehension. Surely, though, the person that would buy this kind of book is interested in investing time to read it, so why spare ink when it would only make the reader happier, more fulfilled? The flip side is that the author proposes an interesting but daring idea, so he needs to lavish us with strong points to support it. We know how (analytical) Bob's fans can be. Sometimes they devote themselves to a new input like missionaries, or sometimes they get feisty and dismiss it completely. Of course, the fans can't be an author's compass, but in this dialogue they are his counterpart.

At the end of each chapter (each analyzed song corresponds to a chapter), the author discusses the metric scheme of the song and then poses a kind of moral question (we all know where those answers are blowin'). The scheme as it is doesn't give us new inputs, and I feel it should either be improved or removed. It should provide us with more food for thought; otherwise, it remains a sterile element. The question, however, while it would probably be better placed at the end of the song's analysis, is delicate and suggestive of the book's key point: not simply that the *American Bard* probably crossed paths with the *Sommo Poeta*, and that he drew some inspiration from his main work, the *Divina Commedia*, but that certain moral/ethical questions tend to come back to those sensitive enough to realize that the world is going wrong. What I appreciate about this perspective is that Grossi is suggesting, or even better, *conjuring* (in a less playful way than Scorsese) the idea for us. He's not arrogant nor presumptuous when planting this seed in our mind, even in our conscience.

Many personal accounts of the Song and Dance Man describe him like a sponge, and that's the visual I want to call to mind here. It would be easy to question the author's perspective, possibly claiming that Bob couldn't have been so well read in Dante's matter at such a young age, when rambling around New York City's streets, and that is probably true. Some of the details that Grossi works on are minute, and at times the analysis sounds a bit stretched ("All the Tired Horses" and "Union Sundown" chapters for instance), but this happens in minor cases. The author's ideas come across as revelations, as thunder, when we read the pages devoted to "A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall" and "Desolation Row." We can easily imagine the young Dylan spending time in libraries as he did, or reading essays passed on by Suze Rotolo, or maybe titles found in the house of the intellectuals and bohemians they were spending time with. In *Chronicles* we get a taste of the environment he was immersed in. We can easily picture him going through a Dante compendium or essay about the *Divina Commedia*'s themes, its questions, its metaphors, and Dante's journey from Hell to Heaven. We can

imagine the youngster's swirling brain, the wannabe poet, projecting himself on such a journey. Yeah, that seems to be a safe assumption, and on that journey, well, there are surely a lot of special people and events waiting for a visionary narrator to come and immortalize 'em.

One of the most inspiring aspects of a great artist's body of work is that it is *open*, it gives us room to project what resonates for us, and it usually works on a subjective level. It can also be a trigger for future artists, inspiration that passes through generations in mysterious and symbolic ways. To solve the mystery, we sometimes need a detective, a critic like Grossi, a Dante scholar who has clearly mastered his subject. I won't spill the beans about the spellbinding work he performs at the peak of his treatment, but I will say that his readings of "Blind Willie McTell" and "Seven Curses" leave us with some serious digging to do.

We need more of this research, a complete and exhaustive essay, that walks us as Virgil walked Dante through this challenging and fascinating kind of detection. But if anybody happens to visit Italy, they better check the theatrical adaptation of Grossi's book. A show has been made out of the book: two musicians and the author give a live rendition of the text, perhaps because 2021 is the 700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Dante's death. Celebrations will go on all over the country, online and in person (as soon as it is safe and healthy). This circus will be in town.

**Alessandro Portelli. *Bob Dylan, pioggia e veleno: "Hard Rain," una ballata fra tradizione e modernità*. Donzelli Editore, 2018.**

REVIEW BY Michele Ulisse Lipparini

If you're reading these words, it means you're that kind of Bob Dylan passionate who's willing to deepen his or her knowledge on the matter. You've read bios, you've read essays, and you're serious about it. So you've probably read many times that this or that song draws or quotes from or refers to this or that source, this or that song. Usually this is the kind of information we retain in our mental bank of data, but if that's all we do with it, we are erasing that info at the same time. It becomes a sterile notion. It has no life. Well, if that perspective frustrates you, this is the book you've been dreaming of.

Working on a single song, Portelli provides us with a voluminous experience. Now don't get me wrong, Bob Dylan' songs are alive. They are about life, they have veins and exude life, but often they keep a certain aura of mystery, which is part of their magic. Meanwhile their author is a real person, not just a persona, and he gathers inputs and draws inspiration from everywhere and anytime. Exegesis is often valuable and even necessary. Portelli walks us through a land where time, space, and culture overlap, and the destination is a memory that, when it exists, is already tradition — not unlike the traditional music that Bob Dylan cherishes and deems immortal.

Something happened, maybe, centuries ago, in Italy, and somebody decided to tell a story, in the ballad form, though where and when exactly the episode took place is not known. It's a tragic story: a man comes home to his mother and, by what he narrates, she realizes he's been poisoned by his lover. He's going to die. So she starts asking him what will he leave and to whom, hence the song's title, "Il testamento dell'avvelenato" o "L'avvelenato" ("The Poisoned Man's Will" or also "The Poisoned Man"). The ballad goes on in the form of a dialogue, question and answer, which offers us a parade of situations that build up in a perfect "relative-climax." That ballad traveled, locally in Italy, from region

to region, from dialect to dialect, and eventually through Europe, landing in Great Britain, where, after having gone through a linguistic sieve and a synthesizing process, it became “Lord Randall.”

What usually happens with traditional songs, especially those that stick around in the collective imaginary, is that they become archetypes, the characters become functions and the tales become symbols. Portelli examines the Italian song’s meaning, but above all its legacy and its trail all the way down to the apocalyptic vision of “A-Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall.” Intertwining his own memories and experiences as ethnomusicologist (one of Portelli’s many fields) wandering throughout the country recording traditional songs and preserving the oral tradition, the author allows us to time travel and to witness an alchemic development.

One of the questions I find myself asking more and more frequently, reading Dylan-themed essays — especially those connecting him with ancient Greek and Romance languages cultures — is: was he that well-read when he was that young? Is it possible? Sometimes the descriptions of Dylan’s hyperliterary youth seem a bit of a stretch, yet this is not the case with the thesis introduced in *Pioggia e veleno*. Bob Dylan places himself — accidentally, or unaware — at the crossroad between tradition (the past) and evolution (the future): this specific song blossoms on a ground that had been fecundated centuries before.

The songwriter stands at the intersection of popular culture and dazzling new poetry, of oral tradition and culture industry (and its reproducibility), of spoken word, live performance, and music. The song is the result of one million steps walked by ten thousand people within an invisible map, people moved by the compass of fate, and then the song becomes a tool to expand that map’s borders. Thanks to Portelli, we’re now able to retrace some of those steps, getting close to the song’s source; we can navigate that ethereal land and meet the blue-eyed boy across time.

Portelli identifies numerous technical details about the composition of the lyrics that are relevant when comparing the two songs: the use of anaphora and alliteration, for instance. But while the author offers insights about the literary devices, he's an experienced and educational popularizer and never exceeds in technicalities.

Portelli practices the noble art of digression, but that doesn't take unnecessary space. On the contrary, it usually produces informative paragraphs or footnotes that add to the overall comprehension of the subject. The digressions are like telltale signs that shed a light on the folk map which leads to the creation of "Hard Rain," the solid foundation on which Bob Dylan started to draw his own poetic map. And this is the only point where I would respectfully disagree with one concept the author expresses: he says that in the very moment that the songwriter composed this song, he was prodigiously hanging in the balance between two worlds with a power he would never find again. While it is possibly true the young balladeer known as Bob Dylan was in a state of ecstasy, touched by otherworldly perfection, close to the purest folk form (if that's even a thing), I would say that he has been able to find an equally powerful voice at other moments in his career. He has, for one example, added modernist elements and created a completely new language that has been explored and expanded for decades — but this consideration is of secondary importance in the light of the extensive work of detection presented here.

The book will be published in English soon, by Columbia University Press, and the good news is that it's a revised and expanded edition with an extra focus on the oral tradition.

It goes without saying that Alessandro Portelli knows his song well before...

**Jim Curtis. *Decoding Dylan: Making Sense of the Songs That Changed Modern Culture*. North Carolina: McFarland, 2019. 177 pp.**

REVIEW BY John H. Serembus, Widener University

Whenever I read a review of a book I may be interested in, I like to know something about the reviewer so that I can put the review into context. It is only fair, then, that I give you some details about my perspective on Dylan and my background.

First off, I am not a Dylan scholar. Yet, at the same time, I am not merely a fan. I do possess all his albums in some form or other, I have attended twenty or so Dylan concerts over the years, and I have read a fair amount of books about and by Dylan. The relationship is more intimate than merely a fan though certainly less than a scholar. As a friend and colleague said to me in the 1980s, Bob Dylan has provided “the soundtrack for our lives.”

Secondly, I am a professor of Philosophy with a specialization in Logic and an abiding interest in its dark side — paradox. The former informs my review of the book. The latter explains my interest in Dylan.

The author, Jim Curtis, is an accomplished scholar and academician. One of the great strengths of the book is his Renaissance-like command of the materials of which he speaks as well as all things Dylan. Another great strength is that the author is literally a contemporary of Dylan. Born less than a year before Dylan, he grew up within the same cultural milieu as Dylan with similar influences and experiences. The rest of us (me, just barely) can only *imagine* what it was like to come of age in the 1950s and early 1960s.

*Decoding Dylan* runs 169 pages, which includes copious chapter notes, an extensive bibliography, and an extremely thorough index. It obviously is not intended to give a complete account of Dylan’s life and works but rather focus primarily on his output during the 1960s. Interestingly, it begins with an original poem (song lyrics?) by the author: “Songs for Passersby,” which is an homage to

Dylan spun from biographical strands used by the author to support his claims. This is then followed in the customary way by a preface and introduction.

The body of the text contains eight chapters divided into two sections and a conclusion. Section I, "Theories and Practices" contains three chapters offering: a biography, an account of Dylan's early years in New York, and Dylan's affinities with Franz Kafka, T. S. Eliot, and Pablo Picasso. Section II, "Songs and Songwriting" contains five chapters which: detail what Curtis calls "Songs of Transcendence" from *Highway 61 Revisited* and *Blonde on Blonde*, "Songs of Assimilation" from *John Wesley Harding* and *Nashville Skyline*, tables of rhyme forms from Dylan's songs of the 1960s as well as those of some Tin Pan Alley and other American Songs, a comparison of Dylan and Bruce Springsteen, and a chronological comparison of the early successes of Dylan, Barbra Streisand, and Woody Allen. Curtis concludes his account with a discussion of the paradoxes of Dylan.

The very first sentence of the introduction tells us that his purpose in writing the book "is to help the reader understand the often puzzling, confusing songs that Bob Dylan wrote during the 1960s" (p. 4). Hence, the need to decode Dylan. There are three things to unpack here: there is a message in these songs, the messages are hidden, and that a key exists to unlock the messages. But in some sense the key itself is hidden, or, at the very least, it is not as straightforward as a cryptogram where there is a one-to-one correspondence between letters in the message and letters in the key. The message connects to what Curtis calls the "markers of creativity." In particular, the four major markers of: cultural marginality, ethnicity, relationship to father, and birth order (10). If one can understand these markers with respect to Dylan, then one can then decipher the messages of his songs. Given the space constraints on this review, I will focus on just two of the four markers — ethnicity and birth order.

The author attempts to account for these markers in Dylan by looking at "other major figures in cultural history" (10). I will focus on just one of those figures — Pablo Picasso. Curtis goes to great lengths to establish that Dylan had read or

had an opportunity to read *Picasso's Picassos*, *Picasso: An American Tribute* (58) and *Life with Picasso*. He notes that Dylan's own words in *Chronicles* acknowledge a familiarity with Picasso and the impact he had on the art world with Dylan wanting to "be like that" (57). He goes on to claim that Dylan and Picasso "have a remarkable series of affinities" (64). He then lists no fewer than seventeen affinities between the two men! To this reviewer there is less here than what meets the eye. It may be interesting to note these affinities, but they can't serve as proof for any claim. One can find coincidences between any two people.

Frankly speaking, using ethnicity as one of the "markers of creativity" is fraught with difficulty. The author wants to claim that Dylan has Jewish ethnicity, and this helps explain his genius and his affinity to others who also have the same ethnicity. Therefore, for example, the author compares Dylan with Barbra Streisand and Woody Allen. Yet how does one determine ethnicity? There are no real objective markers, and assuming there are leads to stereotyping. If it is a matter of self-identifying, then how can one be sure that any two people identify as a certain ethnicity for the same reasons?

The first-born marker, though less controversial, also has major failings. If it is intended as a psychological theory, it runs counter to the hallmark of every scientific theory — falsifiability. Curtis talks about Dylan, Streisand, and Allen as being first-born. But there is a problem: Streisand was born second. Rather than questioning the merits of the claim of the theory, the author points out that though she was born second, she was born six years after her older sibling and that fact makes her, in effect, first-born. This *ad hoc* revision of the criterion does not pass the smell test. In addition, this account lumps first born and only children together without any proof that the experiences of the two are sufficiently similar. I have no problems with the first-born account being a useful fiction. I do have a problem with it being used as part of a proof of someone's creativity.

The final point that the author makes in his conclusion is worth emphasizing. It is "Dylan's refusal to choose between high culture and popular culture that

makes him a man in the middle" (148-149). The man in the middle has a foot in both worlds, sprinkling high culture references into popular culture songs. He is a participant in both without an affinity to either. This allows the author to justly claim that Dylan is paradoxical. His lyrics are strewn with paradoxes resulting from his two-culture habitation, such as "I was so much older then / I am younger than that now."

Given some of the preceding paragraphs, you may think this reviewer would not look favorably upon the book. But the truth is, I found it to be an interesting and enjoyable read. The book is a lot like the Dylan songs of the 1960s that Curtis noted may be "puzzling and confusing," but are nonetheless worth listening to. It may not stand up to rational scrutiny, but it is certainly a useful fiction.

## THE DYLANISTA

The film actress Kay Francis, reputedly the highest paid female star at Warner Bros. in the 1930s, once told an interviewer, "I can't wait to be forgotten." She has all but gotten her wish, since few can imagine Kay Francis was more of a box office draw than Bette Davis until 1938 (the year of *Jezebel*).

Unlike Kay Francis, celebrities usually want the opposite: to be remembered well past their sell-by date. There's even a film about it, *Sunset Boulevard*, as complex a mixing of art and life as the medium ever offered (Gloria Swanson, a genuinely forgotten silent-screen idol plays a silent-screen idol whose servant is her old director, Max Von Stroheim, who was in fact a celebrated German silent-film director.) Not quite *Don Quixote*, but more than enough layering for a two-hour on-screen performance where you can't turn back the pages.

John Milton called fame the "last infirmity of mortal man." He was referring to poets seeking a permanent place in the literary firmament. This same infirmity still afflicts poets and writers hoping their work will last. Even when they are not literary celebrities, they would rather not be forgotten. There are exceptions, of course: the seventeenth-century English poet John Donne refused to publish even his less saucy verse. Now considered one of the finest lyrical poets in any language, Donne and his work sank from sight for more than two centuries. No one cited him in the eighteenth century, Samuel Johnson did not include him in the *Lives of the Poets*, despite including such seventeenth-century giants as Wentworth Dillon (Earl of Roscommon), Thomas Otway, and George Stepney. Johnson also excluded all women poets, so Donne was in good company in terms of neglect. But the neglect meant that the Romantics didn't read him, and Donne had no influence whatever on nineteenth-century authors like Tennyson, Whitman, or Dickinson.

Not until Herbert Grierson, a scholar, published his Oxford edition of John Donne did the poet's fortunes begin to change. Grierson's edition was reviewed

by no less a celebrity than T.S. Eliot, and Donne's brilliance shined from under the bushel.

But this is a rare, quirky emergence in the realm of literary culture. As the late Harold Bloom often pointed out, *poets* make the canon, not editors, professors, readers, or even Amazon. Earlier poems chosen by later poets — “belated,” in Bloom’s vocabulary — serve as models to be imitated, stolen from, reworked, or parodied. This is a cumulative process of formation, since those later poets in turn become the objects of imitation. *All* these imitated works come inescapably to make up the canon because, to read and study later poets, we must study the works that influenced them.

There are other ways to conceive of canon formation, including discovery-and-recovery missions like Grierson’s, but charting the influence of earlier poets is unavoidable. Walter Jackson Bate called this “the burden of the past.”

Will Bob Dylan’s influence survive as a “burden” on future generations? Will he, in the future, become an unavoidable figure of the American poetic and musical past? Is he already a canonical figure, or is there work to be done, Grierson-style? The Nobel Prize is no guarantee of a place in the literary firmament, as Pearl Buck, Sinclair Lewis, and (probably) John Steinbeck would testify.

Popular music presents an even trickier problem than literary works. Songs from earlier eras only outlast their first popularizers in nostalgic covers, or, rarely, as with the “standards,” in a new improvisatory art form like jazz.

So where does this leave Dylan’s songs? It’s difficult to imagine what demographic will be strumming “Blowin’ in the Wind” or “Mr. Tambourine Man” in twenty, thirty, fifty years (is there a generation of acoustic guitarists playing those songs even now?). Will there be rock ‘n’ roll bands reviving “Like a Rolling Stone,” “Tangled Up In Blue,” or “Not Dark Yet”? Given the direction of popular music, this kind of revival seems unlikely.

And what about the Dylan imitators? They used to be legion. Dylan’s phrasing and style, diction, even his inimitable voice demonstrably influenced a

generation of guitar players and songwriters. The term *Dylanesque* became descriptive currency, referring not only to singing and songwriting, but also to something beyond music, an elusive, utterly distinct posture. But would a Dylanesque effort be recognizable today? What would it take for that characteristic to survive? More significantly, can anyone other than Dylan be Dylanesque successfully, or does the term *a fortiori* indicate a failure to create a personal musical style and distinctive posture? This latter alternative further confirms the threat of obscurity in Dylan's future.

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*Ergo*, maybe this 80<sup>th</sup> birthday year—hailed as a milestone by some, dismissed as a non-event by others—should get us wondering. Not wondering *if* Dylan will endure, but *how* we can make it happen. Because no one has ever survived without some help, whether from imitators or editors.

Here's a curious fact. Despite all the voluminous attention Dylan has received, all the interpretation, poring-over, contextualization, and microscopic critical appraisal—and Christopher Ricks's monumental *The Lyrics: Since 1962*, which includes variants of the songs. Despite all that, there hasn't yet been an annotated edition of Dylan's lyrics. That is, an edition with commentary and interpretation, along the lines of the Yale Milton or the Oxford Ben Jonson or even, more modestly, the myriad Shakespeare textbook editions.

Maybe this gap in Dylan studies is a result of copyright restrictions. Still, I can't help but wonder if we're toying with canonical survival. It's all well and good to sneer about infinity going up on trial, or to impute permanence to works we deem unsurpassable. But are we tempting fate to think song lyrics live in the music and die in explications on the page?

There have been translations of the lyrics, most notably into Italian and French. And there are footnotes galore in sixty years of articles and books. But no sifting and collocation has emerged in the form of a single edition designed, at

least in part, for future listeners (and readers). This is a desideratum. For example, an annotated edition might include this kind of information:

*Item:*

POSITIVELY 4<sup>th</sup> STREET\*

\* *4<sup>th</sup> Street* an east-west running street in New York City's Greenwich Village, a quarter known for its bohemian inhabitants and, during the 1960s, home to cafes and folk clubs. Dylan owned a house on 4<sup>th</sup> Street.

*Item:*

Inside the museum,\* infinity goes up on trial

\* *museum* private or public building that cares for or conserves artifacts and other objects of artistic, cultural, historical, or scientific importance; curates exhibitions for viewing audiences who walk through the galleries at their own pace.

Don't laugh: before about 1800, the word *museum* referred to Greco-Roman temples. Scores of other Dylan lines come to mind, many of which, even today, might benefit from annotation.

*Item:*

And if you hear vague traces of skippin' reels\* of rhyme

To your tambourine in time, it's just a ragged clown behind

\* *skippin' reels* a) a reel-to-reel tape recorder, the state-of-the-art technology in the 1960s, both in studios and for home recordings; b) a traditional dance, e.g., the Highland Reel.

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It's all well and good to eschew becoming self-ordained professors' tongues. And it's certainly a blast to debate interpretations on Einstein "sniffing drainpipes and reciting the alphabet," or the importance of the "13<sup>th</sup>-century poet," or why the trial's "in a Sicilian court." Not that these debates should stop —

on the contrary, poetry and criticism grow together like the rose and the briar. But hermeneutics alone won't preserve Dylan. Soon enough, it will be necessary to define Bette Davis, now probably almost as obscure as Kay Francis. And other basic definitions will be called for: what are electric violins, for instance, where's Montagu Street, what exactly is "a topless place," who were "Ginsberg, Corso and Kerouac" (not to mention "Louie and Jimmy and Buddy"), and what about "the land of Oz"? This is not pedantry. It's preservation. Dylan's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday might not be a genuine climacteric. But perhaps we should use it as a bourne at the roadside, a marker to urge selfless planning for future listeners to the music, future readers of the lyrics, future scholars — future Dylanistas.

RF

## POEMS

### For Dylan at 80

Jacqueline Osherow, University of Utah

One chord of a harmonica can take  
me back, or a name — *Johanna, Mr. Jones* —  
to that Eden of stretched-out afternoons  
on the living room carpet, an open math book  
neglected at my elbow, index cards  
untouched beside it in a fallow stack.  
I'm halfway in a trance, half trying to crack  
each cipher in the snarled onrush of words  
surging through the stereo's dark mesh.  
*Something is happening and you don't know  
what it is . . .* I'm fourteen. Of course that's true  
but I get an inkling — as limits vanish —  
of word as lightning flash, wick, whiplash, arrow  
and soon-to-be accomplice. Dylan, thank you.

## ARTICLES

### Bob Dylan and Wallace Stevens in Conversation

Jim Salvucci, Independent Scholar

**Abstract:** Bob Dylan's "Key West (Philosopher Pirate)" and Wallace Stevens' "Of Mere Being," both composed in their authors' septuagenarian years, engage in an intertextual conversation about the end of life. That both are evidently set in Florida as they contemplate the distant horizon adds to the intimacy of their conversation and invokes the range of Stevens' Florida poems, which Dylan's song extends thematically. Dylan's speculation about the liminal moment of death centers on immortality and equanimity and thus is more reassuring than Stevens' conception, which is more abstract and terminal even as it holds out hope for a renewal. Both authors emphasize the profound ambiguity of liminal death as one approaches the unequivocal finale of life and its potential beyond.

**Keywords:** Dylan, Bob; Stevens, Wallace; "Key West (Philosopher Pirate); *Rough and Rowdy Ways*; "The Idea of Order at Key West"; "Of Mere Being"; death; dying; afterlife; immortality; legacy; horizon; Key West; Florida; Florida poems; flowers; intertext

*Not all great poets—like Wallace Stevens—are great singers, but a great singer—like Billie Holiday—is always a great poet.*

*Bob Dylan (qtd. in Marcus par. 48)*

A student of literature as well as Americana, Bob Dylan has long known of the poetry of Wallace Stevens, as the epigraph above establishes. The quotation appears in critic Greil Marcus' famous *Rolling Stone* review of Dylan's album *Self Portrait*, but Marcus supplies no other pedigree for the statement than that Dylan said it "a year ago," which would date it as 1969 (par. 48). While Dylan has always been a magpie of sorts, absorbing the words of others and fashioning them into

his own original works, I am not aware of Stevens' poetry appearing in Dylan's songs or other writings—with one possible exception. In 2001's "Po' Boy," Dylan sings punny lines that appear in the authorized lyrics on *Bob Dylan* as

Poor boy, sitting in the gloom  
Calls down to room service, says, 'Send up a room.'

In contrast, unofficial online transcriptions commonly reproduce that first line as, Po' boy, in the hotel they call the Palace of Gloom. (For instance, Dylan, "Po' Boy Lyrics")

That transcription notwithstanding, I find it impossible not to hear Dylan sing,

Po' boy, in the hotel they call the 'Palaz of Hoon.'

In my hearing, the line is an aural allusion to the Stevens poem "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," in which a solipsistic Sol sets at the end of the day, much like the ever-sinking Po' Boy who never seems to catch a break. Whether Dylan sings "Palace of Gloom" or "Palaz of Hoon," one thing we can be sure he does not sing, thankfully, is "sitting in the gloom." Although this allusion is a rare and speculative instance of Dylan using Stevens' language in his writing, we can find a confluence of ideas elsewhere. For instance, in "Not Dark Yet," Dylan writes, "Behind every beautiful thing there's been some kind of pain," an intertextual variation of Stevens' famous line in "Sunday Morning": "Death is the mother of beauty." More broadly, this song and the poem address similar themes regarding the inevitability of darkness. A more extensive intertextual conversation takes place between Dylan's song "Key West (Philosopher Pirate)" from his album *Rowdy and Rowdy Ways* (released 2020) and Stevens' poem "Of Mere Being" (first published posthumously in 1967). Of all Dylan's songbook, "Key West (Philosopher Pirate)" is his most Stevens-esque lyric, with its Florida locale, its catalog of flower imagery, its horizontal perspective, and its sense of movement within stability. The conversation between the two works revolves around their shared geographical setting and thematic focus even though they express a divergent perspective on life, death, and what lies in between.

The album *Rough and Rowdy Ways* features a thematic thread that contemplates the prospects and consequences of a long life and, importantly, the process of aging. This theme narrows to a progression in the final three numbers, which Richard Thomas deems “the closing epic triad of the album,” starting with “Crossing the Rubicon,” the album’s eighth song (55). “Crossing the Rubicon” explores the steady march of choice and consequence that constitutes life itself and amounts to little more than a series of metaphorical Rubicon crossings, the most significant being the very first—the traversing of the birth canal. Fate is set at that moment, and nothing can stand between that birth and its ineluctable conclusion—death—a sentiment Dylan articulates in “It’s Alright, Ma (I’m Only Bleeding)” as, “he not busy being born is busy dying.” Similarly, in “Huck’s Tune,” Dylan equates all of life as a form of death (“In this version of death called life”), making life itself the only Rubicon that matters in the end. The first song on *Rough and Rowdy Ways*, “I Contain Multitudes” is even more direct regarding the transience of life: “The flowers are dying like all things do.” This focus on life and death prevails as *Rough and Rowdy Ways* closes with “Murder Most Foul,” a saga of life’s conclusion. Its repercussions occur as an otherworldly perusal of the aftermath of death and a supernatural address from the afterlife or, perhaps, a plea to the afterlife. We witness the assassination of John F. Kennedy, some details that surround it (including hints of conspiracy theories), and finally its ethereal aftereffect: a litany of musical requests to a celestial “Mr. Wolfman Jack.”

Unfolding between these two narratives, “Key West (Philosopher Pirate)” envisions the passage from life toward the approaching end. As a song about the nebulous, liminal space before death, “Key West (Philosopher Pirate)” recalls the horizontal theme of Wallace Stevens’ poem “Of Mere Being,” composed shortly before his death in 1955 and possibly his last poem.<sup>1</sup> The composition of each

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Armstrong discusses at length the “delicate” question of this poem being Stevens’ last in “Stevens’ ‘Last Poem’ Again.” For my comparison, it is only necessary that the reader recognize the poem’s having been composed toward the end of Stevens’ life as his health was failing, according to Eleanor Cook (*A Reader’s Guide* 314), and the

work occurs late in the authors' lives (though precisely how late in Dylan's life has yet to be determined), with the song and the poem conducting a literary conversation regarding the end of life while also sharing similarities of setting, content, and even form. For instance, Dylan's song explicitly and Stevens' poem evidently are set in the tropics of southern Florida with its perpetual warmth and never-fading flora. "Winter here is an unknown thing," as Dylan sings.<sup>2</sup> For Stevens the region is, in Helen Vendler's phrase, "the realm of the sun" (41), a symbol of the life cycle and a topos most pertinent in the context of works envisioning the sunset of life in "the land of light," as Dylan would have it. Similarly, Eleanor Cook avers that "Florida released something in Stevens" (*Poetry*, 67). The ostensible Florida setting of the two works contributes a geographical definiteness to life's ultimate certainty even as both works emphasize ambiguity in the advance toward that certainty. However similar in this regard, though, the poem and the song draw different ideological conclusions regarding the conditions of our terminal state.

It is difficult to overemphasize the importance of Florida to Stevens and in his writing. Florida imagery pervades his poetry, with critics grouping a subset of his works as his "Florida poems." Some, like "Of Mere Being," do not expressly invoke Florida but still turn to the imagery of the tropics. For instance, as Karl Precoda notes in his perceptive article "The Noble Rider on the Terminal Beach," one section of "The Comedian as the Letter C" is labeled "Approaching Carolina," but it "is recognizably Floridian in its details" (8). Whatever the precise setting, "Comedian" is a poetic narrative of voyage, discovery, and landing that, as Cook observes in *A Reader's Guide*, "allegorizes his partial literary biography as the physical and mental journey of Crispin," the main character and Stevensian persona of the poem (46-7). In fact, we can see the Florida poems'

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thematic implications of that timing with regard to Dylan's own later work. On liminality generally in Dylan's songs, see Tenschert.

<sup>2</sup> In his poem "Indian River," Stevens similarly declares, "Yet there is no spring in Florida."

setting and imagery as a sort of crude plan for a continuous journey through the experience of life as in "Farewell to Florida," where Stevens' departure is akin to death or a permanent transformation like a snake that "has left its skin upon the floor." Also, as with "Comedian" and other Florida poems, "Farewell" is full of sea imagery and the trope of a movement or a voyage, launched with the hail, "Go on, high ship." In the early poem "Fabliau of Florida," another voyage is enacted without movement as a boat, "Barque of phosphor," lies still "on the palmy beach." Stevens commands it to sail toward the nighttime horizon, but the only actual motion is the surf with its perpetual "droning," which mimics the constancy (and tedium) of the life journey. He also evokes this language and imagery in "Two Figures in Dense Violet Night" where the "droning sibilants" of the "sea-sounds" resolves into the serene and intimate beauty of a nighttime "serenade." The sounds here and throughout the Florida poems are a recurring part of the life experience as they "come to dominate the music of Stevens' lines" (Precoda, 7). In "Indian River," the sound is not a drone but a "jingle" that rings steadily all over Florida, mixing the human-made ("rings in the nets") with the natural ("jingle of the water"). In "Primordia," a self-pastiche of a poem that embeds the entirety of "Indian River" as its ninth section, Stevens depicts the "voice of the wind" as a continental sound, linking the Florida peninsula with the rest of the American landmass, but it is sound and the movement of air, not solid dirt and rock, that bounds and delineates the continent.<sup>3</sup> Cook counts these Stevens poems, along with several other Florida poems, among the "fluency poems" that work "with the concept and trope of flowing and fluency" (*Poetry*, 39). Time and again throughout Stevens' Florida poems, we witness the association of sound and movement with the land, as though the land flows like water, as in "The Load of Sugar-Cane" or "Infanta Marina." We also *feel* the sense that even the land is not

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<sup>3</sup> Dylan, likely unconsciously, replicates this airy conceit in a couplet Allen Ginsberg deems the "national rhyme" of "Idiot Wind": "blowing like a circle around my skull / From the Grand Coulee Dam to the capitol."

solid but is a phantom on the horizon. Thus the land itself is the movement of a journey, the journey of mind and geography that Crispin and Stevens take, which are among the tropes that Cook identifies in “Comedian” (*Poetry*, 77-8). This same conceit plays a significant role in Stevens’ final Florida poem, “Of Mere Being,” and in Dylan’s only Florida song, “Key West (Philosopher Pirate),” both of which dwell on the liminal state of terminal transition, on fluency within stability.

I refer here to “Key West (Philosopher Pirate)” as Dylan’s sole Florida song, but a number of Dylan’s songs mention Florida or Florida locales. For instance, “Po’ Boy” evokes Florida as a potential escape from “them Georgia laws” (and is thus less a Florida song than a Georgia song, if that). Some Florida cities surface in passing in Dylan songs, such as Miami in “Caribbean Wind” or Tallahassee in “Got My Mind Made Up” (co-written with native Floridian Tom Petty), a city that also appears among the litany of place names that is “Wanted Man.” To be sure, Dylan’s association with Florida extends beyond individual songs and recordings. For instance, Dylan recorded *Time out of Mind* in Miami, but none of the album’s songs explicitly evokes that city or its state. More tantalizing is “Florida Key,” a handwritten Dylan lyric sheet from the Basement Tapes sessions that musician Taylor Goldsmith set to music and performed on 2014’s *Lost on the River: The New Basement Tapes*. While the lyric is situated in Florida and is a plaintive expression of love and longing, Dylan neither finished nor performed it, nor does it appear on the list of songs on his authorized website, *Bob Dylan*. As such, it is hard to qualify the abandoned lyric sheet “Florida Key” as a Dylan song with the same definitiveness that, say, “Of Mere Being” is a Stevens poem. Unless and until Dylan composes another, “Key West (Philosopher Pirate)” remains the only Dylan song that approaches the spirit and depth of Floridianess present in Stevens’ Florida poems.

The major theme of Dylan’s “Key West (Pirate Philosopher)” is the mediation of the condition of life and the condition of death—the instant just before or of death itself—within the journey of life that is *Rough and Rowdy Ways*. The

outcome is not equivocal, but this liminal state is itself marked by vagueness. It is a moment within a transition, a suspension that offers the possibility of reflection. Much like the “horizon line,” which the song references twice, this state is not physically fixed as its position is always relative to the perceiver, like a boat at rest on the water, still and not still, an echo of the tropes of several Stevensian Florida poems. “Key West (Philosopher Pirate)” is, after all, a sea song, and Dylan knows the sea, having sailed the Caribbean extensively on his schooner, the *Water Pearl*, with his family for ten years “from Martinique to Barbados” (*Chronicles* 163), adventures that manifest in the horizontal perspective and the movement of the song.<sup>4</sup> As with the horizon, the liminal state the song evokes can never be visited as a destination nor fully experienced and yet is always perceivably there, certain and inescapable. Meanwhile, this condition, though ostensibly static, roils with tension and pressure, pulling and pushing—a boat adrift. Like Dylan’s sailboat, the land mass of Key West is only deceptively permanent, an impermanence reinforced by the fact that Dylan’s boat sank in a storm (*Chronicles* 163). Furthermore, Precoda offers the historical detail that even in Stevens’ day, much of the land of Key West had been claimed and reclaimed by ongoing dredging (9) and that the island was largely a mass of “shifting sands” (10), much like the horizon itself—there and not there—and in theoretical danger of disappearing altogether like the island resort in Dylan’s “Black Diamond Bay.” In “Farewell to Florida,” almost foreshadowing the fate of Dylan’s schooner, Stevens describes this very instability—“Key West sank downward under massive clouds”—exemplifying the fluidity amidst seeming solidity we see throughout the Florida poems and in Dylan’s Florida song.

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<sup>4</sup> Douglas Brinkley, in the introduction to his 2020 interview with Bob Dylan, envisions the lyrics more terrestrially as “an ethereal meditation on immortality set on a drive down Route 1 to the Florida Keys” (par. 5), perhaps with particular reference to the line, “Stay on the road – follow the highway sign” from the first chorus, the only lyrical indication that the song may approach the Keys via a land route.

The lyrics of Dylan's "Key West (Philosopher Pirate)" present a first-person narrative of a man who himself is at sea and is best understood as at once literally Dylan and not. After all, while many lines and the song itself resonate as Dylan's bona fide personal reminiscences and musings, so far as I am aware, no biographer has ever uncovered an instance when a preteen Bobby Zimmerman was made to marry a sex worker as the narrator of the song asserts:

Twelve years old and they put me in a suit  
Forced me to marry a prostitute  
There were gold fringes on her wedding dress  
That's my story but not where it ends  
She's still cute and we're still friends  
Down in the bottom - way down in Key West

This narrative is provocative and has generated much speculation. For instance, numerous online commentators have, offering scant evidence, construed this particular vignette as a sardonic reference to Robert Allen Zimmerman's bar mitzvah, but as David B. Green notes in *Haaretz*, that ceremony took place on 22 May 1954 (par. 1), merely two days before the future Bob Dylan turned thirteen, the normal age for a Jewish boy's bar mitzvah. While he was still twelve at the time of the ceremony, the two-day age differential remains more technical than consequential, and it seems unlikely that Dylan would further obscure what would only rate as an opaque reference to his own bar mitzvah with such artifice. More pertinently, in the very next verse, Dylan references "Pretty Little Miss," a 2011 Patty Loveless song that features a young girl who is looking forward to marrying at age twelve but is jilted by her would-be groom. Thematically and structurally, Loveless' song is quite different from Dylan's, but they share the topical kinship of preteen marriage. Alternatively, the reference could be to an identically titled traditional bluegrass song, also with a theme of impending marriage, although the ages of the bride and groom in that song are never established and are evidently considerably older than twelve.

As with the sequence on young marriage and many of the song's lyrics, the opening lines of Dylan's "Key West (Philosopher Pirate)" are disconcerting. Why start with the assassination of President William McKinley in 1901 at all, and how could the narrator have "[h]eard it on the wireless radio," which was still in its developmental infancy at the time McKinley's death? Could Dylan be guilty of a careless anachronism? Many others have noted that the first line of Dylan's song ("McKinley hollered - McKinley squalled") quotes the opening line of "White House Blues" by Charlie Poole and the North Carolina Ramblers, first recorded in 1926 (for instance, Thomas 63). Poole's song cleverly tells the story not of McKinley's life and assassination but of his final days lingering with the fatal consequences of two bullet wounds. Thus, when Dylan's narrator states, "I heard all about it - he was going down slow / Heard it on the wireless radio," he is not referring to the breaking news of McKinley's murder but to hearing the song "White House Blues" itself playing on the radio. While listening to the radio in his youth back in Hibbing, Minnesota, Dylan would most likely have heard the 1959 version of "White House Blues," by the New Lost City Ramblers, which has a different opening line and "updates" the lyrics to the Hoover-Roosevelt transition period.

Another curious reference is the use of the word "pirate," which occurs most prominently in the title as well as in the phrase "pirate radio station." The affiliation of pirates and Key West is both historical and contemporary. A simple internet search will reveal much pirate activity in and around Key West dating back to the sixteenth century. One may also uncover an extensive list of present-day pirate-themed businesses and venues along with indications of the island's more recent use as a smuggler's base. Additionally, in "A Pirate Looks at Forty," Jimmy Buffett, a songwriter long associated with Key West, portrays the melancholy reflections of a modern-day drug runner as he enters middle age—a theme in line with that of "Key West (Philosopher Pirate)." Dylan, an admirer of Buffett, performed "A Pirate Looks at Forty" with Joan Baez in 1982 (Greene par. 5), and Buffet arguably makes another appearance in Dylan's song as "Jimmy"

in a litany of individuals who were “born on the wrong side of the railroad track.” The title also calls to mind the Kurt Weill-Bertolt Brecht song “Pirate Jenny” from *The Threepenny Opera* (1928), which Dylan discusses at length in *Chronicles, Volume One*, describing its great influence over him when he was first learning to write songs (272-6). The Weill-Brecht song is from the point of view of Jenny, a former prostitute (ostensibly unmarried and decidedly not “still cute”) and housekeeper who fantasizes about wreaking revenge on all those who look down upon her. In Jenny’s reverie, a dark pirate ship launches an assault from the harbor to rescue her from misery and to exact vengeance as the invading pirates defer to her leadership to decide the fates of the survivors. In *Chronicles*, Dylan refers to the song’s “ghost chorus” (275) with “[b]ig medicine in the lyrics” (274), so in this way, her musings make her a sort of metaphysician pirate if not a philosopher pirate. Still, “Pirate Jenny” is an intense and disturbing song in both music and lyric. “Key West (Philosopher Pirate),” by contrast, though exhibiting its own lyrical potency, has the melodic movement of a lullaby cum sea shanty (see Hartman 8).

So how is Dylan’s titular pirate a “*Philosopher Pirate*?” Instead of attempting to further unspool the Gordian knot of allusions in the song, a focus on the thematic conversation between it and “Of Mere Being” by Wallace Stevens, a poet renowned for his philosophical rumination, may offer insights. After all, according to Thomas, intertextuality is “a hallmark of Dylan’s song composition since the 1990s” (42). Indeed, the conversation between these two works, along with several of Stevens’ Florida poems considers both the philosophical and metaphysical dimensions of mortality.

Dylan’s Key West is as much an aspirational horizon point as it is a physical island, a geographically fixed reality, even though we know that it is largely a mass of reclaimed sand. The Key West setting recalls numerous poems by Stevens, most obviously “The Idea of Order at Key West,” which, like “Of Mere Being” and so many other of Stevens’ poems, resists definitive interpretation as it flows through

meaning(s). Similarly, “Key West (Philosopher Pirate)” refuses to settle, its fragmented narrative consisting of a series of observations of experiences on the island of Key West, including the sights, locations, and people associated with the island, literally or figuratively, all of which connect with concepts the songwriter wishes to express. In effect, this narrative functions as a fictional or representational life review. Stevens’ “The Idea of Order at Key West” also educates memory (genuine, enhanced, or fabricated) as it revolves around the notion of trying to snatch settled order from fluidity much as Stevens’ reader attempts to snatch settled meaning from his poetry. Precoda observes Stevens’ inclination to associate the fixed with longitudinal movement in that “Stevens reads landscape like a book, stressing the temporality of the act of perception” (14). In “The Idea of Order,” on a beach at sunset, a siren-like singer draws the poet’s attention. For Cook, Hoon is a “forerunner of the singer,” which makes sense as both mark the end of day (*Poetry* 133). In “Idea of Order,” the singer’s voice mimics the sea in the listener’s mind, and he muses about meaning, meaninglessness, agency, and creation. In the closing stanzas, Stevens notes the human imperative to impose order on a chaotic world and conveys a sense of loss in this process.

While Key West and Florida are featured throughout Stevens’ works, there is a particular emphasis on the flora of the state with extensive references to Florida and Florida-adjacent terms, which Cook documents as “‘Floréal,’ ‘florid,’ ‘flora,’ ‘flor-abundant,’ and so on” (*Poetry* 71-2). Similarly, Dylan’s Florida song, “Key West (Philosopher Pirate),” itself features flowers and plants throughout, which are not typically prominent subjects in his other lyrics. In this floral context, two of Stevens’ Florida poems warrant closer scrutiny. The first is “Hibiscus on the Sleeping Shores,” a contemplation of ennui, a recurrent Stevensian topic. In the poem, the poet notes the languidness of a sultry day, presumably in Florida. At the end of the poem, the sight of a vivid hibiscus bloom shocks the poet from his torpor as its brilliance contrasts with the climatic indolence. The poem is as much about a mental awakening as a sensual awakening with a “monstered moth”

lingering over the garish flower “all the stupid afternoon.” In contrast, and characteristically, Dylan's song does not treat his hibiscus so analytically: “Hibiscus flowers, they grow everywhere here / If you wear one, put it behind your ear.” Still, like the hibiscus in Stevens' poem, the lines are sensual and provocative particularly since wearing a flower behind the ear is unhelpfully supposed to signal either that a female is available or that she is taken. The flower reference thus stands as an instance of Dylanesque ambiguity and dissonance that augments the song's presentation of a liminal state of being.

Another Stevens poem, “O, Florida, Venered Soil,” includes the lines, “In the porches of Key West, / Behind the bougainvilleas.” This poem, too, references the ennui of the tropical clime, which at night gives way to its own form of sensuality, a libidinous restiveness. In the last stanza, he calls out:

Donna, donna, dark,  
Stooping in indigo gown  
And cloudy constellations,  
Conceal yourself or disclose  
Fewest things to the lover ---

“Donna donna” here is as much a woman as it is the flowering belladonna, a poisonous plant employed medicinally as, among other things, an anesthetic, a sedative, or an aphrodisiac, which reinforces Stevens' titular use of “venered” in its every sense (Cook, *Poetry* 69). The diminutive and “stooping” indigo/purple flowers of the belladonna are native to Eurasia but grow widely in Florida as an invasive species. The closing line of the poem depicts the flower, referencing a variation of belladonna's alternate moniker, “nightshade”: “A pungent bloom against your shade.” Dylan's song references both flowering plants in separate lines: “Bougainvillea blooming in the summer, in the spring,” and a more indirect image of the belladonna: “The tiny blossoms of a toxic plant / They can make you

dizzy.”<sup>5</sup> These floral images subtly echo the ennui, sensuality, and eroticism of Stevens’ lines.

I am not suggesting that the coincidence of these floral images are Dylan’s intentional allusions to Stevens’ poetry. It is clear, though, that the poet and songwriter have, at the very least, compatible visions of Key West, and that these visions inform a literary conversation across generations and genres. As noted, Stevens has infused his poetry with flowers throughout his career, often in a Floridian context, while Dylan seeds “Key West (Philosopher Pirate)” with plants and flowers, sometimes cryptically. For instance, Dylan’s lines, “The fishtail ponds and the orchid trees / They can give you the bleedin’ heart disease,” allude to three Florida plants in a slightly disguised presentation: fishtail palms, orchids (a flowering plant, not a tree), and bleeding heart flowers, none of which feature prominently in Stevens’ poetry, just as none of the flora in “Key West (Philosopher Pirate)” has ever appeared in any previous Dylan lyric.

While itself devoid of flower imagery and introducing only a lone palm, Stevens’ “Of Mere Being” presents a stripped-down philosophical vision even more compatible with that of “Key West (Philosopher Pirate).” Like “Hibiscus on the Sleeping Shores,” it is not explicitly set in Key West or Florida or anywhere else in particular; although, with its phantasmagoric image of an exotic bird in a distant palm tree, the poem does evoke that setting. “Of Mere Being” educes the space between departure and arrival, or as B.J Leggett speculates, it “may be thought of as a poem about *after* leaving or *beyond* leaving” (139). The opening lines present a golden bird in a palm rising in the distance “in the bronze decor,” which evokes the sunset as one approaches the horizon, an image Dylan separately resurrects as a “Bird on the horizon, sittin’ on a fence” in his 1975 song

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<sup>5</sup> Some internet commentary identifies the tiny poisonous flowers as lilies of the valley without offering any textual evidence, but according to the National Gardening Association, the lily of the valley simply cannot grow in the warmer climate of southern Florida (“Lily of the Valley in Florida?”).

"You're a Big Girl Now."<sup>6</sup> Given that Stevens composed the poem late in life and likely while ailing, it stands to reason that mortality colors or at least tints the poem's theme. The poem opens with an image: "The palm at the end of the mind, / Beyond the last thought." Later, "The palm stands on the edge of space." Thus, the palm is an object that comes into view after the "last thought" but just before or at the end, a terminus on the horizon and a vision of an oasis with accompanying mirage. "Palm" in the first line bears an aural similarity to the word "poem," thus insinuating the *poem* "at the end of the mind," which anticipates Dylan's wordplay with "fishtail ponds" vs. fishtail palms. The language of the poem's final line echoes the alliteration and imagery of the last line of "Nomad Exquisite," a fellow Florida poem that ends "Forms, flames, and the flakes of flames." In "Of Mere Being's" final image, "The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down," eliciting a vision of the phoenix aflame and destined to rise from its own ashes but not rising yet. It is, thus, a poem that addresses the end of life. Jennifer Bates notes the weightiness of this image: "Instead of upward swords of flame, the colors in the fire-fangled feathers are drawn downward, as though even the flames of fire—whose nature, according to Aristotle, is to go up—could not escape the pull" (159-60). Tim Armstrong recognizes the poem as articulating a "sense not only of Stevens' work, but also of his life-cycle, and particularly the moment of death itself" (43).

But it also is a poem of renewal, transition, and even hope, and like "Key West (Philosopher Pirate)," it is a pause for reflection in the midst of that transition, which Cook perceives as a "transmutation" (*Poetry* 312). In this and in the image of the wind that "moves slowly in the branches," the trope of fluidity that pervades the other Florida poems operates in "Of Mere Being." The poem announces a belief in the cyclical nature of life but certainly not literal reincarnation or rebirth.

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<sup>6</sup> The image of the bird at such a far remove raises a practical matter. At the distance of the horizon or the "edge of space," a bird of any size would be difficult to see and even more difficult to hear, but the poet and the songwriter do both with surprising acuity.

As Cook puts it, “The poem is of mortality yet with a sense of immortality, though not personal immortality. It is a kind of will and testament of song” (*Poetry* 312). The poem gestures toward the perpetual regeneration of the poet through his poems that metaphorically live on after him—thus, “The [poem] at the end of the mind.” Brayton Polka conjectures but does not insist that in “Of Mere Being,” “the artificial bird is the poem, it sings the poem, it makes the poem” (54). Cook sees a complex pun linking the palm and the bird, and she also affiliates the palm’s leaves with the poem’s words (*Poetry* 312). Whether the palm is the poem or the bird is the poem is immaterial to my reading of the distant object representing the potential of Stevens’ artistic/intellectual legacy. As Bates puts it, “[o]nce risen, the palm, bird, or poem as a whole are in a sense absurd” (161). Leggett observes that “[t]he poem attempts to posit a conception of being that is sundered absolutely from the human mind and thus necessarily survives ‘the end of the mind’ in death” (141) although, like Stevens, he does not venture to suppose what that state of mind may be with any precision.

Dylan’s “Key West (Philosopher Pirate),” as a nonliteral life review, contains much more narrative than “Of Mere Being,” but it is more a chronicle of a state of being or states of being than a coherent, linear story. Dylan’s island of Key West is both distant and near, like “that pirate radio signal,” which communicates with the local listener from its exotic origin “out of Luxembourg and Budapest” and is at once present and not present, an ethereal sound that, distorted by atmospheric, can tease and evade the would-be listener. Similarly, Stevens’ golden bird sings a “foreign song,” audible but beyond the listener’s understanding, even as it manifests within the familiar setting of a palm tree in the breeze.

As we already saw, the song is more narrative than the poem and starts sharply *in medias res* with an impending death, the immediate aftermath of the attack on McKinley, which will echo as Kennedy’s assassination in “Murder Most Foul.” The last verse before the final chorus brings us back to the theme of death

as the singer reports that he “heard your last request.” The chorus then antithetically offers, for the second time in the song, the promise of eternal life in heaven:

Key West is the place to be  
If you're lookin' for immortality  
Key West is paradise divine

Given the association of Florida and environs with the legend of the Fountain of Youth, it is only appropriate that Key West would be the source of perpetual life, but Dylan's Key West offers immortality of a different sort, as a “paradise divine,” not an earthly eternity. Dylan makes a similar promise of an afterlife in his other great horizon song, “Beyond the Horizon”: “Beyond the horizon, behind the sun / At the end of the rainbow life has only begun.” The first and last choruses of “Key West (Philosopher Pirate)” conclude that “Key West is on the horizon line,” which, like Steven's palm, is forever on the “edge of space” and, in fact, definitionally demarcates the optical separation of the sea from space, which is visible to us on Earth as the sky. The horizon line, where we can locate Key West, is an illusion, the image of a seemingly set and accessible location that is neither set nor accessible at all since its position is entirely relative to the inherently mobile viewer. There can be no mappable geographical coordinates to define the horizon line. Dylan's Key West, like Stevens' “gold-feathered bird” that sings in the palm “without human meaning, / Without human feeling” is phantasmal, “the enchanted land”—visible on the edge of perception but intangible and alien, fluidly there and not there.

The musical performance of the song generates a similar tension. As Christopher Ricks has observed in *Dylan's Visions of Sin*, the most pronounced distinction between song and poetry is the performative aspect of the former, which can illuminate and subvert the lyrical text (14-5). In “Key West (Philosopher Pirate),” understated and lurking in the background, the instruments propel the song and hold it back at the same time, enacting the fluidity of the lyrics. At moments, a guitar strains, perhaps with the help of a tremolo bar, pushing the

music almost out of key before dragging it back again. (This effect is most notable immediately after the line, “I play the gumbo limbo spiritual.”) The result is beautifully subtle but unmistakable once you take note of it. The ever-present accordion, the number’s “signature sound” (Hartman 8), plays throughout in counterpoint, which further increases the pleasant tautness while providing “a delightful aquarelle tone” (Grafe and McKeown 223). Meanwhile each line of the melody rises and then falls, like a boat at sea riding swells—a movement of music and of feeling.<sup>7</sup> Since it is a long song, the total effect is lulling and ultimately mesmerizing as the movement of the music lingers just on the edge of consciousness, “the edge of space.” In this way, “Key West (Philosopher Pirate)” shares much with the mellifluous aural experience of Stevens’ Florida work.

Appropriately, while both of these works are about ending or at least visualizing the end, they are full of false endings—primarily performative, in the case of Dylan’s song, and primarily structural, in the case of Stevens’ poem. In “Key West (Philosopher Pirate),” Dylan sings the chorus four times in four different versions. The first three choruses are followed by a rest before the instruments pick up the next verse, thus creating a false ending to the song after each of these three choruses. Ironically, the final chorus is the only one not followed by a rest or false ending but is followed immediately by an instrumental fadeout, the true ending of the song. Similarly, Stevens’ “Of Mere Being,” while not primarily a performative work, induces a sense of ending over and over in the last two of its four stanzas by presenting six sentences splayed paratactically across a mere six lines. If not for the fact that one can see more words remaining on the page, some of these sentences could feel terminal, thus falsely giving the impression that each is an ending. When the poem is read aloud, which is the only mode of performance available to poetry as poetry, this effect is particularly pronounced, an illusion that is only enhanced if the reader exaggerates the pauses at the

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<sup>7</sup> “Music is feeling, then, not sound,” Stevens muses ironically in “Peter Quince at the Clavier.”

periods. Stevens' use of paratactic sentences in the final two stanzas stands in radical contrast to the first two stanzas, which consist of one continuous sentence, or, as it is, two independent clauses joined by a comma after the first stanza. The first two stanzas/independent clauses, thus, are linked as a single thought or image, an artificial continuation, which is the opposite of a false ending. The abundant false endings in both these works project a sense of incompleteness, which Bates also detects in Stevens' images (103), and evoke the thematic sense of conclusion followed by new or renewed beginning. For Dylan this new beginning is in "the land of light," which Thomas sees as offering "a brighter glimpse of the afterlife" than that of "Murder Most Foul" (60). For Stevens, the new beginning is something even more evocatively figurative and discomfiting (the phoenix in flames). Quoting a phrase from Stevens' "The Poems of Our Climate," Bates argues that "Of Mere Being" "is apocalyptic in that it uncovers and celebrates how imperfection, properly understood, is complete: the poem expresses Stevens' view that 'The imperfect is our paradise'" (163). In this way, Dylan's song and Stevens' poem are equally sanguine regarding the state of death.

In their philosophical conversation about the end, these two works, the song and the poem, present the authors' visions of the tentative and liminal instant at the end of life, the moment when the dying can perceive the end but not quite reach it. It is, on the one hand, a place of serenity where, as Dylan opines, "If you lost your mind you'll find it there." To reach the "horizon line," a physical impossibility, is to live eternally in equanimity. On the other hand, for Stevens, this liminal instant is a moment of immolation, annihilation, and triumphant revitalization, not literally, but as a representative new beginning, perhaps as a creature of renown without consciousness. Although reaching "the edge of space" is a logical impossibility since pure space contains all matter and has no edges, to do so figuratively is to live on in seemingly violent cycles of memory and repute—as a phoenix of eternal renown. For both authors, the moment portrayed

is a mediation of striving and holding back, and their depictions of that state are neither comforting nor dismaying. They are, like the horizon itself, the *mere end*, just there in the inchoate distance, reliably and forever. As “Of Mere Being” is Stevens’ *final* Florida poem, “Key West (Philosopher Pirate)” is Dylan’s *only* Florida song and, in terms of subject, imagery, form, and spirit, extends the scope and propels the thematic reach of Stevens’ Florida poems into the genre of song and into the twenty-first century.

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## The Hal Lindsey Effect: Bob Dylan's Christian Eschatology

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**Abstract:** In the thought of popular Christian personality Hal Lindsey, Bob Dylan found a theological construct that would inform his own Christian experience in three significant ways. First, Lindsey's popular eschatological teaching informed Dylan's own understanding of the end times, which is evident in his lyrics and in his more prosaic pronouncements. Second, Lindsey provided Dylan with a heuristic for bringing together the Jewish and Christian strands of his religious pilgrimage. Third, Lindsey's views on Israel's place in God's end-times plan and his stance that human political influences played no significant role in establishing the kingdom of God informed Dylan's political philosophy of "Christian anarchism."

**Keywords:** Bob Dylan, Hal Lindsey, eschatology, Christianity

### Introduction

Bob Dylan's so-called "Christian/gospel period" has received renewed, and in many cases appreciative, attention in recent years. In 2017 a pair of key works documented Dylan's output during the period 1979–1981, the years in which Dylan's albums *Slow Train Coming*, *Saved*, and *Shot of Love* appeared. The thirteenth entry in the Bootleg Series, titled *Trouble No More*, a nine-disc set that included studio and live recordings from this period along with Jennifer Lebeau's documentary film of the same title, was released, along with Clinton Heylin's book, *Trouble in Mind*, which provided a narrative of the period. With reports of Dylan's conversion to Christianity in 1978, the release of the gospel-themed *Slow Train Coming* in 1979, and a gospel-only tour launched later that year, Dylan's fan base reeled in shock and, not infrequently, anger. The passage of nearly four decades has allowed for a more reasoned appraisal of the material from this

period, with scores of studies emerging in academic circles analyzing both the music and its creator.<sup>1</sup>

My initial interest was to determine theological influences on Bob Dylan's eschatology, as seen in such songs as "When He Returns" and "Are You Ready?" As it turned out, a strong candidate quickly emerged: Hal Lindsey, a well-known minister whose famous book *The Late Great Planet Earth* had captured the imaginations of millions of readers in the 1970s with its sensationalistic interpretation of biblical teachings on the end times. This finding was not only obvious; it was highly disappointing. As I continued my research, I began to see that the influence of Lindsey's book on Bob Dylan was more intricate. Anticipating the results of this study, Hal Lindsey's eschatology functions in a multi-faceted way in Dylan's thought. At a basic level, Lindsey provides the newly converted Dylan with a specifically Christian source of imagery to direct Dylan's long-established appropriation of prophetic biblical language in his new gospel way. At another level, Lindsey's emphasis on the role of Jews and the current state of Israel in God's end time program provided Dylan with a heuristic that allowed him to integrate the Judaism of his background with his new Christian faith. At yet another level, Lindsey's thought provided Dylan a way to express what has been called his political "anarchism" in a way consistent with his new Christian faith.<sup>2</sup> First, though, we need to look at what Hal Lindsey brings to the table and how he and Bob Dylan found themselves there together.

### **The Dylan-Lindsey Connection**

Hal Lindsey, born November 23, 1929, is a well-known twentieth- (and twenty-first-) century figure on the American religious landscape, having first and most prominently made his mark with the publication of his best-selling book *The*

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., Rogovoy, "Was Bob Dylan at His Best When He Was a Christian?"

<sup>2</sup> Taylor and Isrealson, *The Political World of Bob Dylan*.

*Late Great Planet Earth* in 1970.<sup>3</sup> Lindsey was educated at Dallas Theological Seminary, the educational bastion of a theological position known as dispensationalism. In its basic form, dispensationalism holds that God's dealings with human beings follow in a series of historical epochs, or dispensations, each administered by a certain kind of covenantal relationship. The foundations of dispensationalism involve creative exegesis of such biblical texts as Revelation, Daniel, and Ezekiel, along with apocalyptic passages from the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 24:1–44; Mark 13:1–26; Luke 21:5–28) and passages from certain of Paul's letters (e.g., Romans 9–11, 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11; 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12). Lindsey made his own distinctive contribution to dispensationalism by providing a further degree of exegesis that included reading certain twentieth-century events into the dispensational framework. The resulting presentation was *The Late Great Planet Earth*, a highly sensational prophetic oracle that portrayed recent history as the harbinger of the impending end of the age.

For Lindsey, the establishment of the nation of Israel in 1948 marked a key event in God's prophetic program. It marked the point at which God would begin to fulfill ancient promises made to the Jewish people but that had been put on hold with the coming of Jesus as the Messiah and the inauguration of the "church age" in which Gentiles would be granted access to God's kingdom. It also marked the beginning of the last days. It would only be a short time before the church would be "raptured" from earth to heaven by Jesus, the world would enter into a seven-year period of tribulation, and Jesus would return and establish his 1,000-year-long, or millennial, reign on earth with his redeemed people. Precursors to this event were certain portents, such as famines, earthquakes, and wars. But most fantastically, recent historical events were sure signs that these things were about to come to pass. Lindsey read certain political movements and

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<sup>3</sup> The book was also published in 1973 by Bantam Books and again in 1977 by Zondervan. The book was also made into a motion picture narrated by Orson Welles and released in 1979.

crises as fulfillments of biblical prophecies. The emergence of Arab nations surrounding the state of Israel and their growing economic and military power were a constant threat to God's chosen people. Moreover, Cold War tensions were a sign that the Soviet Union would become the great Gog and Magog that would attack Israel from the North (cf. Ezekiel 38–39) in the last days. China would be the great force from the East that would join the battle (cf. Revelation 9:16), and the European Economic Community, which would be a revived Roman Empire headed by the Anti-Christ (cf. Daniel 2:42), would attack from the west. The climactic battle would occur in the battle of Armageddon (cf. Revelation 16:13–16), where the Messiah would decisively crush these forces. Significantly, Lindsey did not see the United States prefigured in biblical prophecy, which may indicate, in his thinking, that the United States had ceased to be a major world player by the time of these events. Nevertheless Lindsey does speak to the degrading moral condition of the United States throughout the book, seeing this as portending the coming of the last days.

The point of intersection between Lindsey and Bob Dylan takes place within the context of the emerging Vineyard Fellowship, a loosely connected group of worshiping communities in Southern California founded by Kenn Gulliksen. Gulliksen was on the staff of Calvary Chapel under the pastoral leadership of Chuck Smith when he established a church in Los Angeles in 1974. Dubbed the “pastor of love” by Smith,<sup>4</sup> Gulliksen found a following among the so-called Jesus People Movement of the 1960s and attracted several actors and musicians with Vineyard’s laid back atmosphere and contemporary worship style.<sup>5</sup> The Vineyard at this point did not have a formal theological statement. Hal Lindsey identified with the Vineyard early on and had become close friends with Gulliksen,<sup>6</sup> and so

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<sup>4</sup> Bustraan, *The Jesus People Movement*, 63.

<sup>5</sup> Higgins, “Kenn Gulliksen, John Wimber, and the Founding of the Vineyard Movement,” 210–14.

<sup>6</sup> Maxa, “Bob Dylan Knocks on Heaven's Door.”

Lindsey's eschatological teaching unofficially became the position of the Vineyard.

Bob Dylan's conversion to Christianity took place within the context of the Vineyard Fellowship. In early 1979, his girlfriend at the time, Mary Alice Artes, had been attending a Vineyard church and facilitated a meeting between Dylan and some pastors on staff, Larry Myers and Paul Emond.<sup>7</sup> After his conversion, Dylan surprisingly attended the Vineyard's School of Discipleship,<sup>8</sup> where some of the themes of Lindsey's eschatological vision were taught.<sup>9</sup> Dylan also read *The Late Great Planet Earth*, and was quite taken with it.<sup>10</sup>

Dylan's familiarity with this book is confirmed in an account by music writer James Riordan on the occasion of Dylan's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday.<sup>11</sup> Riordan had just relocated to the Los Angeles area in 1978 and somewhat out of the blue decided to visit a Vineyard Fellowship church service. Sitting near the back, he heard someone singing along to "Amazing Grace" in a rather distinctive voice. He turned and saw it was Dylan. Deciding not to encroach on Dylan's space in church, Riordan after the service went to the bookstore onsite and perused the latest edition of Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*. From behind him, Dylan made the comment, "Hey, that's a pretty good book, ain't it?" Part of Riordan's motivation for moving to Los Angeles was to make the book into a film (though this was already underway). Deciding not to share this with Dylan, he simply agreed with Dylan's assessment of the book and the two parted ways. As Riordan

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<sup>7</sup> Heylin, *Trouble in Mind*, 23–25; Marshall, *Bob Dylan: A Spiritual Life*, 34–35.

<sup>8</sup> Dylan recalls his compulsion to attend the School of Discipleship in Reseda, California, in an interview with Robert Hilburn in the *Los Angeles Times*, 23 November 1980, in Cott, *Bob Dylan: The Essential Interviews*, 298.

<sup>9</sup> Kathryn Lofton asserts that Lindsey actually taught eschatology in the Vineyard School of Discipleship, though other sources surveying this period of Dylan's life do not mention this. See her essay, "I Don't Want to Fake You out: Bob Dylan and the Search for Belief in History," 156. Heylin quotes Larry Myers as saying that Dylan studied under Kenn Gulliksen and "at least four other competent pastor-teachers, including myself," so it is possible that Lindsey was among that number (*Trouble in Mind*, 28).

<sup>10</sup> Heylin, *Trouble in Mind*, 30–38.

<sup>11</sup> Riordan, "It Ain't Easy Being Bob."

made his way to his car in the parking lot, Dylan pulled up to him, rolled down his window, and said, “Hey, see you next week, huh?” This sparked a brief conversation where Riordan shared with Dylan his intention to make Lindsey’s book into a film. According to Riordan, Dylan gave him his phone number and asked Riordan to call him should he be able to schedule a meeting with Lindsey’s people. Riordan was never able to connect with Dylan after that, and the plan for the movie never came to fruition. Yet the anecdote, if true, illustrates Dylan’s connection with Lindsey’s book.

In 2017, Seth Rogovoy wrote a piece in the Jewish online magazine, *Forward*, in which he shared his change of opinion on the quality of Dylan’s work during his gospel period. Asking the question, was Bob Dylan at his best when he was a Christian?, Rogovoy noted the importance of Hal Lindsey’s book in Dylan’s new Christian walk, saying, “Dylan was very much parroting Lindsey’s line” in his songs and stage raps.<sup>12</sup> Someone brought this piece to Lindsey’s attention, so on his website, Lindsey rejoiced that after four decades, someone still “blames” Lindsey for his role in Dylan’s Christian conversion.<sup>13</sup> Just how much Lindsey is to “blame” for Dylan’s conversion is debatable, but there is no question that, at least in matters of helping Dylan express his newfound Christianity and his own eschatological views, Lindsey’s influence is significant.

### **Lindsey and Dylan: The Verbal Connection**

To be sure, Bob Dylan did not need Hal Lindsey to introduce him to the prophetic biblical texts that informed some of Dylan’s gospel-era songs. Dylan’s indebtedness to the Bible for his imagery has been well-established.<sup>14</sup> As he has stated in an interview with John Pareles of *The New York Times* in 1997,<sup>15</sup> Dylan’s

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<sup>12</sup> Rogovoy, “Was Bob Dylan at His Best When He Was a Christian?”

<sup>13</sup> Lindsey, “Was Bob Dylan at His Best When He Was a Christian?”

<sup>14</sup> E.g., Gilmour, *Tangled up in the Bible*.

<sup>15</sup> Bob Dylan, interview with John Pareles, *The New York Times*, 28 September 1997, in Cott, *Bob Dylan: The Essential Interviews*, 419.

lexicon and prayer book for his beliefs are the songs of his early musical nurture, extending as far back as the 1930s. Though Jewish, Dylan found inspiration in the gospel songs of such acts as the Carter Family. Many of these songs, interestingly, emerged from a strand of twentieth-century fundamentalist Christianity that was quite at home within classical dispensationalism. Moreover, his early upbringing as a bar mitzvahed Jewish boy certainly exposed him to some of the biblical sources of this faith, including prophetic texts, and Dylan's visits to Israel in the earlier part of the 1970s seem to indicate an interest in his Jewish background. Moreover, Dylan did not need Lindsey to introduce him to apocalyptic imagery, as songs such as "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" clearly indicate. Finally, he did not need Lindsey to provide him with the worldview of biblical prophetic justice. Theologian Francis J. Beckwith has argued, "[I]f one carefully inspects Dylan's Christian albums, one will find an individual who found in the Christian faith an account of the deep moral and social principles that had been lurking behind his pre-Christian work for quite some time."<sup>16</sup> So if Dylan was conversant with biblical imagery that is related to the kinds of pronouncements Lindsey made, what does Lindsey's particular expression have to do with Dylan?

If the songs in some way function as Dylan's lexicon, then it may be fair to say that Lindsey provided the new Christian Bob Dylan with a syntax for expressing this vocabulary. This may be seen in his lyrics, his on-stage raps during his gospel tour of 1979, and in interviews. To each of these we now turn.

### **The Lyrics**

Songs from the albums *Slow Train Coming* and *Saved* show clear influence of the brand of eschatology touted by Lindsey. In the song "Gonna Change My Way of Thinking," Dylan draws from New Testament references to the return of

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<sup>16</sup> Beckwith, "Busy Being Born Again," 146. Beckwith identifies four areas in which Dylan's early philosophy is developed in his Christian work: Dylan's assimilation of the Christian narrative; human beings live in a moral universe; the moral law is objectively true; and it is important that human beings practice virtue.

Jesus in the following verse:

Jesus said, "Be ready  
For you know not the hour in which I come"  
Jesus said, "Be ready  
For you know not the hour in which I come"  
He said, "He who is not for Me is against Me"  
Just so you know where He's coming from<sup>17</sup>

The suddenness and inability to know of the time of Jesus' return is standard biblical teaching. Dylan's emphasis in the final line, laying out the battle lines of allegiance, though biblical, is put here in the context of Jesus' return. Such an emphasis is at home in Lindsey's dispensational framework, where eternal destiny is determined based on one's fealty to Jesus in the final hour.

In many segments of Christianity, the return of Jesus is not viewed in such dread terms. Rather, it is an event that constitutes the very hope of Christians wherein God in Jesus Christ "sets the world to rights," bringing an end to every evil and establishing a kingdom of joy and righteousness.<sup>18</sup> Yet Dylan, like Lindsey, seems preoccupied with the wrathful side of this event. This is seen clearly in "Are You Ready?"

Are you ready for the judgment?  
Are you ready for that terrible swift sword?  
Are you ready for Armageddon?  
Are you ready for the day of the Lord?<sup>19</sup>

In an alternative couplet from the song "When You Gonna Wake Up" Dylan warns of the sword of judgment that waits to be wielded against those who work unrighteousness in the world when Jesus comes back for his people:

there's a sword being flashed for all those in sorrow & despair

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<sup>17</sup> Dylan, "Gonna Change My Way of Thinking."

<sup>18</sup> Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 109–13.

<sup>19</sup> Dylan, "Are You Ready?"

you won't find it so hard to imagine when you meet it in the middle  
of the air<sup>20</sup>

This delight in the judgment and wrath of God at Jesus' return finds further  
expression in "When He Returns."<sup>21</sup>

The iron hand it ain't no match for the iron rod  
The strongest wall will crumble and fall to a mighty God

...

Don't you cry and don't you die and don't you burn  
For like a thief in the night, He'll replace wrong with right  
When He returns (verse 1)

...

He unleashed His power at an unknown hour that no one knew  
(verse 2)

...

Surrender your crown on this blood-stained ground, take off your  
mask

...

Of every earthly plan that be known to man, He is unconcerned  
He's got plans of His own to set up His throne  
When He returns (verse 3)

In some discarded lyrics to this song, Dylan connects the biblical teaching to  
specific historical circumstances of the time. Verse 1 finds the following alternative  
lyrics:

The communists might be frightenin' you cause they only believe in  
man

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<sup>20</sup> "When You Gonna Wake Up," typescript lyrics from *Slow Train Coming*, circa 1979, The Bob Dylan Archive, box 80, folder 02. Courtesy of THE BOB DYLAN ARCHIVE® Collections, Tulsa, OK. Spelling and punctuation retained from the original in all references to archival materials.

<sup>21</sup> Dylan, "When He Returns."

& the capitalists might be exploitin' you cause that's part of their  
plan<sup>22</sup>

Verse 3 has alternative lines toward the end of the verse:

He's got His own blueprint for a new government

It's been prophesized from the beginning of time that He'll return.<sup>23</sup>

Communists and capitalists alike, with the specific evils of each, will meet a woeful end when Jesus returns to establish his kingdom. The return of Jesus brings with it a cataclysmic end to the current order of things.

In "Trouble in Mind," an outtake from the *Slow Train Coming* sessions, Dylan provides alternative lyrics that indicate he sees even the neutron bomb as prophesied from the beginning:

Neutron bombs—

It's all been predicted

It's all been foretold<sup>24</sup>

A key element of Lindsey's interpretation of end time events is that the final conflagration leading to the world's destruction is nuclear weapons. Dylan seems to agree.

This focus on contemporary events as evidence of an eschatological timetable is further attested in "Slow Train." Here, in the following lyrics, the rise to economic and political power of Arab nations controlling America's destiny is evidence that the "slow train comin' up around the bend" draws ever closer:

All that foreign oil controlling American soil

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<sup>22</sup> In some alternate lyrics from "The Groom's Still Waiting at the Altar," Dylan expresses a similar sentiment regarding the place of communists and capitalists in the end time drama: "the communists were falling—the capitalists were crawling/the hand of God is moving—Jesus is calling" ("The Groom's Still Waiting at the Altar," typescript lyrics from *Shot of Love*, circa 1981, The Bob Dylan Archive, box 81, folder 01. Courtesy of THE BOB DYLAN ARCHIVE® Collections, Tulsa, OK).

<sup>23</sup> "When He Returns," typescript and manuscript lyrics from *Slow Train Coming*, circa 1979, box 80, folder 01. Courtesy of THE BOB DYLAN ARCHIVE® Collections, Tulsa, OK.

<sup>24</sup> "Trouble in Mind," typescript and manuscript lyrics from *Slow Train Coming*, circa 1979, box 79, folder 06. Courtesy of THE BOB DYLAN ARCHIVE® Collections, Tulsa, OK.

Look around you, it's just bound to make you embarrassed  
Sheiks walkin' around like kings  
Wearing fancy jewels and nose rings  
Deciding America's future from Amsterdam and to Paris  
And there's a slow, slow train comin' up around the bend<sup>25</sup>

Such a situation certainly has "Jefferson turnin' over in his grave" in the home of the brave. In Lindsey's calculus, the precise role that America plays in the final stages of the eschatological drama is unclear, yet America's worsening predicament in the world is a harbinger that the time of final reckoning draws nigh.

Even an ostensible love song, "Precious Angel," contains allusions to Lindsey's particular eschatology. Dylan laments his friends' deception as the end time approaches and the dreadful consequences of their delusion:

My so-called friends have fallen under a spell  
They look me squarely in the eye and they say, "All is well"  
Can they imagine the darkness that will fall from on high  
When men will beg God to kill them and they won't be able to die?<sup>26</sup>

In an alternative verse, Dylan provides more Lindsey-esque detail of the final battle between good and evil, again, in what is framed as more of a love song.

ARMIES OF MEN MARCHING INTO PLACE  
THE KINGS OF THE NORTH & THE KINGS OF THE SOUTH SHOW THEIR  
FACE  
& THE NIGHTWIND RESTLESS AS CAN BE  
SOME RULED BY LOVE, SOME RULED BY THE DEVIL IN THE SEA  
THE BATTLE BETWEEN RIGHT & WRONG  
I KNOW IT WON'T BE LONG<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Dylan, "Slow Train."

<sup>26</sup> Dylan, "Precious Angel."

<sup>27</sup> "Precious Angel," typescript and manuscript lyrics from *Slow Train Coming*, circa 1979, box 79, folder 08. Courtesy of THE BOB DYLAN ARCHIVE® Collections, Tulsa, OK.

It is interesting that Dylan, even in the time when his faith convictions would come under scrutiny, continued to draw on this type of imagery in his lyrics. On the album *Infidels* (1983), "Neighborhood Bully" is a song that expresses Lindsey's assessment of the current state of Israel in God's eschatological program. The final descriptors of this "bully," which clearly represents modern-day Israel, show him "standing on the hill / Running out the clock, time standing still,"<sup>28</sup> perhaps alluding to the role of this bully as the time of the end approaches. Indeed, in verse 8, where the established lyrics say, "Every empire that's enslaved him is gone / Egypt and Rome, even the great Babylon," an alternate lyric replaces the list of empires with the line, "& by one miracle or another he keeps going on," accompanied by a marginal note that seems to connect this line to the date 1948, the year in which the modern state of Israel was established.<sup>29</sup> The year 1948, as we noted earlier, is a crucial sign post in Lindsey's eschatological framework.

In the years to follow, there would be occasional instances where Dylan's lyrics reflect the imagery of Lindsey's dispensational eschatology. On 1990's *Under the Red Sky*, the song "God Knows" seems to reflect the imagery of the judgment of the earth in terms drawn from 2 Peter 3:6–7, an important passage in Lindsey's scheme: "God knows there's gonna be no more water / But fire next time."<sup>30</sup> In a similar vein, "Things Have Changed," from the soundtrack of the movie *Wonder Boys*, contains the line, "If the Bible is right, the world will explode."<sup>31</sup> Again, this line is not at all a clear reading of the Bible; it is a clear reading of Lindsey's eschatology.

In this brief survey of lyrics, there is at least circumstantial evidence that Dylan's thought is influenced by Lindsey's eschatology. One might argue that what we see here is nothing more than Dylan's penchant for drawing imagery

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<sup>28</sup> Dylan, "Neighborhood Bully."

<sup>29</sup> "Neighborhood Bully," manuscript and typescript lyrics from *Infidels*, circa 1983, box 35, folder 06. Courtesy of THE BOB DYLAN ARCHIVE® Collections, Tulsa, OK.

<sup>30</sup> Dylan, "God Knows."

<sup>31</sup> Dylan, "Things Have Changed."

from the Bible. What we need to realize is that for centuries, Christians interpreted these biblical images in ways quite different from how Lindsey would come to understand them, and indeed, most Christians on earth today would take issue with Lindsey's interpretations. What we see here is a particular slant on these passages that coheres closely with Lindsey's. In other words, the biblical data themselves do not necessitate this interpretation. They only take on this interpretation when seen through a particular filter. Given Dylan's early Christian context, it is reasonable to assume Lindsey provides this filter.

### **The Stage Raps**

Of course, the lyrics provide the most substantial source for comparison with Hal Lindsey's teaching. Another source, however, is the words Dylan frequently spoke during his concerts, especially during the gospel-only shows in November and December 1979. From November 1–16, Dylan performed fourteen shows in the Fox Warfield Theatre in San Francisco, California. The reaction to these shows, to be charitable, was mixed. On the one hand, the sheer energy of the music captivated many in attendance; on the other, many bristled at the gospel-only setlist, with some calling for Dylan to play his old material and others leaving the theater.

Regardless of its reception, the 1979 tour is useful for how Dylan addressed eschatological matters from the stage. As Dylan began his tour in San Francisco, his pronouncements amounted to little more than an introduction to his song, "Solid Rock." Typical is the rap from November 6, when he offered about a sentence of eschatological warning: "You know we're living in the last days of the end of times. In the last days of the end of times, you're going to need something strong to hang on to, so this song is called 'Hanging On To A Solid Rock Made Before The Foundation Of The World.' You're gonna need something that

strong."<sup>32</sup> Throughout the Warfield Theatre shows, this song's introduction would stay mostly consistent in wording and duration.

As the venue shifted to the Civic Auditorium in Santa Monica, California, for four shows November 18–21, the raps became more frequent and more developed. On the opening night of this leg of the tour, Dylan introduced the song "Slow Train" in the following way:

I suppose you've been reading the newspapers and watching the TV? And you see how much trouble this world is in. Madmen running loose everywhere. Anyway we, we're not worried about that though — it doesn't bother us — because we know this world is going to be destroyed. Christ will set up his kingdom for a thousand years in Jerusalem where the lion will lie down with the lamb — we know this is true. No doubt about it. So, it's a slow train coming. It's been coming for a long time, but it's picking up speed.<sup>33</sup>

Here Dylan draws attention to the destruction of the present world and the millennial kingdom of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem, both key themes in Lindsey's framework. Here we also see appeal to current events as portents of the approaching end of times.

When the tour stopped in Tempe, Arizona, for two shows at the Gammage Center November 25–26, Dylan began with a rap that added such typical Lindsey features as the battle of Armageddon, the involvement of Russia in the Middle East, and even the very near imminence of the end:

All right. Now don't be dismayed by what you read in the newspapers about what's happening to the world. Because, now, the world as we know it now is being destroyed. I'm sorry to say it, but it's . . . it's the truth. In the matter of a short time—I don't know, maybe in three years, maybe five years, could be ten years, I don't know—there's gonna be a war. It's gonna

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<sup>32</sup> Björner, *Still on the Road*. Olaf Björner's website contains the texts of Dylan's stage rants during the 1979 Gospel Tour. Clinton Heylin also provides several sample rants in *Trouble in Mind*, Appendix II.

<sup>33</sup> Björner, *Still on the Road*.

be called the war of Armageddon. It's gonna happen in the Middle East. Russia's gonna come down and attack first and you watch for that sign. Anyway, we're not worried about that. We know there's gonna be a new kingdom set up in Jerusalem for a thousand years. And that's where Jesus will set up his kingdom, as sure as you're standing there, it's gonna happen. So this is called, "Hanging On To A Solid Rock Made Before The Foundation Of The World."<sup>34</sup>

The importance of this evidence is that it is prosaic in presentation. Lyrical presentation, especially Dylan's, is always open to various interpretations due to its poetic nature. But these raps are more homiletical in nature and give insight into the sources of his pronouncements. The themes here strongly "parrot" Lindsey. We see Dylan getting bolder and more comfortable as he proclaims his message of the end of days, and his words could not be more clear for those with ears to hear.

## The Interviews

It is with a bit of trepidation that one looks to interviews to discover what Dylan thinks on any topic. Rightly or wrongly, he has a reputation for being, at the very least, elusive with interviewers. However, on the topic of eschatology, he does give indications that he is being straightforward with his responses. Of particular interest here will be an interview conducted by Kurt Loder in *Rolling Stone* magazine in the June 21, 1984, issue. This interview is important for two reasons. First, it very clearly shows affinity with the views of Hal Lindsey on eschatological matters, and second, it was conducted at a time when Dylan was publicly less expressive of his Christian beliefs. His commitment to Christianity had come under severe scrutiny. The interview shows that, whatever his spiritual state, he remained steadfast in his understanding of how the world will come to its end.

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<sup>34</sup> Björner, *Still on the Road*.

When asked about his spiritual stance, Dylan replied first by affirming belief in a life beyond this one, then added, “I believe in the Book of Revelation. The leaders of this world are eventually going to play God, if they’re not *already* playing God, and eventually a man will come that everybody will think *is* God. He’ll do things, and they’ll say, ‘Well, only God can do those things. It must be him.’”<sup>35</sup> Dylan’s attribution rings more true of 2 Thessalonians 2:1–4 than it does the book of Revelation, but he captures the spirit of this antichrist figure so prominent in Lindsey’s thought. Following a line of questioning by Loder on the song “Neighborhood Bully,” where Loder presses Dylan on whether the song is an expression of Zionism or support for American military intervention on Israel’s behalf in the Middle East, Dylan denies such intentions for the song and diverts attention to the battle of Armageddon: “The battle of Armageddon is specifically spelled out: where it will be fought, and if you want to get technical, *when* it will be fought. And the battle of Armageddon definitely will be fought in the Middle East.”<sup>36</sup> Again, vintage Lindsey.

Dylan also reflects Lindsey’s sense of uncertainty regarding the place of the United States in God’s eschatological timetable. Commenting on how the world had become more global, with the United States losing its sense of identity, Dylan attributes this evolution to the spread of instantaneous global communication in fulfillment of the book of Revelation.<sup>37</sup> One frequent plank of Lindsey’s end time scheme is the idea that in the last days, knowledge and travel will increase exponentially, evidence of humanity’s arrogant overreach (cf. Daniel 12:4). The smaller, global world already present in the 1980s figures into America’s decline and acquiescence to the one-world government and economy under the leadership of the Antichrist, another key element of Lindsey’s scheme. Dylan seems to decry this move toward globalism and America’s place in the last days when he says,

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<sup>35</sup> Bob Dylan, interview with Kurt Loder, *Rolling Stone*, 21 June 1984, in Cott, *Bob Dylan: The Essential Interviews*, 306. Italics original.

<sup>36</sup> Dylan, interview with Kurt Loder, 308–9. Italics original.

<sup>37</sup> Dylan, interview with Kurt Loder, 310.

Somebody's gonna have to come along and figure out what's happening with the United States. Is this just an island that's going to be blown out of the ocean, or does it really figure into things? I really don't know. . . . Right now, it seems like in the States, and most other countries, too, there's a big push on to make a big *global* country—one *big* country—where you can get all the materials from one place and assemble them someplace else and sell 'em in another place, and the whole world is just all one, controlled by the same people, you know? And if it's not already there, that's the point it's tryin' to get to.<sup>38</sup>

Again, Dylan, in 1984, still “parrots” elements of Lindsey's eschatological scheme, at a time when his own spiritual status seems unclear to the public. Whether through his lyrics, stage raps, or interviews, Dylan's words frequently and over time betray an indebtedness to modes of expression at home with Lindsey's eschatological worldview.

### **Lindsey and Dylan: A Spiritual Heuristic?**

Is he or isn't he still a Christian? This question has fascinated observers of Dylan and popular Christian culture for decades now. With the release of the album *Infidels* in 1983, many questions emerged as to whether Dylan had forsaken his commitment to Jesus Christ and returned to Judaism. In 1985, Vineyard Fellowship pastor and Fuller Theological Seminary professor Don Williams wrote a monograph to argue that Dylan had not discarded his Christian faith,<sup>39</sup> and as late as 2017, Dylan's spiritual journey was the subject of an investigation by Scott M. Marshall in his book *Bob Dylan: A Spiritual Life*. In a provocative essay, Kathryn Lofton raises the prospect that in the study of history, it is very difficult, if at all possible, to know precisely what a person believes on any point because our subjects tend to be wilier and more equivocal in cataloguing their beliefs than

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<sup>38</sup> Dylan, interview with Kurt Loder, 311. Italics original.

<sup>39</sup> Williams, *Bob Dylan: The Man, the Music, the Message*.

our attempts to catalog their beliefs would suggest. Bob Dylan is the case study for her thesis.<sup>40</sup>

I will not here seek to address the question directly. Rather, I will work from the premise that Marshall's recent study provides the best overall take on what we may surmise about Dylan's spiritual life.

Marshall's study is a broad survey of Dylan's whole life, seeking to frame the religious question in terms of a spiritual odyssey rather than a static taxonomic determination. Rather than seeing Dylan starting out as a Jew, discarding this in favor of evangelical Christianity, only to reject that in favor of a more informed Judaism following studies with members of an ultra-Orthodox Jewish sect known as the Lubavitch, Marshall argues that Dylan's life and art reflect a spiritual quest that has evolved and developed without rejecting any of these elements. Rather, Dylan's odyssey is a robust integration of all of these inputs. Marshall's conclusion is that from his childhood, Dylan's life and art have been the product of a synthetic engagement with both the Jewish and Christian strands of the biblical tradition. In his review of Marshall's book, Francis Beckwith puts it this way: "Part of Marshall's thesis is that the Dylan who emerges from his 1983 Lubavitch studies, and subsequently releases *Infidels*, is not a restored Jew who has rejected Christ, but rather, a Hebrew Christian who has a better and deeper sense of his Judaism and the way it shapes his understanding of the biblical narrative and his relationship with God."<sup>41</sup> Beckwith, we should note, deems Marshall's conclusions as speculative, though "based on very good grounds."

So if this assessment, speculative though it is, has any merit, how might Hal Lindsey's thought have contributed to this odyssey? It is interesting to note that Lindsey is not mentioned by name, nor included in the index, in Marshall's study. Yet I suggest that if indeed Lindsey has so influenced Dylan's lyrics and prosaic pronouncements as we have argued earlier, it would stand to reason that

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<sup>40</sup> Lofton, "I Don't Want to Fake You out," 152–66.

<sup>41</sup> Beckwith, "Why Are We Worried about Bob Dylan's Religion?"

perhaps Lindsey has contributed to Dylan's ability to integrate both the Jewish and Christian strands of his spiritual journey.

Whatever the theological and exegetical merits of Lindsey's program, one fact is undeniably clear: Lindsey's program has a place of inclusion for the Jewish people in God's end-time program that appreciates them as Jewish without the overtones of anti-Semitism that has often colored Jewish-Christian relationships over the centuries. The current nation-state of Israel, even though constituted largely as a secular state, plays a crucial part in the unfolding of the last days leading to God's ultimate triumph over the powers of evil. The unfulfilled promises of God toward the houses of Judah and Israel are not spiritualized as referring to the Christian church, as in some Christian theologies.<sup>42</sup> Rather, they are understood as yet-to-be-realized prophecies for the actual, historical Jewish people. Such an understanding would likely appeal to Dylan, who had become a Christian after visiting Israel in the 1970s and coming to a deeper appreciation of his own Jewish heritage. This interpretation could help him better understand a God revealed in Jesus the Messiah, a thoroughly Jewish Messiah, one who has not cast off the historical chosen people. So perhaps Hal Lindsey's brand of dispensationalism provided a heuristic for Dylan to navigate his way through a conversion to Christianity in such a way as to not only accommodate his Jewish heritage, but also to be enriched by a deeper understanding of this heritage.

### **Lindsey and Dylan: A Political Framework?**

From his earliest days as a public figure, Bob Dylan has been appropriated by various political movements despite his frequent protestations that he is not a voice for any generation or political position. His early embrace of folk music and so-called "protest songs," his appearance at Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, March on Washington in 1963, and performances at the inauguration of President Bill Clinton

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<sup>42</sup> For a survey of positions on the relationship between Israel and the Christian church, see Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*.

in 1993 notwithstanding, Dylan has mostly avoided endorsing specific political platforms. This is not to say that Dylan does not have political leanings; it is to say that Dylan does not put much stock in the ability of politics to solve humanity's problems. As he told Kurt Loder in a *Rolling Stone* interview in 1984, "I think politics is an instrument of the Devil. Just that clear. I think politics is what kills; it doesn't bring anything alive. Politics is corrupt; I mean, anybody knows that."<sup>43</sup>

In a recent monograph titled *The Political World of Bob Dylan*, Jeff Taylor and Chad Israelson present the case that Bob Dylan's political stance is best characterized by the term "Christian anarchism."<sup>44</sup> Their case rests upon an analysis of Dylan's political statements in songs, stage raps, and interviews, brought into conversation with H. Richard Niebuhr's influential book, *Christ and Culture*.<sup>45</sup> Taylor and Israelson argue that Dylan's politics were always more expansive than those of the New Left during the 1960s. Over the decades, Dylan advanced socio-political ideas that resonated with both the political left and right, encompassing both traditional and populist views. Taylor and Israelson argue that within this mix the term "anarchism," understood broadly as a distrust of and lack of confidence in political authorities to address the human condition, always fit Dylan. With Dylan's conversion in 1978, his anarchism melded with a stream of Christian political thought that fit one of Niebuhr's categories of the relationship between church and state, Christ versus culture. This was the position of the Jesus People of the 1960s out of which emerged the Vineyard Fellowship of Dylan's early Christian nurture. The kingdom of God had its own agenda in the unfolding of human history and it did not depend on alliances with earthly political authorities for its realization.

Of course, history is replete with failed alliances between church and state. Within the United States today, the close identification of a brand of evangelical

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<sup>43</sup> Dylan, interview with Kurt Loder, 309.

<sup>44</sup> Taylor and Israelson, *The Political World of Bob Dylan*, 151–72, 194–99. The following summarizes these discussions. See also Taylor, "Bob Dylan and Christian Zionism."

<sup>45</sup> Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*.

Christianity with the so-called “Christian Right,” and with Zionistic groups politically tied to the state of Israel, shows that the Christ-versus-culture paradigm is not the only possible approach to church/state relations. At the time of Dylan’s conversion, American politics was beginning to involve Christians in politics to effect religious goals on a social level. President Jimmy Carter, whom Dylan admired and for whom Dylan once performed, identified as a “born-again” Christian, and at this time, Christian conservatives were marshalling their forces to attack the newly legalized practice of abortion. It is possible that Dylan connected with some aspect of the Christian Right upon conversion. However, Dylan was deeply influenced by Hal Lindsey’s version of premillennial dispensational eschatology. As Taylor and Israelson put it, “Dylan’s newfound Christianity was in many ways less culture-bound than the average evangelical at the time — partly because it was new and he approached the Bible with the fresh eyes of a convert. Also, he had a more-spiritual, less-politicized understanding of Bible eschatology.”<sup>46</sup> Lindsey’s eschatology had two things working in its favor. First, it was largely passive. It did not require much from Christians for the realization of the kingdom other than to engage in evangelism so as to hasten Christ’s return. As noted earlier, Dylan’s stage raps during the gospel tour of 1979 spoke of Christ’s return and typically included an exhortation for the audience to turn to Jesus in response. No amount of political effort would hasten the coming of the kingdom. Second, Lindsey’s eschatology was inclusive of the Jewish people. Given Dylan’s Jewishness both pre- and post-conversion, this eschatology, with its spiritualized focus on the last days, accorded well with Dylan’s predilection to distrust human political efforts as well as his focus on integrating the Jewish and Christian elements of his faith. The final reckoning that would usher in God’s age of righteousness and justice was wholly independent of

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<sup>46</sup> Taylor and Israelson, *The Political World of Bob Dylan*, 222.

political involvement. Lindsey's eschatology enabled Dylan to integrate his newfound Christian faith with his established "anarchist" tendencies.<sup>47</sup>

## Conclusion

I confess a certain disappointment at the degree to which Hal Lindsey influenced Bob Dylan's thinking. As a New Testament scholar and an ecotheologian, I find Hal Lindsey's exegesis and hermeneutic of reading current events through the lens of prophetic biblical passages specious, and the implications of his eschatology frankly dangerous. Yet it is evident that Hal Lindsey exerted considerable influence on Bob Dylan's art and patterns of thinking during this period. Dylan would be but one of millions of people who found, and still find, in Lindsey's teaching a key to navigating perilous times within a Christian framework. In the case of Bob Dylan, Lindsey's influence has clearly endured.

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<sup>47</sup> Taylor and Israelson, *The Political World of Bob Dylan*, 158–59.

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## SONG CORNER

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### “The Truth Just Twists”: Psychedelic Irony in “The Gates of Eden”

“The Gates of Eden” must be one of Bob Dylan’s more opaque songs, since there is so little commentary on it, and that little only addresses the lyrics—and not all of those. For example, Michael Gray discusses only two of the song’s nine verses to claim that it is about “balances of opposites” (62-63), while Nick Smart and Steven Heine look only at its refrain, calling its Eden “a vision of paradise” (186) and “the locus of non-dual truths” (126), respectively. To me, such readings do not capture the haunting, ominous quality of the song, when it is apprehended as a whole. Here, I will explore all the verses and the music, the *whole* song, in order to describe a tone and mode that Dylan uses so effectively in works throughout his career, but which he honed especially well in this early period. I like to call this mode “psychedelic irony” for its blend of imagery that invites and escapes rational analysis with an accompaniment built on an ironic musical sleight of hand.

### **The Kingdoms of Experience: Psychedelia**

When I use the term “psychedelic” as a way to describe the particularly cryptic effect created by lyrics of songs like “The Gates of Eden,” I mean first that Dylan does verbally something akin to the sensory effects brought on by ingesting a psychedelic substance. The images and vignettes in these songs seem to me to perform a swirling, shape-shifting intertwinement not just of visual phenomena, but also of phenomena from the other senses, of ideas, figures, scenes, and of phrases from other songs and literary works. Other commentators have noticed Dylan’s intertextuality. Rona Cran calls his style “collagesque” and connects his work to that of modernist poets and visual artists (187), while Alex Ross refers to his “magpie mode of writing” (309). Christophe LeBold sums it up when he writes, “Basically,

Dylan does to the great American Songbook what T. S. Eliot did to the Western literary canon" (133). These characterizations very smartly get at the way Dylan layers his songs with bits from all over the blues masters, ballads from the British Isles and Appalachia, cowboy songs, sea shanties, American standards — roots music, as we now call these forms — and those who identify them enlighten us helpfully about where the contents of these song-conglomerates come from. However, with the term “psychedelic,” I want to get at *effect* as well as content.

For a brief example of what I mean by this psychedelic effect, I'd like to consider one of my favorite lines from another song, and another kind of song, “Visions of Johanna”: “The ghost of electricity howls in the bones of her face.” Now, I don't know what that means. I am not sure I even know what it might represent metaphorically. What is the “ghost of electricity”? And whatever it is or represents, what does “howling” mean that it's doing “in the bones of her face”? However, I do know how vivid the image is: I know what it looks like, what it sounds like, how it feels. That bony, hollow face glows and pulses and aches; it's starkly lit and shadowed; she's inspired, or angry, or agonized, or ecstatic — or all of these — or the singer sees all of these in a projection onto her face of his own feeling. The full couplet suggests such an entanglement of identities: “The ghost of 'lectricity howls in the bones of her face / Where these visions of Johanna have now taken my place.” So, while I may not know what it means, I believe pinning it down to a specific meaning is not the point. We do not *need* to know what it “means”; we can see it, hear it, feel it. This flickering of an image among referents and sensations, like an optical illusion, is what I mean by the “psychedelic” aesthetic effect.

In 1965, too, important psychological and spiritual dimensions accompanied the perceptual dimension of psychedelic experiences. The word “psychedelic” was coined in the 1950s not by Timothy Leary or Aldous Huxley, but by British psychiatrist Dr. Humphry Osmond, who was at the time researching the treatment of schizophrenia. He noticed a similarity between adrenaline and

mescaline molecules, which led him to theorize that schizophrenia might primarily be caused by distortions of perception from “intoxication caused by one’s own body” (“Humphry”). Since some alcoholics seemed able to give up drinking only after experiencing *delirium tremens*, he observed, perhaps inducing a similar condition with hallucinogens would lead to a cure. His ensuing experiments with hallucinogens on himself and as treatment for schizophrenic patients revealed to him the mind-expanding and mystical experiences such substances could induce, and it was he who guided Aldous Huxley through the mescaline trip that led to Huxley’s 1954 book *The Doors of Perception*.

Osmond coined the term “psychedelic” from two Greek words: “*psyche*” (which the *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us means “mind” and *anima mundi*, the animating principle of the universe) and “*delon*” (which the *OED* translates as “make manifest, reveal”). So literally, “to reveal the mind,” “to make manifest the mind of the cosmos.” In correspondence with Dr. Osmond, Aldous Huxley proposed his own coinage in a rhyme: “To make this trivial world sublime, take half a gram of phanerothyme” (from *thymos*: “spirited”). Osmond retorted with his own rhyme, in better rhythm and fuller understanding of hallucinatory range: “To fathom Hell or soar angelic, just take a pinch of psychedelic” (qtd. in “Humphry”). As I use this term, then, I want to suggest an aesthetic influence that includes this metaphysical suggestion. And I think it is safe to say that the psychedelic effect of “The Gates of Eden” is not one of “soaring angelic” (despite its cowboy angel) but rather one of “fathom[ing] Hell.”

The song unfolds a ghastly world of absurdity, neglect, decadence, torment — and longing gazes toward “Eden.” In the seventh verse, we see the abdication of responsibility, as “the princess and the prince discuss what’s real and what is not” with rotting “precious” windiness, while paupers scabble for each other’s possessions, “each one wishing for what the other has got.” The third verse shows a “savage soldier,” head in the sand, complaining to a “shoeless hunter who’s gone deaf” — two figures that seem to have withdrawn from the

world and their roles in it (blinded, head in the sand, deaf to complaint). The same might be said for the wish-purveyors of the fourth verse, “Aladdin and his lamp” and the “utopian hermit monks,” who make “promises of paradise” from their “side-saddle” perch on that false idol “the Golden Calf,” pointing the way with a “time-rusted compass blade.” The fifth verse shows “those who are condemned to act” according to “relationships of ownership” that “whisper in the wings” — enslavement from behind the scene.

Still, the most hellishly haunting psychedelia come in the two verses whose figures that entangle human with machine or human with beast and object perpetrate the most horrifying abuses. In verse two, an iron-clawed lamp-post cop with his “shadowed metal badge” and forbiddingly “folded arms” looms over “holes where babies wail” in a frightening display of state power over the most helpless victims of urban decay. The sixth verse brings us the part-woman, part-machine “motorcycle black Madonna two-wheeled gypsy queen” and “silver-studded phantom,” figures that shift among Madonna with Holy Spirit, gypsy queen with spirit familiar, and two-wheeled dominatrix in black silver-studded Phantom motorcycle jacket. She/they torment a softly helpless “gray flannel dwarf” with his “bread-crumb sins” who “screams” and “weeps.”

Both Michael Gray and Seth Rogovoy consider these bread-crumb sins an allusion to the *tashlich* atonement ritual of Rosh Hashana in which the sinners cast the bread-crumbs that have accumulated in their pockets into a body of water in order symbolically to shed their sins—a ritual that responds to Ecclesiastes 11:1: “Cast your bread forth upon the waters, for after many days you will find it” (Gray 482, Rogovoy 84). Like his tormenters, however, the gray flannel dwarf also appears as a shifting composite figure. He is as much the innocent Hansel as he is the guilty sinner. In the tale, Hansel leaves a trail of bread-crumbs in order to find the way home, but the birds eat them, leaving him and Gretel lost in the forest. Here, “wicked birds of prey” “pick up on” (that is, notice and reveal), “pick up” (that is, retrieve), and “pick upon” (that is, tear at) the bread-crumb sins in a

nightmare of humiliation, lost-ness, and predation such as Prometheus endures, chained on the mountain, his liver eaten over and over by the eagle.

Yet, every vignette concludes with a pronouncement about “Eden,” the songworld’s lost paradise. Sometimes ills plaguing the songworld are said to have no place in Eden (kings, sins, trials); sometimes desired things lacking in the songworld appear there (trees, a laugh, the truth). Yet for all the confidence with which such conditions are projected into this paradise, the performance of the refrains feels as unsettling as the verses they close. In his reading of “Mr. Tambourine Man,” Christopher Ricks notes in passing that “The trees of Eden are haunting, frightening trees” (144), and Nelson Hilton claims that Dylan’s Eden owes a debt to eighteenth-century poet William Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (110). (I would note that it could as easily have come via Huxley’s book: “the doors of perception” is a phrase taken from this Blake text.) However, we do not need to know William Blake to feel what’s “haunting and frightening” about the songworld’s Eden. Dylan performs it in the music.

### **You Will Not Hear a Laugh: Irony**

Certainly, local ironies appear in the individual scenes: the soldier may be “savage,” but he is also plaintive and cowardly; the deaf “shoeless hunter” can hear neither his companion’s complaints nor his prey; the “time-rusted compass blade” will not point in the needful direction; “friends” are “other strangers.” These local ironic twists contribute to the ways the scenes and figures invite and resist interpretation and so intensify the phantasmagoric feeling of the songworld. But the song’s main structural irony plays out in its harmonic movements.

How do we perceive irony in the non-semantic language of music, whose “meaning” resides in pure sound and the feelings it provokes? Harmonic music creates feeling by establishing a “home” (or “root” or “key”) and then moving away from and back to this “home.” In more complex music, the harmony can lead away from one home and establish a new one—or move into and out of

several such homes. Such movements create the patterns of tension and resolution that constitute the “meaning” of music.

The simplest folk and rock songs play out a home-away-home gesture in their three or four chords, sounding some variation of tonic-subdominant-dominant-tonic. In “The Gates of Eden,” G major is the established tonic home, but the chords that lead away from and back to it are not always the ones we expect to hear in that key. Instead, Dylan colors or inflects that journey with sonorities from the Dorian mode — a scale and family of chords that fall between major and minor keys. Minor keys have three flatted notes, which gives them their somber sound. Major keys have no flatted notes and so feel brighter. However, Dorian mode has two flatted notes, which is why it is “between” major and minor, although it is closer to the “somberness” of minor. It thus produces a scale that sounds unresolved, even uncanny, to our modern harmonically-trained ears because it does not follow the patterns of whole- and half-steps found in the major and minor scales that we are so used to hearing. The Dorian scale sounds like it ends on the second degree of the scale instead of the first; it *feels* unresolved and uncanny, as though it is hovering in mid-air. To us — or to me, at any rate — it is an unsettled and unsettling mode.

This Dorian coloration provides the *unheimlich* sonority established in the first two lines of the verses in “The Gates of Eden.” The first four chords (G major – D minor – F major – C major), as they are voiced on the guitar, outline in their highest pitches a descending Dorian scale: G – F natural – F natural – E natural, or *do – te – te – la*. The chord progression itself also gets Dorian coloration from the use of a minor dominant (d minor, or v) leading to two major subdominants (F major—a bVII instead of the usual vii—and C major, or IV), which return home to the tonic via plagal cadence. The sequence we are used to hearing (tonic to subdominant of various kinds to dominant to tonic) is reversed: the dominant gives way to the subdominants, which then shift directly back to the tonic in a plagal cadence. On top of this unsettling progression, Dylan sings a pentatonic melody whose

highest note sounds in repeated emphasis, as peak moments in the melodic shape, the flatted seventh-degree *te*: “Of war and peace the truth just *twists*.” Put all this together, and we get a combination of sonorities that creates the uncanny, portentous sound characterizing the songworld.

However, the third melodic line, the one that leads into the refrain about Eden, feels different. Its harmony moves comfortingly toward resolution as it approaches the refrain through a standard progression from tonic through subdominants to the *major* dominant: G major (I) – B minor (iii) – A minor (ii) – G major (I) – A minor (ii) – C major (IV) – D *major* (V). That D major chord jumps into prominence after the lyrics of the line have finished, as a full-measure fill in the guitar, so its bright F#, or *ti*, sounding at the top of the texture, provides the strongest possible leading tone towards resolution, like a promise to take us not just home but Home—to Paradise. Then, during the refrain itself, when for example the “ships with tattooed sails” are “heading for the gates of Eden” in a melody that pushes through an insistent repetition of the “home” note G, the harmony shifts behind those notes, beginning with a brief, disquieting Dorian inflection in the transitional chord that comes halfway through that line. I want to call it a Bb7sus4, but whatever it is, it includes all three notes, the F natural (*te*), Bb (*me*), and E natural (*la*), of the Dorian scale. It sounds only briefly, but it takes us not to the D major chord that promised to take us Home via authentic cadence, as in the third line, but back to the C major subdominant (IV) that has been circling us around in the songworld in the first two lines. With the harmony shifting the ground below them in this way, those repeated G notes in the melody draw us unrelentingly to a place where the first syllable of the very word “Eden” is sung on that same flatted *te* (in the lower octave): “Heading for the gates of *Eden*”: *te* do. It is like waking from a bad dream only to find that you are still dreaming. This is the irony sounded in the music: Eden is not a better Other Place but in fact is part of the songworld and its nightmares.

In this kind of irony, one thought — the acknowledgement of a reality — is clothed in another thought — a wish expressed in the surface utterance. It is the voicing of disillusionment: the ironic utterance banishes the wish in the very act of saying it, even as the wish's sweetness makes acknowledging the reality bitter. Oedipus wishes to be the righteous king who restores the fertility of his people and their lands and cattle by punishing the criminal whose unnatural actions have caused their desolation. But the unnatural criminal he seeks is in fact himself. The words in the refrains voice a wish: Eden holds original innocence and the Tree of Life—no sins, no kings, no trials, no crashing but meaningless blows. The compass will point the way, the ships will reach the gates, we will laugh in joy when we return. But the music hollows laughter into derision: “And on their promises of paradise you will not hear a laugh / All except inside the gates of Eden [fe-do],” where they know better than to listen to promises of paradise (or make them). The “curfew gull” and “cowboy angel,” wafting up from Eden’s trees on “four-legged forest clouds” with “candle lit into the sun,” bear a wish: the time has come to return where truth glows bright. But the curfew gull “just glides,” the glow is “waxed in black.” Within the wish comes bitter reality: Eden also holds that other Tree, the one with the forbidden fruit, the knowledge of good and evil: we have always already fallen. The song turns on this irony, just as it turns on the refrain that wishfully cycles around at the end of each verse: Eden world is songworld.

### **No Words but These to Tell What's True**

Lyrics and music are of course delivered in a performance, and this song is performed for and addressed to listeners by a first-person singer/speaker. This singer has enough in common with the cowboy angel that I'm tempted to consider that angel his Eden-world avatar. Both bring portentous news, both come accompanied by birds — the “curfew gull,” the “lonesome sparrow” — both have what seems an alienated relation to the “foreign sun,” which “waxes” the cowboy angel's candle-glow “in black” and “squints upon” the singer's bed that is never his own.

However, the cowboy angel bears “the truth,” and in this song, whether the bearer of “the truth” is Eden’s cowboy angel, the state’s lamp-post cop, the church’s motorcycle black Madonna, the capitalist’s whisperer in the wings, or philosophy’s arbiters of what is real and what is not, “the truth just twists.” How can our singer bring us a true message and how can we hear it in such a world? The final verse gives us a “glimpse”:

At dawn my lover comes to me and tells me of her dreams  
With no attempts to shovel the glimpse into the ditch of what each  
one means

At times I think there are no words but these to tell what’s true

Telling the dreams provides the words that tell what’s true. Attempts to shovel these glimpses “into the ditch of what each one *means*” just twist their truth.

We so often approach poems as though what a poem “means” is something other than what it “tells.” But with dreams and much poetry and certainly songs composed in this psychedelic-ironic mode, we need to listen in the state of receptivity that poet John Keats calls “*Negative Capability*”: the capacity to rest in “uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason” (109). Our singer, keeping himself (like his lover) in this state of negative capability, speaks through art, not exegesis. If we attend to what he *tells* instead of irritably reaching after what he *means*, at times we might see and hear and feel what’s true, especially in a world where the truth just twists.

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## **INTERVIEWS**

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## LETTERS

SUBMITTED BY Spencer Leigh, 12 April 2021

I thank Quentin Miller for reviewing my book, *Bob Dylan: Outlaw Blues* so thoroughly and the *Dylan Review* for publishing that review. Naturally, I would like to make a few comments, as Miller's review raises several issues.

The book was never intended to be academic but that is not, *ipso facto*, a drawback: it is just a different type of book. I wanted to try and capture the general reader, maybe people who hadn't read a Dylan book before. I didn't want footnotes as they can interrupt the flow of a story.

Dylan is such a quirky individual that I knew I could make this a funny book and that generally goes against academic criteria. The story of him visiting John Lennon's childhood home in Liverpool in 2009 is comedy gold.

I transcribed all my Dylan-related interviews and no one is misquoted or paraphrased. Most of them have been broadcast on BBC Radio Merseyside over the years. If an academic wanted further details, I can supply the full transcripts and the dates and places of recording. Indeed, my lockdown job has been annotating my radio programs (about 3,000 of them) for Liverpool Central Library. My role model is John Gilliland's interviews from the 60s/70s which are on the University of North Texas website.

There is a pattern in my biographies. I start with the artist's connection to Merseyside and then to the UK in general and onto the US. This I suppose does imbalance the books. In the case of Dylan, I wrote at length about his appearances in Liverpool as they are the shows I attended.

I accept too that my books may be biased by the people I've met. I met Judy Collins and Joan Baez in Liverpool on UK tours. I haven't interviewed Sara Dylan but I don't think anyone else has either. Maybe her silence was a condition of the divorce settlement. She is a mystery lady but she is not missing from the index — Dylan's family members are subsections under Dylan himself.

A significant factor about the key artists from the 60s is that they were listening to what other people were doing and the relationship between Bob Dylan and the Beatles is a strand in the book. I loved how Bob Dylan had taken a rock & roll band, the Hawks, and transformed them, mostly by osmosis. We wouldn't have had The Band in that form without Dylan's input, so they are an integral part of the story.

I also suspect that nobody works in a vacuum. When I was talking to the blues singer/songwriter Chris Smither, he said that Tim Hardin was unusual because he didn't listen to anybody else.

One advantage of putting an artist into context is that it enables me to write about some of my favorite artists. In my world, John Stewart is up there with Bob Dylan and so by putting him into the text, I am hopefully introducing him to a few people who may like him.

Oddly enough, one of the great moments in my life was when I saw Richard Dreyfuss in a Neil Simon play in the West End. He had been on *Desert Island Discs* the previous Sunday. I went to the stage door after the play and proffered my program for a signature. I said, "You were excellent in the play but I've really come round to thank you for playing John Stewart on *Desert Island Discs*." He said, "Come here" and gave me a big hug adding, "There aren't many of us." The track he chose: "Mother Country." It was from the 1969 album, *California Bloodlines*, which despite its title was cut in Nashville and on the liner note, John Stewart refers to "Dylan across the street," who was making *Nashville Skyline*.

The section on the New Dylan is, I hope, both enjoyable and informative as they all have their own idiosyncrasies — Loudon Wainwright and John Prine, for starters. Prine had the talent to rival Dylan except he was never prolific enough. Still, he did outclass Dylan in sheer quirkiness.

Over the years the great songwriters have known the importance of love songs and Cole Porter, Irving Berlin and Lennon and McCartney have given us standards. This is another factor that differentiates Dylan from his contemporaries.

Ian Anderson of Jethro Tull told me, “I would love to be able to write short, straight-to-the point love songs. They are the hardest to write because so many have been written.”

As well as writing songs like “Desolation Row” and “Stuck Inside of Mobile,” Dylan is able to write succinct lyrics and get the whole world singing — “Lay Lady Lay,” “I’ll Be Your Baby Tonight,” “If Not For You,” and “Make You Feel My Love.” That Brill Building talent has served him well.

Bob Dylan has been elusive when it comes to discussing his songs and this has worked in his favor. He can be discussed forever as students grapple with their meaning. If he had given footnotes, it would have closed down the discussion. It remains to be seen what is in his archive in Tulsa. I thought that he would have covered his tracks, but it turns out he’s a hoarder.

No matter how thoroughly you read over your text, there is always something you miss and it irks you forever. The John Osborne play is called *Look Back In Anger*, so why did I give it the Oasis song title, “Don’t Look Back In Anger,” and why didn’t I or anybody else spot it? I don’t know: it happens.

The key problem in discussing lyrics is copyright. I would love to attempt a full textual analysis of “Desolation Row,” but the cost would be prohibitive. Dylan’s work is protected by copyright and it could be several hundred pounds to quote from the lyric. The rule of thumb is you can quote up to 10 words without infringing copyright — at least, that is what the London-based publishers appear to work to.

In 1965, Bob Dylan alienated his audience at the Newport Folk Festival and the jury is out as to whether that was deliberate. What can’t be denied is that he went on a world tour with the same approach. When I saw him in Liverpool, I witnessed something I had never seen before, namely, the star turn being booed. When I wrote the book, I wondered about other musicians who had alienated audiences in the same way and found some examples, starting with Hector Berlioz, who, as luck would have it, could have been on similar drugs to the 60s rock stars. When I put the examples together, I thought it made surprising reading.

Once again, thank you very much for the attention. I appreciate it — and more to the point, so do my publishers.

## CONTRIBUTORS

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**Jacqueline Osherow** is the author of eight collections of poetry, most recently *My Lookalike at the Krishna Temple* (LSU Press, 2019). She's received grants from the Guggenheim Foundation, the NEA, the Ingram Merrill Foundation and the Witter Bynner Prize. Her poems have appeared in many magazines, journals and anthologies, including *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, *American Poetry Review*, *the Wadsworth Anthology of Poetry*, *Best American Poetry*, *The Norton Anthology of Jewish American Literature*, *The Penguin Book of the Sonnet*, *Twentieth Century American Poetry*, and *The Making of a Poem*. She's Distinguished Professor of English at the University of Utah.

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