Dylan Review, Spring/Summer 2024

Masthead

Table of Contents

Reviews

The Politics and Power of Bob Dylan's Live Performances, ed. by Erin C. Callahan and Court Carney. London: Routledge, 2023, 246 pp.

REVIEW BY Andrea Cossu, University of Trento

For many of us who attended Bob Dylan's shows in the early- to mid-1990s, "All Along the Watchtower" as the third song was the only predictable thing that could happen during the set. Everything else – a tender "Born in Time," a ferocious "Maggie's Farm," a devilish "Cold Irons Bound" or, and this really took me by surprise back in 1992, an undecipherable "Idiot Wind" – was part of the chase for the unexpected. Old and new fans alike learned how to live with the feeling that everything could happen, and surprises rarely had to do with the perceived quality of the show. Things have become more predictable in the past ten years, since the introduction of fixed setlists, and yet one can still witness the excitement spreading through the crowd, such as, among the shows I recently attended, when Dylan gave a tender rendition of "Only a River" in Rome, or brought his band to his youthful past with a rocking "Not Fade Away" in Milan.

I have often wondered, as a scholar, whether my interest in performance and its contingency comes from my teenage days of seeing Bob Dylan in Italy, or if my interest in Dylan as a performer comes from my training as a sociologist who pays attention to the scripted or unscripted performative character of communal action. The two threads are intertwined, and it is from the many points of their convergence that I praise the fact that, alongside others, the contributors to this book have put Bob Dylan's shows (tours, setlists, individual songs) at the center of their analyses.

This centering is no easy feat, even for a team of scholars as large as the one that Erin Callahan and Court Carney have assembled for *The Politics and Power of Bob Dylan's Live Performances.* Consider that Bob Dylan has played in excess of 4,000 live shows since his debut as a teenage rock and roller, and that many of these performances took place since the beginning, in 1988, of the Never Ending Tour. It is indeed one of the many strengths of the book that the chapters do not focus only on the perceived heyday of Dylan's career (the 1960s and the mid-1970s) as they follow the complex relationship between Dylan and live performance across decades. The chapters also focus on post-1988 Dylan, which speaks to the current revisionism in Dylan studies to move toward the centrality of performance and consider that Dylan – even as a showman and as a performer – cannot be typecast by nostalgia.

Indeed, four of the chapters focus on the 1960s (Carney; McAslan; Naimby and Radosta; and Isom); three on the Rolling Thunder Revue (Landgraf, Tebbe, Martinez); two on the controversies surrounding the "born again" tours (Herren and Salvucci). The remaining chapters take the reader through the musical landscape and the references that Dylan explored in "Murder Most Foul" but which, in reality, constitute the essence of the Never Ending Tour, *The Philosophy of Modern Song*, and of Theme Time Radio Hour. From these later explorations in the complexity of popular music, Dylan reveals the reticular, sometimes rhizomatic connection to an idealized vision of America ("a rising tide") that is apprehended through popular music and which ideally connects Dylan to multiple pasts, including his own. This idea of a "tradition" – live and in person – proves much more complicated than the Nobel Prize in Literature commendations reveal.

While organized in a chronology that, in broad sketches, follows Dylan's trajectory as a live performer – starting with his capacity to adopt a Guthrie-like persona through to the most recent shows that, after the forced stop due to the pandemic, brought Dylan back on stage – there are common threads and overlapping themes. Most deal with varieties of temporality, and ideas of performativity, which only rarely get their due consideration in Dylan scholarship.

On the other hand, setlists may appear at first sight an odd place from where to assess Dylan's artistic impact. And yet, as Callahan and Carney remind us, "Setlist construction thus allowed Dylan additional creative expression during live performances. He contemplated not only how he plays the songs but also their selection and order to create unique collections and sequences, playing into and off each other sonically and lyrically" (xii). From this perspective, setlists are a *narrative.* The sequential element is not a mere juxtaposition of songs, but a fundamental component in the creation of a performed "text" in which the artist conveys broader meanings to the audience. Individual songs, even the seldom performed ones, or the one-offs, function therefore as anchors in such a narrative, which may be constructed as a set of references that connect Dylan's performance on stage, subtle hints about his personal life, an ambivalent relationship to audiences, and a goldmine of hypotheses about where Dylan was at – artistically and aesthetically – at any given point in his career.

Appropriately, two of the main themes that connect many of the essays, temporality and the performance of artistic persona, are at the center of Court Carney's "Bob Dylan, Woody Guthrie, and the Implications of the Past." As Dylan recalled in *Chronicles: Volume One*, he had originally come to New York "to find singers, the ones I'd heard on record, most of all to

find Woody Guthrie."[1] It also seems, as Carney argues, that "the teenaged Dylan seemed to understand the meaning embedded in Guthrie and his music – the ancient past drawn from the folk tradition but embodied in a tangible person still alive." Dylan was not, therefore, simply searching for an improbable idol, but for an entry point, embodied in an ailing singer, that could enable him to start connecting the past to present and to craft a vision of America that many, from Sean Wilentz to Greil Marcus, have pointed out as the key to understanding Dylan's journey through music. In this regard, Guthrie's songs have thus acted as a roadmap to which Dylan returned in several moments of his career, long after he outgrew the tight clothes of the Guthrie imitator. Indeed, as Carney writes, "Bob Dylan has routinely returned to Woody Guthrie to telegraph his own past and how it connects to a larger, more mysterious narrative of belonging and creativity" (p. 8). It happened at crucial points even when Dylan was already a well-established *rock star*: in 1968, to mark a return to performing after the fabled motorcycle incident; in 1975 and 1976, when "This Land Is Your Land" and "Deportee (Plane Wreck at Los Gatos)" were nightly highlights of the Rolling Thunder Revue; and at the beginning of the Never Ending Tour, when Dylan routinely shuffled the cards of time and tradition to produce a puzzling, yet ultimately homogenous, image of the artist as both the carrier of a larger tradition (to which he has proved always faithful) and of its own past (which he has preferred to reinvent in multiple ways).

More than many of Dylan's fellow performers, friends, and acquaintances who were at the center of the urban folk scene – Dave Van Ronk, Pete Seeger, Ramblin' Jack Elliott, Joan Baez – Guthrie embodied the "folk process," that endless adaptation and appropriation of material that defies established notions of copyright and originality and which Dylan has explored throughout his career. In this regard, Simon McAslan's description of Dylan's "pivotal performance" at the Finjan Club in Montreal (1962) sees the making of Bob Dylan as an artist torn between the role of the original songwriter and that of the carrier of the folk process in the age of mechanical reproduction and copyright law. In this regard, McAslan's essay is as much a snapshot of how much Dylan owed to the folk process as it is a review of an early turning point. However, the key point of McAslan's argument is that at the Finjan Club "Bob Dylan is, in effect, practicing to become 'Bob Dylan'" (12). This early incarnation of Bob Dylan is a person who, by "not distinguishing his songs from others . . . presents himself as more performer than songwriter" (12).

[1] Bob Dylan, *Chronicles Vol. 1* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), p. 9.

Since, as I have argued in *It Ain't Me Babe: Bob Dylan and the Performance of Authenticity*,[2] all the key transitions in Bob Dylan's career have been marked by and achieved through performance (from going electric to being born again), McAslan's point can also be applied to many other chapters in this book. Not last Nainby and Radosta's analysis of Dylan's engagement with audiences in '64-'66, the years of the irreversible transition to "folk rock" and of the creation of a coalition and an infrastructure for the production and interpretation of rock music. Particularly after Newport, Dylan's shows became the setting of a nightly social drama, which produced simultaneously a breach with the audience and recreated "Bob Dylan." On one hand he was signaling "a clear pulling away from the folk idiom" (24) through "both his choice of a setlist for the show and his approach to framing the songs in his spoken introductions and in his ensuing vocal performances" (24). On the other, scholars can approach this confrontational transition from a perspective that brings into the picture both shifting cultural structures (the complex of symbols, scripts, narratives, and styles established in the folk scene and emerging in rock music), and how the artist and the audience aligned (or misaligned) to them in the context of live performance. Here, the yells, the insults, the slow clapping, the monologues, the accusations of Judas or Liar, even the long pauses, build a local, highly interactional picture of the transition. And yet – unfortunately, in the opinion of this writer – the authors have refrained from such an analysis, which could have enriched their enjoyable account of selected performances from the years of the "electric turn."

Like the electric tours of 1965 and 1966, the Rolling Thunder Revue has been traditionally not only a fan favorite, but also a favorite focus for critics and scholars. It is no surprise, then, that three of the chapters focus on different aspects of how songs, setlists, and performance shaped one of the most creative periods of Dylan's career and his image on stage.

Skye Landgraf explores the politics and performance of "Hurricane," a song that has probably haunted Dylan more than he originally wished for. While "George Jackson" in 1971 fell quickly into relative obscurity, "Hurricane" has been a mainstay of Dylan's greatest hits collections and has been prominent in movie soundtracks, even though he's only played it a handful of times in a live setting. The song contains a deeper motive, Landgraf argues, and it lies in the fact that it came at a "pivotal moment" of reinvention, in which Dylan was willing to explore "musical roots" that "are inevitably always deeply linked to and steeped within a history of Black culture and political work" (38). Yet, Landgraf also makes a more

[2] Andrea Cossu, *It Ain't Me, Babe: Bob Dylan and the Performance of Authenticity* (Boulder: Paradigm, 2012).

controversial statement that Dylan has somehow "profited off of Blackness" (39), to the point that he has overshadowed with his legacy a myriad "Black voices" (47). True, images of Black America are everywhere in Dylan's oeuvre, as respectful appropriation and as a common code rooted in the folk process. We see that in the trajectory that links Hattie Carroll to blackface minstrelsy, and yet I would like to point out to a crucial aspects of Dylan's relation to Black culture: that it is always, sometimes problematically, linked to a white counterpart, in a contact that does not only shape tense racial relations, durable inequalities, and institutional racism, but also the landscape of folk and vernacular music.

Tradition and memory also lie at the center of Jason Tebbe's reconstruction of the political climate around the Rolling Thunder Revue, which he frames as encapsulated in "Bicentennial Nostalgia" and the public debate over the meaning of the anniversary. The Revue, too, "was a kind of intervention in the febrile national discourse, one that articulated an alternative notion of America in the midst of a largely empty and consumeristic Bicentennial event" (64). Around the same time, sociologist Robert Bellah was writing of a "broken covenant," of the deep narratives and values of America facing, in his words, a time of trial. The Rolling Thunder Revue was, if we follow Tebbe's argument, a sonic, performative instance of such a crisis, and yet it worked mainly through the creation of an inclusive narrative: it tried to hold together collective commitment and American individualism; the exploration, through places and persons, of another, more vernacular America; the link to folk music and its transformations into a broader style of "Americana." These deep themes, which are at the center of Dylan's poetics, would, more than ten years later, come to maturity in the Never Ending Tour.

The last essay that focuses on the Revue, Sarah Martinez's account of "Spontaneous Performativity" is one of the book's highlights. Linking the performance theories of Philip Auslander and Richard Schechner to ideas about repetition and authenticity (with performance being a key medium of authentication), Martinez correctly describes the performative process as one of convergence between actors and audiences. She advances the argument that the spontaneity of the tour amplified "Bob Dylan's conception of art" as one that "has always been as a living, layered body that is ruled by the principles of change, fluidity, and reinvention" (86). In this regard, her analysis of the setlists and of the NBC special *Hard Rain,* and of Scorsese's documentary about the Rolling Thunder Revue (surprisingly not taking *Renaldo & Clara* into consideration) brings us closer to an understanding of Dylan as primarily a performing artist. Others, including Paul Williams and Betsie Bowden, have repeatedly stressed this point, as has Dylan himself, not least with his Nobel Lecture.

Perhaps the most radical reinvention Dylan underwent was not going electric, but going Christian and enraging much of his audience with the Gospel Tours. While the two essays that center on that period (Herren's analysis of the "Warfield Cycle" and Salvucci's take on the Tour of 1981) do not focus primarily on the 1979 shows (in this writer's opinion, one of the absolute peaks of Dylan's career as a performing artist), they cover relatively new territory. Both essays bring attention not only to the brilliance of those shows, but also to Dylan's ability to craft a new persona through his contact with another genre: the white and Black streams of southern gospel that have always featured prominently in his career, from "No More Auction Block" to the fascinating covers of the Stanley Brothers that graced many shows at the turn of the century. Those gospel-fueled shows were, in Herren's words, "stable and consistent," carefully scripted shows with a "dramatic structure" that had at its center "the quest for righteousness, reunification, and redemption" (97). At the same time, the return to secular songs after the fracas of 1979 also meant a reconciliation with the past achieved (in Salvucci's words) through the creation of the setlists as a "text" (121) that synthesizes gospel, secular, and folk songs in an attempt at reinvention.

Indeed, if one looks at the setlist of the first show ever of what became known as the Never Ending Tour, the three strands (four, if we consider the blues) that constitute the coordinates of Dylan's career are all mixed together. When Dylan played Concord, California on June 7, 1988, with an unexpected reshuffling of the band after touring with Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers as well as the Grateful Dead, he rocked the first ever performance of "Subterranean Homesick Blues," and the first electric "Gates of Eden," but also "Gotta Serve Somebody" and "In the Garden," and gifted his audience with stunning performances of "Man of Constant Sorrow" and "Lakes of Pontchartrain." The Never Ending Tour comes under analysis in four chapters, and also in two sections entitled "Encore" (Jeff Fallis) and "Epilogue" (Callahan and Carney).

The Never Ending Tour has been, in many regards, Dylan's *opus magnum*. It is the summa of reinvention; and often a tightrope walk between successful landing and performative shipwreck. Most of all, the tour has shown to progressively smaller and more dedicated audiences the breadth of the musical landscape Dylan inhabits, and his legitimacy in carrying the torch of an American canon that relies less on rock music than on the inclusion of every facet of American popular music: gospel and country, rockabilly and Tin Pan Alley, topical song and torch ballad.

That Dylan inhabits this space is arguably his greatest achievement as an artist. In this regard, anachronistically, the essay that McKenzie Isom has dedicated to *Nashville Skyline,*

John Wesley Harding, and the relationship of Bob Dylan to country music is probably an ideal connection to the Never Ending Tour, much more than it is to the 1960s. For years on the Never Ending Tour many of those songs displayed the core quality that Isom assigns to those seemingly "minor" albums: he argues that "Dylan instead sought a way to return to his roots and create music that was not only personal but also unaffected by the trappings of fame and celebrity" (61).

Dylan's return to his roots – via his songs or via the countless covers played during the Never Ending Tour – was often visible on stage, both through the choice of songs or the choice of arrangements, in a process that, as I have argued elsewhere,[3] can lead songs as diverse as "It's Alright Ma," "High Water (For Charley Patton)," and "The Coo Coo Bird" by Clarence Ashley to be compressed in a "timelessness" where Dylan's work, traditional folksong, and the intersecting memories of "tradition" and "Bob Dylan" share the same space of meaning. Robert Reginio shares the same attitude when he notes the juxtaposition of roots songs and songs from *"Love and Theft"*, an album connected to *John Wesley Harding* and *The Anthology of American Folk Music*, to the point that song sequences result in the "blending [of] roots music with Dylan's intertextual lyrical preoccupations" (133). Reginio's examples are two distinct performances of "A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall," in 1962 and 1999, with the latter being a carefully chosen example of the Never Ending Tour as the environment to recast "Dylan's "anthemic" songs and to show how Dylan's revisiting (and revising) of this early anthem "signals the direction his songwriting was taking at the end of the millennium" (133). Reginio's analysis is convincing, particularly because he is the most explicit in describing the Never Ending Tour as a context of multiple takes on memory – the past and the present – in which genres blur along with the image of Bob Dylan. Reginio's is a wonderful take on a theme that Dylan highlighted early on in his career, that of the mystery of folk music as being anything but simple, full as it is of "legend, myth, bible, and ghosts" (as he told journalists Nora Ephron and Susan Edmiston).[4]

Quite surprisingly, the other chapters skip much of the Never Ending Tour (both the good and the bad) to focus on the past decade (although one of the authors, Nina Goss, edited

[3] Andrea Cossu "Down the Foggy Ruins of Time: Bob Dylan and the Performance of Timelessness," in Nina Goss and Eric Hoffman (eds) *Tearing the World Apart: Bob Dylan and the Twenty-First Century* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2017), pp. 45-62.

[4] Quoted from Jonathan Cott (ed) *Dylan on Dylan* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2006), p. 50.

a collection a few years ago on Bob Dylan in the 2000s).[5] Erin Callahan reflects on the later years of the Never Ending Tour by focusing on the change that occurred in earnest after 2013 and the release of *Tempest*. Years of what has become known as "the set," of fixed setlists with fewer changes, find Dylan exploring "the themes of change, temporality, and looming annihilation, presenting contemporary American life as bleak and apocalyptic" (146). This apocalypse has been a recurring theme since "Hard Rain": it acquired religious overtones with the Gospel Years, connecting poetically to Dylan's vision of fate and individual responsibility. In the context of "the set," Callahan sees unity in "The repetition of these songs in performance [as they] construct meaning by their order, thematic connections, and use of language and images" (157).

On another path, Goss identifies one of the moments in which Dylan caught us all off-guard – the release of *Shadow Kingdom* during a summer still shut down by the pandemic – as a "dislocation of time; dislocation of self; dislocation between self and other" (162). The very decision to follow Dylan in the assumption that performances are central dislocates not only the artist, but also the fan into a "grayscale realm that is out of time" (163). This "dislocation" involves first and foremost the audience: "To know Bob Dylan live, to engage as fully as possible with a live performance of one song, or the emotional and thematic life of a full concert, you need not to have been there" (169). Again, time and place collapse and are reassembled in an encyclopedic space (to quote from Italian semiotician Umberto Eco) where performances lead in all directions and trace unpredictable paths that confuse our experience of "Bob Dylan" and make it highly personal.

The dislocation that Goss highlights as a key feature of Bob Dylan's presence on stage, however, should be tempered by the idea that performances are also highly *local* events in which the artist is not only engaged in creating a space for the activities of meaning-making carried out by audiences, but also actively involved in the performance of his "musical persona," as Philip Auslander would argue.[6] On one side, therefore, the success of the performer rests at least in part on the *projection* of representations, and meanings, from the audience; on the other, what is perceived as exceptionality, or even a charismatic quality, is the result of the artist's capacity (and Dylan is no exception) to perform his role as a performer. And in this regard Dylan shares the stage with other great performers like Frank Sinatra, Bruce

[5] Nina Goss and Eric Hoffman (eds) *Tearing the World Apart: Bob Dylan and the Twenty-First Century* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2017).

[6] Philip Auslander *In Concert: Performing Musical Persona* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021).

Springsteen, or Lady Gaga, each with a distinct performative style or persona. There is an ongoing tension, therefore, between routine and creativity, in which Dylan has been able to adopt a strategy that makes the creativity of performance a central component of a ”professionalized” musical persona.

Performance – in the here-and-now – mediates this confusion and puzzlement. As Laura Tenschert argues in the final chapter, “performance is a way to actively deal with the shadow cast by the past: by providing [Dylan] with an opportunity to engage his creativity on a regular basis, and therefore also to always live in the potential of the next masterpiece” (173). This potential of anticipation does not rest solely on Dylan, but also on the audience.

Many of the essays contained in this book focus – sometimes exceedingly – on the artist, and yet they contain compelling insight into what needs to be done in order to bring the interaction between audience and artist into a closer analytical framework. As many essays highlight, the connection of performance to social context is relevant and needs further investigation because it might lead, if not closer to unlocking the mystery of why Dylan has fascinated us for six decades, then at least to a proper appreciation of what makes Dylan stand out.

On the Road Again: Bob Dylan plays the Outlaw Music Festival

REVIEW BY Bob Russell

On July 2nd, 2024, Bob Dylan performed at Mansfield, Massachusetts' Xfinity Center, still referred to by its original name Great Woods by many who attended concerts there in the 1980s and 1990s. It is one of the big-barn amphitheaters popular for major national summer tours in the United States. The event was Willie Nelson's 2024 Outlaw Music Festival, a traveling package tour crossing much of the country over the summer, with Nelson as the planned headliner, though illness prevented his appearance at several dates, including Mansfield. Despite Dylan's frequent touring in the last few decades, fans have eagerly awaited this Outlaw tour as an opportunity to see another new twist in his travels on the road.

From November 2021 to April 2024, Bob Dylan performed approximately 200 concerts on the Rough and Rowdy Ways Tour, named after the stunning 2020 album. The shows involved performing first eight, then nine, of the ten album tracks, omitting only the epic "Murder Most Foul." Fans always hoped for this last track, which was somewhat impractical in a live setting due to its almost seventeen-minute length and spare accompaniment. The concert setlists remained relatively static during the tour, but Dylan's performances were intense and focused, showing off the new album tracks with just a small selection of other songs, not at all a greatest hits kind of event.

Despite the newness of the material and the audacity of presenting such a limited set of songs, critics and fans received the tour extremely well, generally viewing it as a career-capping triumph. As the tour progressed, several surprise songs popped up as occasional setlist additions, notably respectful and faithful renditions of Grateful Dead classics such as "Truckin'" and "Stella Blue," no doubt baffling some more Dylan-centric listeners. As magnificent as the Rough and Rowdy music could be at its best, the alarming prospect loomed that the majority of Dylan's classic oeuvre would never be heard again (an inevitability at some point, but not one easily accepted).

Rampant speculation followed the announcement of the Outlaw Music Festival in early 2024. Was the Rough and Rowdy Ways Tour over? Would the sets be short, as often experienced at European festivals? Who would be in the band?

The Outlaw Music Festival has a changing list of performers. In Mansfield, the lineup was (in order of performance) Celisse, Robert Plant and Alison Krauss, Bob Dylan, and Willie Nelson's band (without the ailing Willie). Celisse (Henderson) is a dynamic vocalist and

guitarist performing as part of a three-person power trio, heavily influenced by Jimi Hendrix. She won over the early-arriving crowd with her personality and flair, along with an emotional moment when she confessed that she was in a dream come true. Robert Plant and Alison Krauss played a stunning long set, heavy on moody rock (with some Led Zeppelin hits), and short on the bluegrass that made Alison's reputation. The once-unthinkable pairing worked magnificently, backed by a stellar band, including guitar whiz J. D. McPherson and bluegrass multi-instrumentalist Stuart Duncan. It is a very successful match. (I feel bad though for some of my fellow traditional bluegrass fans who may have bought tickets based on the name Alison Krauss, only to be horrified by a style of music which would have Father of Bluegrass Bill Monroe spinning in his grave. However, the open-minded fans would have been delighted.) Following Bob Dylan's set, Willie's son Lukas led the Nelson band through a set of Willie's classics. Lukas has the guitar chops and the voice of his father, making him a fine substitute for Willie.

Bob Dylan took the Mansfield stage shortly after the sun went down. With a light-colored shirt unzipped halfway down, he looked jauntily comfortable and ready for the summer heat.

A few things stood out throughout the show. First, after shaking up the setlist from the Rough and Rowdy Ways norm, after the first two nights of the tour Dylan had firmly established the lineup of songs. Possibly the "Cold, Cold Heart" or "Long and Wasted Years" from the first night would eventually return (or even the "Sweet Home Chicago" rumored to have been sound-checked one night), but for the present, perhaps the unchanging setlist was returning.

Second, the band has changed for the Outlaw tour. Drummer Jerry Pentecost was replaced by the veteran Jim Keltner, whose history playing with Dylan is long and distinguished. Keltner is a solid, safe choice for timekeeper, though Pentecost (and Charley Drayton before him) had done sterling work on the previous Rough and Rowdy tour. More significantly, long-time multi-instrumentalist Donnie Herron is no longer in the group, after being in the band since 2005 on pedal steel, mandolin, and violin. Just as Bucky Baxter had in the 1990s, Herron added variety and color to the band's sound and dynamics. Though sometimes not fully noticed, Donnie Herron's contributions were significant in Dylan's live sound for almost twenty years. The lack of it in the new band is noticeable.

Third, the Outlaw Music Tour has visited venues far different from the intimate theaters so favored by Dylan for the previous four years. Willie's Outlaw troupe attracts an audience much broader and wider than Dylan's usual following. In Mansfield, I was surrounded by

devotees of Led Zeppelin, hardcore bluegrass aficionados, and longtime Willie/traditional country fans among the 20,000 or so other attendees. Given Willie's age (91 at the time of Mansfield) and instability, some would have seen this as perhaps their final opportunity to see him in concert. The upshot is that listeners during Dylan's performance were not all following closely and reacting breathlessly to every slight lyric change or vocal inflection. The Outlaw crowd was not a typical Dylan crowd. It would be more difficult to wow them or even to keep them interested for seventy minutes. Does Bob realize this? Does he care? Does he alter his approach for this audience?

It raises a question in the mind of an astute concert reviewer: Is the quality of a show determined solely by the activity on the stage? How should audience reaction be factored into the evaluation, if at all? The perhaps sad reality is that a fair percentage of the fans in attendance at the Outlaw tour were totally uninterested in hearing Dylan's set and proceeded to talk inanely throughout, during both soft and loud passages. This in turn greatly annoyed the engaged fans and negatively impacted the quality of their experience. The more rabid Dylan fans were left a-longing for the comfort and intimacy of an Orpheum or Beacon Theatre.

Beginning in 1978, my own Dylan tour history spans more than 170 shows. What multitudes I have seen and listened to in that time! That first 1978 show in St. Louis (its "Mr. Tambourine Man" discussed in Paul Williams' *Bob Dylan: Performing Artist: 1974-1986 The Middle Years*) was the "big band" alimony tour, with all new arrangements and the largest band Dylan would ever tour with. My experience that night was drastically different from any that I would experience in the coming years. After three years of intense exposure to Bob Dylan albums, in 1978, I was finally seeing the legend in person.

Over the coming years and many dozen more shows, there were ups, downs, and in-betweens. Among them were wonderful shows with surprise setlists in the 90s; some fairly pedestrian shows with rough, uninspired vocals around 2005; and sometimes, the truly magical. Among these: Patti Smith joining Bob for the first ever duet on "Dark Eyes" in Boston in 1995; the one and only live appearance of "10,000 Men" in Kingston, Rhode Island in 2001; on the third night of a 1994 Boston run (the first concert of many for my then 9-year-old son), an unexpected final encore of "Two Soldiers"; Jorma Kaukonen, Warren Haynes, and Phil Lesh all joining in on a 1999 encore. There were events close to home, others seen while driving across big sections of the United States, and a few in Europe. There were nights I was all alone, nights I shared with an international set of fans and friends, and many nights with a very close friend, a man that I shared dozens of tours with and who added to the wonder and enjoyment of my journey.

Did I gain any real insight from these concerts? The main thing I take away from these years of following the tours is to take each night as it comes and to be open to the possibilities. There is enjoyment and delight to be taken from the nights where Dylan is at the peak of his performance art, but also from those times where all is not perfect; where there are sound issues, where the singer is not happy with the band, where lyrical mistakes are made. This is because we are seeing live art being made, with all the potential for triumph or disaster. It is like watching any live event, whether a play, sports event, or ballet. We see human beings displaying their art and we are amazed by the potential and the reality of the attempt. I never take that idea lightly.

On the Rough and Rowdy tour, Bob Dylan opened each night with the ironic line, "What's the matter with me? I don't have much to say," then proceeded to say multitudes in the following hour and a half. On the Outlaw Tour, on July 2, 2024 in Mansfield, Massachusetts, Dylan begins with "Highway 61 Revisited." Interestingly enough, Dylan omitted the line "kill me a son" this night, whether intentionally or not. This song has been somewhat problematic in recent times. The loud, fast, noisy rendition we hear, while potentially exciting, is a challenge for Bob's voice. With the "Sinatra" albums and tours, Bob found a volume and pace where his voice was comfortable, and the results were stunning. Perhaps the vocal cords themselves had healed somehow after years of rough going, but the material was perfect for these late-career concerts. The trend continued with *Rough and Rowdy Ways*. The album did not go into the troublesome vocal territory, rather lent itself to beautiful songs such as "Mother of Muses" and "I've Made Up My Mind To Give Myself To You." In Mansfield, Dylan's vocal delivery was solid, though a few words skipped or slurred. Musically, the guitars of Bob Britt and Doug Lancio rocked out in a way little experienced in recent tours.

In Mansfield, the initial sound quality, as often happens, was not totally set. Dylan was clearly unhappy through the second half of the first song, and had comments at the end for ever-faithful bassist Tony Garnier. The instrumental audio was fine, guitar-based fast rock, but the vocal was a bit low on the starter. Also, the large crowd did not have the enthusiasm this song richly deserves, a bad sign with several slow ballads to follow.

"Shooting Star" was in the second spot, a good changeup after the initial rocker. The beautiful intense ballad from *Oh Mercy* was a success, in terms of arrangement and delivery. The poignant verses and dramatic bridge were greatly enhanced by Dylan's now excellent piano playing. Gone are the days of roller rink organ or tinny piano. Bob's baby grand piano is now the lead instrument much of the time, and shines in that role. He clearly has been woodshedding (maybe at the Crossroads). Dylan also employed harmonica here for the initial

time of the night, with three more to follow. Only one frustration here. This is clearly an instance where Donnie Herron's absence is a great loss. The steel guitar in a 2013 rendition, for example, added a sweet counterpoint to the piano and other guitars. For a Willie Nelson-centric audience, perhaps unfamiliar with *Oh Mercy,* the reception was tepid, especially in the middle to high reaches of the arena.

"Love Sick" followed. This take on the *Time Out of Mind* track was, on the face of it, well executed. From my location the vocal lacked sufficient volume. Further, the chattering audience, bane of modern concert going, seemed bored by the slow (yet dramatic) pace.

A cover next, "Little Queenie." Here we go. What a song for a festival audience! "Little Queenie" is, of course, a joyous Chuck Berry original, notably done by the Rolling Stones in 1969 for the *Get Yer Ya-Ya's Out!* live album, and here conjuring the (virtual) memories we have of a teenage Dylan bopping out Little Richard songs. Dylan was enjoying this one. The music featured Bob Britt on the trademark Chuck Berry intro riff, and the band rocked to the essential rock 'n' roll driving rhythm that Berry invented. One could imagine Dylan and the Cruzados rocking this on the glorious 1984 Letterman episode. The Willie Nelson crowd loved this rocker, and so did I. For those who have not seen a Dylan tour in 10-15 years, Bob's voice and piano playing must be a revelation. Bob on keyboards now makes sense, and his voice can show the power and emotion that have moved so many in the past.

The show then moved into a slow section, temporarily losing much of the audience. "Mr. Blue," a DeWayne Blackwell song notably covered by the Fleetwoods, was unfamiliar to the audience, and the volume of talk increased. The song rendition itself was exquisite, recalling the best of the "Sinatra" cover era. "Early Roman Kings" as a lyric is quite fascinating, especially with the proper background on the text. As a stalwart of pre-Rough and Rowdy times, it had become a drag on the setlist (I know, some will disagree), and it was no better here. "Can't Wait" was enjoyable and recalled the late 1990s when the *Time Out of Mind* album was featured and displayed the power and depth of that career revival.

"Under the Red Sky" came next, its lilting melody and nursery rhyme lyrics working together to revive some of the enervated audience. That song has been unjustly knocked for its simplicity, but shone here, and would make a welcome mainstay of future sets. Treasures like this from Dylan's songbook are a joy to hear again. "Things Have Changed" also brought back memories, in this case from a long stretch when this was a powerful concert opener. It retains that power and Dylan's current piano prowess and vocal approach just enhance it. If I had one specific request for Bob's touring structure, it would be to turn up the sound (as he would for Neil Young!). The vocals and the musical chops of this crack band need to be heard. See the

Plant/Krauss band for how to create volume and dynamics to unleash the full potential of an excellent performance.

Two more covers followed, both played with intensity and passion. "Stella Blue," a Grateful Dead ballad now familiar to those hearing recent concert recordings, was a faithful rendition of a song that Dylan's friend Jerry Garcia once did so impressively. It was a moving moment, but again one largely lost on this audience (except for a lone fan in the lower seats, who seemed to be having a moment of religious ecstasy; security staff spoke with him mid-song). Again, we have the dichotomy: a strong performance unrecognized by more than half the audience, at least in my area. Dylan and his band performed "Six Days On the Road," the Dave Dudley country classic, with gusto. Bob Britt and Doug Lancio on guitars and Dylan on piano gave a rollicking run-through, though Bob fussed a bit and had instructions for bass player Tony Garnier early. One could imagine a stunning cover collection of tracks like this one and "Little Queenie," showing the rock 'n' roll chops of this band.

"Soon After Midnight," from the album *Tempest*, has one of Dylan's loveliest melodies, which Dylan delivered flawlessly before a trio of classics from the 60s and 70s stirred the crowd. "Ballad of a Thin Man" was strong and accusatory as it was the mid-60s, "Simple Twist of Fate" featured Willie Nelson's harmonica master Mickey Raphael, and "I'll Be Your Baby Tonight" kept the Rough and Rowdy tour arrangement: slow intro verses, rocking middle section, and dramatic, strutting ending. With no encore, the changeover to Willie's stage began.

The audience had seen a fine show, though many did not know it. Dylan, per usual, made no concessions in terms of setlist, talking with the audience, introductions, or anything else. For those paying attention, the wonder and joy were there, and the prospect of future tours seemed very bright indeed, especially if they can play it loud.

Cat Power Sings Bob Dylan: Interpretation as Transformation

REVIEW BY Nora Bonner

Inside the auditorium at the Chevalier Theater in Medford, Massachusetts, a crowd anticipates *Cat Power Sings Bob Dylan: the 1966 Royal Albert Hall Concert.* Houselights loop across a gray ceiling and make the place feel like a temple. As these lights dim, a ring of industrial lights rises faintly on stage behind an empty microphone in the center of two musicians – an acoustic guitar player on the left and harmonica player on the right – who will accompany Cat Power, aka Chan Marshall for the acoustic portion. This is our first clue that the show we'll hear tonight is not an exact replica of the 1966 concert, as Dylan accompanied himself solo for this portion of his show. The lights change and Marshall clacks across the stage in the highest of heels. A long tie hangs over the corset beneath her pant suit, all in black, including her plastered down pixie cut. She looks amazing, but also very nervous.

Regardless, her look invites us to consider these Dylan reinterpretations alongside concepts of gender. The Royal Albert Hall Concert, which we recognize from volume four of Bob Dylan's *Bootleg Series*, includes "Visions of Johanna" and "Just Like a Woman," songs that will inevitably transform in context and meaning once paired with Marshall's fierce and smooth female voice. She has a reputation as a "gifted interpreter of songs," to borrow a phrase from Laura Tenschert, host of the *Definitely Dylan* podcast. As she welcomes Marshall on a November 2023 episode, Tenschert cites the singer's version of "Stuck inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again" as an example of impressive reinterpretation, which fans of both Dylan and Marshall might recognize from the *I'm Not There* soundtrack. Before the interview, Tenschert also reminds us that the concert at Royal Albert Hall exists as a key myth in Dylan's career, the one where a disgruntled fan shouts "Judas!" at Dylan for going electric. The *Cat Power Sings Bob Dylan* tour, based on the 1966 Royal Albert Hall recording, is therefore an interpretation of this transformation myth.

As a myth, Dylan's concert condenses his prolific output from 1965-1966 into one night, two years which also mark his transformation from folk kid to rock god. But when it comes to putting together a mythology, for Dylan or for anyone else, facts hardly matter. That way, we can excuse the fact that the aforementioned "Judas!" incident actually occurred in Manchester, not London. Clinton Heylin's 2016 *Judas!* offers a thorough account of that night and the events leading up to it, including the infamous Newport show when Dylan had already struck his FolkFest fanbase with an electric bolt the previous year. Perhaps the most interesting

thing about Dylan's 1966 tour is his decision to continue playing acoustic sets. Another musician might let the transformation happen behind the scenes and let the fans figure it out. They'd bust up a folk appearance, release *Bringing It All Back Home,* and go full electric for the tour. Dylan, on the contrary, performed this transformation night after night in front of a live audience.

The mythological performance at Royal Albert Hall, later released in 1998 as *The Bootleg Series Vol. 4: Bob Dylan Live 1966, The "Royal Albert Hall" Concert,* is legendary because it represents the product of what had been refined during the two years Dylan yielded *Bringing It All Back Home, Highway 61 Revisited,* and *Blonde on Blonde.* What had been refined is the transformation itself, demonstrated by the show's two sets: solo acoustic, then full band electric. It's the same myth Pennebaker retold in his *Dont Look Back* documentary of Dylan's 1965 tour: a myth that shows the process of transformation, how not just Dylan, but perhaps American music itself evolved into rock 'n' roll. The UK tour might be understood then as the next chapter in an Alan Lomax study – how Bob Dylan brought Woody Guthrie's and Lead Belly's porch blues ballads to Greenwich Village, where he turned them into rock 'n' roll hits. It's a myth Dylan – whether intentionally or by accident – presented for British audiences, as if to give them a musicology lesson on where the Beatles' music came from.

So why Cat Power?

Tenschert attempts to answer this question when she points out that Marshall's career, like Dylan's, "has also been a constant evolution of moods and styles" (2:58), as evidenced in the singer's prolific output of eleven studio albums since 1994, the year she first opened for Liz Fair and signed with Matador Records that same night. Her earliest records *Dear Sir* (1995) *and Myra Lee* (1996), fuse punk's fast power chords with blues progressions. *What Would the Community Think* (1996) opens with electric arpeggios accented by a tinkling glockenspiel as she sings, "In this hole we have fixed we get further and further from the world," before she launches into a much grungier track, "Good Clean Fun." Ten years later, she released what might be her most well-known song, "The Greatest," which is the title track on an album with a hot pink cover and glitzy gold letters. That song features a prominent jazz piano and syncopated drum riffs over haunting strings.

Marshall's repertoire also includes three cover albums, which include a masterfully stripped down version of the Rolling Stones' "Satisfaction." Her cover of John Philip Baptiste's 1959 hit, "Sea of Love," ended up on the soundtrack to the 2007 film, *Juno*. Her latest album is a live recording of the "Royal Albert Hall Concert," which she, unlike Dylan's misnamed release, actually performed at London's Royal Albert Hall. Tenschert reports that, after

attending this performance in November 2023, Marshall's "voice breathed her own spirit into the songs while effortlessly capturing the essence of Dylan's 1966 concert." After listening to Cat Power's live recording of this same concert, it's hard to disagree. Her smoky voice swirls around Dylan's lyrics, offering a dynamic lens forged from life experiences through which we can understand these songs in new ways. At 52, Marshall has weathered nearly three more decades of experience – personal and professional – than Dylan had when he originally performed the show at 24. These differences count toward layers of interpretation to draw from when covering Dylan's music.

Marshall's not one to change the gender in any of the lyrics, something that might have been more noticeable twenty years ago, but this simple decision unlocks a corridor of new meanings. Her version of the set's opening, "She Belongs to Me," comes across like a mantra or pep talk instead of a (male) singer celebrating his lover. And yet, perhaps Marshall's first noticeable detour from the songs' original context is that she's not playing any instruments. She's just singing, which makes her appear vulnerable in front of a microphone, without the safety of a guitar for a breastplate and harmonica headgear for a helmet. We can't help fixating on what she's doing with her hands, and for this part of the concert, she directs most of her gestures to the sound engineer to fix the levels.

Fans may recognize the set's next song by its original context, as a friendly jab to John Lennon, who named Dylan as an inspiration for "Norwegian Wood." Dylan's "Fourth Time Around" echoes some of Lennon's tune and subject matter. On the 1966 live record, Dylan delivers it as though he's anxious to get through the number and, frankly, the whole first half of the show. The result is a slightly rushed, accusatory diatribe, at times taunting. Tonight, Marshall slows this taunt to a bless-your-heart, condescendingly Southern pace as she concludes, "I never asked for your crutch, now don't ask for mine."

Perhaps what elevates Marshall's performance over others' attempts at Dylan covers is that she is not afraid to speak some lines. Reminiscent of Dylan's spoken phrases, these feel a tad more deliberate than the ones she sings. Her acoustic set versions are generally much slower and more contemplative. And while she navigates the sound-balance adjustments that interrupt "Visions of Johanna," these too feel deliberate. She wails silkily through these "visions" in what comes off as a plea to rid herself from the distractions, which at this point could be the sound problems as much as the lyrics' memories of a woman she's trying to forget.

If the show started with sound-level problems, we've forgotten them by the time Marshall gets to "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue." Her aching wails flood the room as she croons, "the sky too is folding under you," from what could be the perspective of a parent

ousting a child, or from this same mother forging boundaries to protect from the toxic person she's addressing when she sings, "strike another match, go start anew." Marshall's ability to evoke these perspectives widens the songs' range of interpretations, each sung with different versions of intensity.

Throughout the first set, Marshall's best moments occur when she pulls back, beckoning us to lean closer if we want to experience her level of intimacy. For instance, in her interview with Tenschert, Marshall describes harrowing scenes of growing up in the rough parts of Atlanta. In a 2006 interview for *New York Magazine*, Marshall divulges dropping out of high school during her senior year. These experiences give her the authority to pull off a version of "Desolation Row" that rejects what's "intellectual," like debates about T.S. Eliot against Ezra Pound, for the desolate experiences one must suffer to understand the origins of rock music. Her steady and direct delivery of the song's many verses invites us to abandon the academy's brightly lit halls and follow her to the lowdown alleyways where we'll find the authentic sounds at the music's roots. At the song's conclusion, Marshall rejects this litany of allusions when she sings: "Right now I can't read too good / Don't send me no more letters no / Not unless you mail them / from Desolation Row." If you want to be in her crowd, you're going to have to prove you've been through it, too.

Having gotten through the song with no sound interruptions, Marshall's fierce voice approaches the rest of the set with a newfound confidence, beginning with "Just Like a Woman." Hers is a salty retort as she lingers tauntingly on notes to accentuate the first verse's rhymes: "Everybody *knows* baby's got new *clothes*, but lately I've seen her ribbons and her *bows*," before concluding the phrase with a spoken, "have fallen from her *curls*."

She concludes the acoustic set with a convincing performance of "Mr. Tambourine Man," which Marshall names as one of her favorites to cover, if not the most difficult. She describes the song to *Variety* magazine's Jem Aswad as "a sort of fuzzy memory of childhood, where you were free in your imagination. But it also is the hardest song and most emotional song for me to sing because it is a testament to having faith in a fucked-up world." Tonight's version comes off like a hazy lullaby begging for another hit, of drugs or artistic inspiration.

The transition between sets happens with little fanfare, as the additional musicians take to the instruments already onstage, in the shadows behind the first set's trio of Marshall, her guitarist Arsun Sorrenti, and Aaron Embry, her harmonica player. The lights brighten and, as if responding to the previous song's demands, the full band injects the audience with "Tell Me Momma," the concert's first electric number.

If Dylan's real-time transition delivered us from folk music's intimacy to rock 'n' roll's sound large enough to fill arenas, Marshall's version transports us from an intimate jazz lounge in New York to what now feels like a full-blown crowded New Orleans jamboree. Compared to Dylan, who stays more or less at one high energetic frequency throughout his second set preserved on *Bootleg Series Volume 4*, Marshall plays around more with levels, drawing in a bit during some of the numbers, including "Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues" and "One Too Many Mornings." Dylan's 1966 London fans would have recognized the latter as a song which draws heavily on traditional British balladeering, now repurposed for demonstrating the power of rock 'n' roll, while Marshall's tamer version offers a reprieve before she breaks into what may be her best song of the night: "Leopard-Skin Pill-Box Hat." Marshall's cover is so atmospherically transporting, we might start to think that Dylan wrote the song especially for her.

Nearing the end of the show, she pulls off "Ballad of a Thin Man" in another standout performance, taking full advantage of her wide-ranging register, especially when she slides from note to note singing, "How does it feel to be such a freak?" She's having a good time, and it doesn't take a lot of imagination to hear the cover's potential as the opening on a soundtrack to another gritty HBO series. By the time she sashays into her "Like a Rolling Stone" finale, most of the audience is on their feet, some dancing in the aisles – a phenomenon that prompts Marshall to acknowledge her niece is one of these dancers and she "doesn't get out much." If the performance started in what felt like a sacred jazz temple, it's ending with a dance party in somebody's backyard revival tent.

In bringing us Dylan's Royal Albert Hall sets, Marshall retells the story of a musician who accepts his responsibility to morph alongside his talent, trying new things, always on his own terms. In fact, the company that produced Pennebaker's *Dont Look Back* is named after Janus, the Roman god of transformation. The documentary presents Dylan's transformation via his performances, perhaps even more so by way of the backstage conversations he doesn't want to have about his decision to transform the music. The most famous of these might be a scene that takes place near the end of the film, when Dylan skewers a journalist from *Time* about his magazine's readership. Although for many this conversation signifies Dylan at his pettiest – evidence of his immaturity – we might also acknowledge the conversation as his breaking point, frustrated with the public's resistance to his transformation.

Either way, Dylan offers a memorable critique of establishment journalism when he says, "They have no ideas in *Time* magazine, there's just these facts." For our interpretation of tonight's Cat Power concert, Dylan is clearly more interested in "ideas," which we might name

as the residue of careful storytelling, because it is from ideas, not simple facts, that one extracts a "truth." Put another way, truths are more than simple facts; they are ideas left behind not just by "what happens," but "how" and, more importantly, "why." These are the "ideas" Dylan's criticizing the journalist for leaving out in his writing. By choosing to call her tour after the misnamed concert venue, Marshall invites us to pay attention to more creative choices, raising such questions about the songs as "versions." How will she choose to sing these songs? Which truths will her versions highlight? The answer to all these questions is simple: hers.

These are *her* versions made up of her choices for pacing, how she sings a line, and which words she'll choose to emphasize. Each choice reminds us that song cover is in itself an act of transformation. The overall effect is a concert that leaves us with the sense that there are far more meanings to uncover in these songs and that each of these meanings is unique to the experiences and talents of the performer. In this sense, she invites us to transform and be transformed, one Dylan cover at a time.

Works Cited

Aswad, Jem. "Cat Power Talks Her 'Sings Bob Dylan' Album, Her History With His Music, and Meeting the Man Himself." *Variety Magazine*. 21 Feb 2024.

Heylin, Clinton. *Judas! From Forest Hills to the Free Trade Hall: A Historical Overview of the Big Boo.* Route, 31 Oct 2016.

Pennebaker, D. A., Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and Donovan. *Dont Look Back* Director-approved two-DVD special edition., The Criterion Collection, 2015.

Power, Cat. *Cat Power Sings Bob Dylan: the 1966 Royal Albert Hall Concert.* Domino Recordings, 4 Nov 2024.

Tenschert, Laura. "She's an Artist, She Don't Look Back": A Conversation With Cat Power. *Definitely Dylan Podcast*. http://www.definitelydylan.com. 11 Nov 2023.

The Dylanista

The Diegetic Fallacy

Somebody once said Frank Sinatra was the only singer of his time who understood the words the sang. Hyperbole? Probably, but more striking is how alien, even dated this statement sounds today. Now we're saturated with singer-songwriters in all musical milieu, from revived grunge cafes to rap studios to myriad self-promotions on YouTube. "Covers" might be flourishing, but there's also a preponderance of original songs sung by the songwriters. And – maybe optimistically – we tend to infer that all singers singing their own songs understand the words they themselves wrote better than "cover artists" ever could.

Is this inference baseless? Is it a hermeneutic delusion that would have Roland Barthes ("the birth of the reader is the death of the author") and Hans-Georg Gadamer spinning in their graves? Here's Gadamer in full throat:

> Unlike the divine word, the human word is essentially incomplete. No human word can express our mind completely. But as the image of the mirror shows, this does not mean that the word as such is incomplete. The word reflects completely what the mind is thinking. Rather, the imperfection of the human mind consists in its never being completely present to itself but in being dispersed into thinking this or that. From this essential imperfection it follows that the human word is not one, like the divine word, but must necessarily be many words. Hence the variety of words does not in any way mean that the individual word has some remediable deficiency, in that it did not completely express what the mind is thinking; but because our intellect is imperfect – i.e., is not completely present to itself in what it knows – it needs the multiplicity of words. It does not really know what it knows.[1]

This might seem like intellectual woolly-headedness at its worst – when Gadamer tells us "our intellect…does not really know what it knows" we can't help wanting to put on the brakes before we skid into total aporia. But Gadamer is making a valid point. In effect, he says, "Imagine a divine word; then compare that divine word to human speech." The difference is

[1] Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York, Continuum Publishing, 1994), 425.

that this "divine word" (if it could exist) would always be complete, while the "human word" is "essentially incomplete." What Gadamer means, then, is that where the Deity needs one word only, we humans need multiple words to express a simple truth. And the upshot of that multiplicity is we cannot control the meaning of our speech, poetry, or prose – let alone songwriting, with the additional meaning-giver of music.

We don't have to agree with Gadamer to acknowledge that writers, poets particularly, can't know the multiplicity of meanings and resonances their language creates. And we can reasonably conclude that even songwriters themselves might not understand their own lyrics, or fully command the meaning of their utterances from performance to performance. For example, did these lines ever again mean the same thing they meant when written and recorded – if, in fact, they meant something then?

> With a time-rusted compass blade
> Aladdin and his lamp
> Sits with Utopian hermit monks
> Sidesaddle on the Golden Calf
> And on their promises of paradise
> You will not hear a laugh
> All except inside the Gates of Eden

No one can answer this question, least of all Dylan, who, it must be said, has always acknowledged his limits as an interpreter of his own songs. Poets are notoriously untrustworthy readers of their own work, which is why criticism and commentary have been coevals of art in all cultures.

Nevertheless, even if we admit that poets can't corral or stabilize the meaning of their lines, we continue to deem singer-songwriters transparently sincere in their performances, delivering an *intended* meaning without complications. But this is a romantic – even Romantic – ideal. It doesn't stand up to hermeneutic scrutiny.

*

Crucially, this Romantic ideal leads to the Diegetic Fallacy, too-frequent invader of Dylan commentary. In literary theory, the rhetorical term *diegesis* refers to narratives, especially about characters and their thoughts and actions. Songs are often narratives in which the speaker is embedded into the story or *fabula*. Marie-Laure Ryan describes embedded

narratives as "any story-like representation produced in the mind of a character and reproduced in the mind of a reader."[2] We might supplement this definition with "in the mind of a listener," and ask ourselves who exactly is speaking when, for example, we listen to:

> Then they'll raise their hands
> Sayin' we'll meet all your demands
> But we'll shout from the bow your days are numbered
> And like Pharaoh's tribe
> They'll be drownded in the tide
> And like Goliath, they'll be conquered

Or when we listen to this:

> What was it you wanted
> I ain't keeping score
> Are you the same person
> That was here before?
> Is it something important?
> Maybe not
> What was it you wanted?
> Tell me again I forgot
>
> Whatever you wanted
> What could it be
> Did somebody tell you
> That you could get it from me
> Is it something that comes natural
> Is it easy to say
> Why do you want it
> Who are you anyway?

[2] Laure-Marie Ryan, "Embedded Narratives and Tellability," *Style* 20.3 (1986), 320.

It seems obvious, from even the most superficial differences in tone and imagery, we can't think of these two texts as produced by the same speaker. The portentous voice of "we'll shout from the bow your days are numbered" becomes a rallying cry, a shared experience of triumph. In contrast, the isolated, begrudging speaker who asks, none too politely, "What was it you wanted / I ain't keeping score / Are you the same person / That was here before?" is miles apart from that righteous political speaker in "When the Ship Comes In."

Neither speaker is Bob Dylan, obviously. It would be irrational to think Dylan is speaking, yet…yet…yet…Why do so many listeners, sometimes even critics who should know better, identify the speaker of the songs as Bob Dylan rather than as an embedded narrator? When this happens, narrated ethics, attitudes, and postures get all mixed up with the singer himself. Biographical facts coupled to audience expectations infiltrate diegetic fabulation. The consequent confusion, which I've termed the Diegetic Fallacy, distorts our understanding – and our appreciation – of all Dylan's song lyrics.

The culprit responsible for this distortion is the inference of sincerity common to singer-songwriters. From Joan Baez to Dylan to Fred Neil, Peter La Farge ("The Ballad of Ira Hayes"), and Joni Mitchell, the identity of the writing with the performance offered a refreshing genuineness, a belief that the singer could identify with the lyrics. Sinatra might have made "My Way" his own, although the song was written for Liza Minelli, but his colonization of the song deliberately traded on his reputation, his public persona, to add "identity" to the lyrics and authority to his delivery.

During the singer-songwriter era, however, Sinatra's back-formed sincerity withered in comparison to "real" identities. Songs like Dylan's "My Back Pages" or "Bob Dylan's Dream" seemed intentionally to introduce an autobiographical element. It's no wonder then that listeners identified that same "Bob Dylan" saying "I'll stand by your grave until I'm sure that you're dead," or even "Two riders were approaching / The wind began to howl." And Dylan was not alone as a misconstrued speaker: Compare, for example, the frankly autobiographical language of Joan Baez singing "Diamonds and Rust," with lyrics thinly disguising the early Dylan-Baez relationship:

> Now I see you standing
> With brown leaves falling all around
> And snow in your hair
> Now you're smiling out the window
> Of that crummy hotel

Over Washington Square
Our breath comes out white clouds
Mingles and hangs in the air
Speaking strictly for me
We both could have died then and there

The absoluteness of that last line, right after the qualifier "Speaking strictly for me," brings it all back home to a fundamentally, nostalgically personal level. Joanie's sincerity is unquestionable.

A comparably palpable sincerity also exists in Joni Mitchell's postlapsarian paean, "Woodstock":

I came upon a child of God
He was walking along the road
And I asked him, "Where are you going?"
And this he told me

I'm going on down to Yasgur's Farm
I'm gonna join in a rock and roll band
I'm gonna camp out on the land
I'm gonna try and get my soul free

We are stardust
We are golden
And we've got to get ourselves
Back to the garden

Clearly a present speaker – the one who wrote and is singing the song – wants to "get [herself] / Back to the garden." There is a paradigm shift from Sinatra's "My Way" to "Woodstock" – which, ironically, is what Woodstock was all about (even if it was short lived).

But how can we trust this paradigm shift when we recall Gadamer's words? If our sense of singer-songwriters' *complete* understanding of their own songs is a Romantic ideal responsible for an inflated belief in their personal sincerity, is it still misguided to claim their superiority to Sinatra-era vocalists who sang the words of others? Were the singers of the 30s,

40s, and 50s just performers *tout court*, lacking in the sincerity we think we hear in performers who write and perform their own songs?

It's pretty to think so – but we're probably fooling ourselves. The very term *singer-songwriter* inaccurately privileges speech over writing, as though the vocal expression of a song *preceded* its composition. Ordinarily we might not think of singing a song as speech per se. But identifying the songwriter and the singer as a single voice characterizes the song as a form of speech: this identity of song and speech dovetails with the idea of singers' unique sincerity in performing songs they wrote.

Now it's Jacques Derrida's turn to spin in his grave. According to Derrida, writing has as much claim to *presence* as speech, which means that, like speech, writing is always incomplete. Songwriter-singers, from this (deconstructed) perspective, *might* have only as much control over meaning, sincerity, and conscious understanding as other vocalists. Understanding-the-words is not definitively the privilege of songwriters who sing their own songs, nor, by the same token, is sincerity.

Could Frank O'Hara, for instance, have felt what he felt and remembered the experience of Billie Holiday if the singer hadn't shared some kind of *nous,* some evidence of *sapient* delivery? Without at least some understanding of the animating impulse behind Billie's performances, could O'Hara have delivered his own extraordinary performance?

> and in the GOLDEN GRIFFIN I get a little Verlaine
> for Patsy with drawings by Bonnard although I do
> think of Hesiod, trans. Richmond Lattimore or
> Brendan Behan's new play or *Le Balcon* or *Les Nègres*
> of Genet, but I don't, I stick with Verlaine
> after practically going to sleep with quandariness
>
> and for Mike I just stroll into the PARK LANE
> Liquor Store and ask for a bottle of Strega and
> then I go back where I came from to 6th Avenue
> and the tobacconist in the Ziegfeld Theatre and
> casually ask for a carton of Gauloises and a carton
> of Picayunes, and a NEW YORK POST with her face on it

> and I am sweating a lot by now and thinking of
> leaning on the john door in the 5 SPOT
> while she whispered a song along the keyboard
> to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing

This is from "The Day Lady Died," published in *Lunch Poems* (1964) but marking an earlier date. The poem begins "It is 12:20 in New York a Friday / three days after Bastille day, yes / it is 1959." July 17, three days after the anniversary of the French Revolution. The detail is purposeful and typically cryptic, something to etch the date into the reader's memory as it's etched into the speaker's: the Revolution has begun, soon to be followed by the Reign of Terror (*la Terreur*) and public executions. Later in the poem this unexpected detail clashes with O'Hara's idea of agelessness and empathy. The lines "practically going to sleep with quandariness" and "everyone and I stopped breathing" frame a unique tribute to the singer, extending "quandariness" into a kind of permanent stasis, stunned wonderment, when everyone stops breathing in sync with the now dead Billie Holiday.

O'Hara's poem and his preternatural sensibility, though hardly proof positive, help make the case that Holiday, like Sinatra, understood the words. But doubts remain when we compare singer-songwriters to other singers. Can we say Ella Fitzgerald, whose voice had no peer, understood the words she sang the way Frank and Billie understood theirs? What about Bing Crosby (a favorite of Dylan's), whose jazzy baritone changed the course of popular music before Sinatra even showed up? Crosby's winking sense of humor insinuates itself into his performances, but not with much depth. The list could go on, and it's well worth listening closely and asking the question of, say, Billy Eckstine, Doris Day (before Hollywood), Tony Bennett, Debbie Reynolds, Gene Kelly, and, unavoidably, Judy Garland. I've heard Garland called "the greatest performer of the 20th century," another bit of hyperbole, probably suggested by an interested party. Her popularity was bolstered by her very public decline from beloved child star (born somewhere over the rainbow) to drug-addled crooner. But did her undeniable emotional suffering translate to genuine lyric intelligence, to the kind of sapience O'Hara seems to intuit?

Perhaps the most interesting figure of the era – even earlier than Crosby – is Fred Astaire. Though not even remembered as much of a singer these days, Astaire was Cole Porter's first choice to sing his songs. And Cole Porter, as a friend of mine once observed, is the best poet Yale ever produced. Would he have favored a singer who didn't understand the words?

*

But the past is prologue, as the homicidal Antonio says in *The Tempest*. Or, to echo Hamlet:

> Yea, from the table of my memory
> I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
> All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,
> That youth and observation copied there.

Hamlet is alone when he makes this promise, but – appropriately when compared to our present relationship with Sinatra-era singers – he's responding to a ghost.

The past for us is not even prologue. It's more like an ectoplasmic phantom. Since the rise of singer-songwriters in the 60s and their colonization of the popular music scene, the insinuation that the singer might not understand the words would strike most contemporary listeners as contradictory and insulting. And I'm using the word "colonization" advisedly, with all its resonance of Columbus (*Colón*), the first encounters, and myriad predations against the newly colonized. The rout of the professional songwriters of the Aldon music teams at 1650 Broadway, who included such later singer-songwriting luminaries as Carol King and Neil Diamond, along with the utter demolition of Tin Pan Alley, testify to the overwhelming force of the recording artists who wrote and performed their own songs. Significantly, the overriding motif of the revolution was sincerity, foundationed deep, and based largely on the singers' personal identity with the composition of the music.

As is well known, Dylan was the *enfant terrible* of the New Order, first among equals *aux barricades*. His arrival on the Greenwich Village scene and his Columbia recording contract – there's that word *Columbus* again – arguably with even greater effect than the Beatles and the British Invasion, threatened to disenfranchise the ventriloquizing songwriters of Tin Pan Alley. With a staggering display of arrogance from a 21-year-old – who, by his own admission, had only been writing songs for a few years – Dylan boldly calls out those uptown songwriters in the spoken introduction to "Bob Dylan's Blues" on *Freewheelin'*. Using his ironical Iron Range twang, he says, "Unlike most of the songs nowadays bein' written in Tin Pan Alley – that's where most of the folk songs come from nowadays – this, this is a song, this wasn't written up there, this was written somewhere down in the United States." The battle lines were drawn: "folk songs" could not be mass-produced in Tin Pan Alley song factories.

Full stop. Dylan's resistance to the established music culture, his Woody- (or Wobblie-) like stance, was not lost on fans who were hungry for the real experience, the *natural* experience, a return to the folk purity of Blind Lemon Jefferson, Merle Travis, Doc Watson, and Lightnin' Hopkins. Nor would the likes of Dave Van Ronk, Tom Paxton, Joan Baez, Phil Ochs, or Fred Neil have been ungrateful for Columbia's marketing of a stylistic and *philosophical* distinction they'd been trying to popularize for years.

In the subsequent agon, Dylan and many of his cohort not only survived against all odds but superseded the song-factories among the record-buying public. Sinatra's generation, who matched performative brilliance with superior musical sophistication, continued to hold mainstream media prominence. Yet the subculture juggernaut, swarming over the charts, branded them as artificial and impure.

In contrast – facile though it may seem now – the songwriters who wrote their own tunes and sang their own lyrics brought a longed-for genuineness to music, a promise that they understood the words sung in every stanza because they wrote the words themselves. It's easy now to object that singers like W.C. Handy, Robert Johnson, Blind Willie McTell, Lead Belly, Woody Guthrie, Mississippi John Hurt, and so on, wrote, sang, and *recorded* their own songs long before the 60s rise of the singer-songwriters. But these musicians flew far below the radar of popular music, and not simply because many of them were Black – after all, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and Nat Cole, among others, made their mark during more or less the same era. Despite being the root of jazz, however, the acoustic blues repertoire was considered primitive, underproduced, and coarsely executed. The powerful music business elites dismissed the acoustic performers as provincial country pickers and ignored them. The result of this neglect is now the stuff of legends. Notoriously, many of the recordings we have of these early singer-songwriters are the product, not of studio sessions, but of folklorists' research with single mikes and reel-to-reel machines in Southern hotel-rooms. (Robert Johnson's most important songs were recorded in Room 414 of the Gunter Hotel in San Antonio.) A few artists managed to get studio time and better production values, but the record distribution was meager, and the disks were soon remaindered, along with the singers themselves.

That all changed, of course, when rock 'n roll took center stage and the blues became the basis of popular music. The lost singer-songwriters of the 30s and 40s were lionized and those still living were tracked down from the Appalachians to the Mississippi Delta. The project of rediscovery and renaissance came up like a groundswell. Not only twelve-bar blues, but the English and Scottish ballads, many drawn from their American mountain versions, began showing up in folksingers' repertoires – *viz.* the paradigm-shift of "Hard Rain" from the

repurposed Lord Randal. New possibilities opened up for songwriters, and – without hyperbole – for musical culture itself when mostly white twenty-something "songwriter-singers" wrote themselves into the songs they wove from prior blues and ballads.

They "wipe[d] away all trivial fond records," making the songs they wrote and sang inflexible benchmarks of genuineness and sincerity. But all was not peace and love. In the first half of the 60s, the acoustic performers, eschewing showbiz insincerity and loud pounding music, squared off against the rock 'n' roll performers and the noisy staginess of their bands. It's easy to forget the contempt the folkies felt for rock 'n' roll: Dylan himself mocked rock singers in "Talkin' World War III Blues":

> Well, I remember seein' some ad
> So I turned on my Conelrad
> But I didn't pay my Con Ed bill
> So the radio didn't work so well
> Turned on my record player –
> It was Rock-a-day Johnny singin', "Tell Your Ma, Tell Your Pa
> Our Love's A-gonna Grow Ooh-wah, Ooh-wah"

That was in 1963. Two years later, in July 1965 at the Newport Folk Festival, he unleashed an electric set with The Butterfield Blues Band as his backing group. He was booed off the stage. Although he returned that night and played a few acoustic favorites to mollify the audience, the die had been cast. As Clinton Heylin puts it, "Dylan was no longer the sole property of folkies... and they weren't amused."[3] Dylan fans know the dénouement of this over-scrutinized drama all too well: in concert after concert on his 1966 tour, after he "went electric," audiences booed and regarded Dylan as a traitor.

But a traitor to *what* exactly? Is it even possible nowadays to remember the depth of commitment to folk music, let alone recall the force of the hostility among the self-declaredly betrayed?

It remains a phenomenon of that phenomenal period in music history that so many fans (not to mention other folk performers) had so much invested in preserving what they heard as folk music's sincerity. What they saw as Dylan's turncoat action threatened the insularity of

[3] Clinton Heylin, *Judas! From Forest Hills to the Free Trade Hall: A Historical View of the Big Boo* (New York: Lesser Gods, 2016), 16.

the folk movement and undermined any claim to sincerity or purity that Dylan might have had. Few people at the time recognized how Dylan's experimental electric tour *advanced* the sincerity and lyric power of folk music in the cantons of popular music. There was too much heat at the time, and not enough light. One would have to do more than merely remember the dug-in positions of the Second Folk movement. One would have to recall the apostolic devotion of the folkies to Dylan's music, to his inimitable voice, to his pared-down sincerity—all of which seemed to be lost in the new electric language. The sea of boos were an attack on Dylan's loss of straightforwardness, his abandonment of the socio-political stance represented by acoustic music, and his apparent capitulation to the same record-industry standards he himself had helped overthrow.

This bizarrely violent reaction to a *musician* of all people was the direct result of the Diegetic Fallacy. Fans, critics, and even skeptical fellow folk musicians had mistaken the *fabula* for reality. They only heard the narrative intermittently, or misjudged its speaker for the singer. Ryan explains Seymour Chapman's characterization of a fabula as a discourse that is *made to be believed*:

> For a discourse to evoke a fabula, it must bring a universe to life and convey to the reader the sense that at the center of the universe resides an actual or real world, a realm of factual states and events, whose chronological succession determines a history. This world is inhabited by intelligent beings who produce a variety of mental representations, such as beliefs, wishes, projections, intents, obligations, dreams, and fantasies.[4]

Think about songs as fabula, each of them bringing to life a separate universe, a new world of "factual states and events." Allow this world to be "inhabited by intelligent beings" – by different speakers in every song – producing an array of "beliefs, wishes, projections, intents, obligations, dreams, and fantasies."

Now let Dylan's songs be inhabited by this variety of intelligent beings and ask who is speaking in, say, "All Along the Watchtower," "Sara," "To Ramona," "My Back Pages," "Tangled Up in Blue," "License to Kill," "Blind Willie McTell," "Mississippi," "Don't Think Twice, It's Alright."

And keep asking five or six hundred times.

[4] Ryan, 320.

Essays

Bob Dylan and Our Plague Years

BY Roberta Rakove

On March 19, 2020, California became the first state to issue a stay-at-home order due to the Covid-19 pandemic. One week later, Bob Dylan sent a midnight message on his website and social media:

> Greetings to my fans and followers with gratitude for all your support and loyalty across the years. This is an unreleased song we recorded a while back that you might find interesting. Stay safe, stay observant, and may God be with you.

With that message, Dylan released "Murder Most Foul," one of the most remarkable songs in his catalog. None of us, including Dylan, knew that we were entering a period of twenty months when a pandemic would dramatically constrain our lives. But over that time, he gave us extraordinary work that included "Murder Most Foul," a major new album, and a unique concert stream. Through the surprise of the releases and the startling imagination of its content and creative use of technology, his art offered a respite from both our fear and our pandemic-imposed limitations. During a time of traumatic isolation, Dylan used music to create a sense of community among millions around the world.

Art and pandemics are not strangers. Dylan is part of a long tradition of using art as a response to plagues. As Frank Snowden points out in writing about the bubonic plague in *Epidemics and Society, From the Black Death to the Present*:

> An entire genre of plague literature arose including works by Giovanni Boccaccio, Daniel Defoe, Alessandro Manzoni, and Albert Camus. It also transformed the iconography of European painting and sculpture, and it deeply affected architecture with the construction of major cathedrals and churches dedicated to the redeemer, the Virgin Mary, and the plague saints Sebastian and Roch… As late as the 20th century the disease inspired Ingmar Bergman's 1957 film *The Seventh Seal.* (31-32)

Later contagious outbreaks continued to generate art from the cholera outbreak that inspired Edgar Allan Poe's short story, "The Masque of the Red Death" to the visual art of the HIV pandemic that was closely linked to political activism.

While pandemics gave rise to many kinds of art, the role of music is different in its impact. Music has been credited with unique therapeutic roles in helping individuals and communities cope with epidemics, but as Remi Chiu notes in *Plague and Music in the Renaissance*, "while much research has been conducted on the political, economic, medical, and even literary and artistic consequences of plague, the connections between pestilence and music have been comparatively understudied" (5). Chiu's work catalogs how music was recorded in plague tracts by Renaissance physicians as a part of a therapeutic regimen "to counteract the effects of fear with joy… and to distract the mind from vile imaginings" (16). The phenomenon of plague processions created a communal experience and an appearance of social order at a time of isolation. Music, including anti-pestilential musical prayers written to the plague saint Sebastian and others, was central to these processions (118-120).

Dylan was not alone in finding innovative ways to combine music and technology to ease the isolation and fear of the Covid-19 pandemic. *Frontiers in Psychology* compiled a list of over forty articles under the research topic "Social Convergence in Times of Spatial Distancing: The Role of Music During the Covid-19 Pandemic." The impact of music during Covid-19 on both emotions and isolation was similar to its use in plague outbreaks in the Renaissance. In a December 2020 article in *Frontiers of Psychology*, Remi Chiu compares the uses of music in the outbreak of plague in Milan in 1576 and the Covid-19 pandemic noting, "It is perhaps not surprising that the mood maintenance and social cohesion functions of music emerge so clearly during epidemics past and present, given the sustained emotional turmoil and social isolation that result from widespread outbreaks of contagious disease" ("Functions of Music-Making Under Lockdown"). Examples during Covid-19 included the balcony flash mobs in Italy singing their national anthem, the citizens of Montreal singing the songs of Leonard Cohen from their windows, the streaming concerts by musicians from their homes, Yo-Yo Ma's songs of comfort on YouTube, the use of Zoom to create choral and instrumental experiences, and the sharing of curated playlists on Spotify.

But Dylan, as always, was different.

Let's start with that midnight announcement of "Murder Most Foul." Dylan's virtual audience may not be the size of Taylor Swift's, but it is significant. His official X/Twitter account has over 400,000 followers. His YouTube channel following is three times that size,

at 1.3 million subscribers. "Murder Most Foul" on YouTube has amassed 5.3 million views. Dylan's announcement reached a large community.

At the time of the release of "Murder Most Foul," the United States had been in lockdown for just a week. Just a few days before sending out "Murder Most Foul" Dylan had announced a cancellation of fifteen April concerts in Japan due to the Covid-19 outbreak. While it is possible that the song's release was already scheduled, Dylan accompanying it with a personal message was highly unusual. As anyone who attends his live shows knows, he famously does not chat to the audience. When he says "thank you," his audience goes berserk. If he tells a dad joke during the band introduction, Dylan social media lights up.[1] The *fact* of communication is powerful by virtue of its rarity. He is talking to us! In the first sentence, "Greetings to fans and followers with gratitude for all your support and loyalty across the years*,"* he acknowledged his community and reinforced our communal identity. In the second sentence, *"*This is an unreleased song we recorded a while back that you might find interesting*,"* he shocked us to attention. We *might* find it interesting? He must know that his community finds the smallest details about him interesting. An unreleased song, his first new song since 2012, isn't *interesting*. It's a 7.4 earthquake. In his last sentence, *"*Stay safe, stay observant, and may God be with you," he sent a message of concern. One week into our isolation, we didn't know what our lives would be, when we would be able to see our family and friends, and how we could avoid a frightening new illness. Bob reached out.

The gift he gave us was more than a song. It was a cultural and historical opus, not meant to soothe but to challenge. As the Renaissance physicians prescribed, the power of the song gave us something to think about other than our fear. Ian Grant, co-host of the *Jokermen* and *Never Ending Stories* podcasts, describes what that moment meant to him. In conversation with his podcast co-host Evan Laffer, he says:

> I still remember where I was the first time I was hearing this song. I was in my kitchen in my little shoebox fucking apartment on Franklin in Bed Stuy and I was texting you about it and it was like seven in the morning, and it was several months before the show ever even started. It was just like I woke up and it was like "Bob Dylan 16 minute song, listen to this" and we were also like seven days into the shit that's been going on for the

[1] The Dylan site *Expecting Rain* has an ongoing list of Dylan's dad jokes which generally appear during band introductions such as this painful one about drummer David Kemper: "He once swallowed a roll of film, we'll see what develops." (www.expectingrain.com/jokes.html)

> last two and a half years at this point and it just really felt like a flash bulb moment for me and it just kept going and going and going and I remember the fucking moment it got to "rub a dub dub" and I just cracked a grin like I was in, I was in… (and in texting Evan in California) "hey wake up, there's a 17 minute song from Bob Dylan about the JFK assassination!" (*Jokermen*, 11/20/2022)

Grant's description of the power of "Murder Most Foul" to distract is even more powerful because at that moment in time, the city he was living in was in crisis as an early global epicenter of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Of all the songs recorded for *Rough and Rowdy Ways*, the complexity of "Murder Most Foul" allowed it to transport us out of obsessing about the virus and into a shared experience. Simon Vozick-Levinson was right when he wrote in *Rolling Stone* on March 27, 2020, "Murder Most Foul Is The Bob Dylan Song We Need Right Now," but not for the reason he states: "Murder Most Foul is really about the ways that music can comfort us in our national trauma." There is a lot going on in the song, but comfort is not at the top of the list. The song's power came from the fact that you couldn't stop listening to it, couldn't stop thinking about it, and couldn't stop analyzing it. As Anne Margaret Daniel notes reviewing the song in the summer 2020 issue of the *Dylan Review*, "From that first seventeen minutes to subsequent quarter-hours plus, one does not so much listen to 'Murder Most Foul' as be washed over by it… 'Tempest' may be his song about the *Titanic* but 'Murder Most Foul' *is* titanic." Immediately, reviews, news reports, and podcasts appeared. *NPR* had a curated setlist of all the songs mentioned in "Murder Most Foul" up within hours of the release. Parodies were posted and arguments broke out. It became the first of Dylan's songs to reach number one on the Billboard chart. On the 60th anniversary of Kennedy's assassination in 2023, fans continued to share the song on social media. It is unimaginable that any other songwriter could create a work that would produce this reaction.

"Murder Most Foul" was the musical remedy prescribed by the Renaissance physicians during their plague. We stopped thinking about washing our groceries and sanitizing our hands. Instead, we thought about Wolfman Jack and the history of American music, the triple underpass, and the last thoughts of a martyred president. We shared our thoughts through technology within our community, restoring some social cohesion.

"Murder Most Foul" was quickly followed by the releases of "I Contain Multitudes" on April 17 and "False Prophet" on May 7. It became apparent that something was indeed

happening here, creating a sense of anticipation that led up to the release of *Rough and Rowdy Ways* on June 19.

At the time *Rough and Rowdy Ways* was released, the United States was in the middle of another shockwave. On May 25, a white police officer murdered George Floyd, a Black man living in Minneapolis, while three other officers looked on. A shocking video of the murder went public. Large protests broke out in Minneapolis and spread to hundreds of cities and towns across the United States with estimates of between 15 and 26 million people taking to the streets (Buchanan, Bui, Patel *New York Times* July 3, 2020). There was widespread speculation and hope that perhaps this largest and most diverse demonstration in the history of the country would lead to historic change.

Bob Dylan was aware of these events. In a June 12, 2020, interview with Dylan in the *New York Times* the historian Douglas Brinkley wrote:

> I had a brief follow up with Dylan, 79, one day after Floyd was killed in Minneapolis. Clearly shaken by the horror that had occurred in his home state, he sounded depressed. "It sickened me no end to see George tortured to death like that," he said. "It was beyond ugly. Let's hope that justice comes swift for the Floyd family and for the nation."

But Dylan did not comment musically at the time nor since. That lack of comment was certainly not due to a failure of commitment or insight from someone who has written and performed a long list of songs related to racial injustice for decades, many of which already addressed the issues raised by the George Floyd murder.

Added to the social upheaval of the reaction to George Floyd's murder was the ongoing impact of a pandemic that had grown in geography, numbers, and mortality. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) created a timeline of the pandemic, noting of May, 2020: "The unemployment rate in the U.S. is 14.7% – the highest since the Great Depression with 20.5 million people out of work" (https://www.cdc.gov/museum/timeline/covid19.html). By the end of the month, the recorded death toll from Covid-19 in the U.S. surpassed 100,000. By early June, the number of confirmed cases in the country exceeded 2 million. Vaccines were being developed but not yet in sight. The President was at war with the public health establishment. We were exhausted and uncertain.

Fortuitously, *Rough and Rowdy Ways* had been recorded just weeks before all activity shut down in March of 2020. Its arrival in June was definitely welcomed. In his June 15, 2020

Rolling Stone review Rob Sheffield captured the intersection of Dylan's music and the moment in time in which it was released:

> Another apocalypse; another side of Bob Dylan. The man really knows how to pick his moments. Dylan has brilliantly timed his new masterwork for a summer when the hard rain is falling all over the nation: a plague, a quarantine, revolutionary action in the streets, cities on fire, phones out of order. *Rough and Rowdy Ways* is his first batch of new songs in 8 years, and it's an absolute classic – it has the bleak majesty of latter-day Dylan albums like *Modern Times* and *Tempest*, yet it goes beyond them, tapping even deeper into cosmic American mysteries.

In other words, a masterwork that was just what the Renaissance doctors ordered, distracting us in perilous times with compelling music. But in July of 2021, Dylan had another surprise up his sleeve, this one created specifically for a pandemic release and reflecting our response to it in its staging: the unexpected streaming concert film, *Shadow Kingdom*. Like the passion plays written and performed in Oberammergau and the anti-pestilential musical prayers used in religious processions during bubonic plague outbreaks, our 21st century pandemic was a central part of the production of *Shadow Kingdom*. The creation of the songs from Dylan's "early" period obviously preceded the pandemic by decades, but the film's art direction and distribution were dictated by and reflected precautions and restrictions imposed by Covid-19. Rather than being constrained by these limitations, Dylan and his director, Israeli-American filmmaker Alma Har'el, used them to liberate the viewers from their isolation.

The announcement of the streaming event was a surprise. What it would actually be was unknown to everyone, including the owners of the livestreaming platform *Veeps* that would broadcast *Shadow Kingdom*. The media and the Dylan fans around the world bought tickets for what they were told would be 48 hours of access to …something. Viewers got their money's worth both in the music and the production. In his review of the album release of the Shadow *Kingdom* music, Michaelangelo Matos writing in *Rolling Stone* on June 1, 2023 called Dylan's reinterpretation of his earlier songs on the *Shadow Kingdom* album a triumph. But beyond the music, *Shadow Kingdom* offered an experience that challenged the pandemic limitations we had experienced for sixteen months.

In certain ways, the stream of *Shadow Kingdom* provided many of the features of attending a live concert. Viewers would have a limited number of hours to view it, although that time was extended. Just like a live Dylan concert, the bootleggers were ready to capture it

and play a cat and mouse game with Dylan Inc., keeping videos up on YouTube. Importantly, the stream also allowed a form of audience engagement that moved the viewing of *Shadow Kingdom* from an individual experience to a communal one. Opening the concert site early with a worldwide chat room allowed viewers to not only gather in a virtual venue but to speak to each other, identifying their locations and sharing their excitement and hopes for what they were about to see. This type of virtual communication in a period of isolation is no small thing. In a study from *Frontiers of Psychology* on successful audience engagement with Covid-19-era YouTube music broadcasts, the authors identify five themes: interaction, unity, resilience, identity, and emotion (Fraser, Crooke, Davidson). The online messaging that preceded the start of *Shadow Kingdom* certainly allowed for most if not all of these.

Streaming concerts were commonplace during the pandemic. These were usually cozy events from an artist's living room or an empty performance space. Of course they were enjoyable, but at the same time their settings were visual reminders of our inability to have a communal live concert experience. In *Shadow Kingdom*, Dylan and Har'el effectively removed the conventions of time and space to distance the viewers from pandemic physical restrictions. The *Shadow Kingdom* audiences in the different locations in the film seem to be from multiple eras and places. Are we in the Bon Bon Club in Marseille that is thanked in the final credits? Are some of the performances happening in an indeterminate year before smoking was banned? Are we in a Western saloon? Is this taking place before color film existed? Have we landed in the barroom with the jukebox on the cover of *Rough and Rowdy Ways*? As Kitty Empire noted in her five-star review of the *Shadow Kingdom* stream in *The Guardian* on July 24, "there is no drummer to keep time because that would be too definite, and we are in a realm where it could be the 20s or the 40s, night or day." Through the visual clues in the different venues in which Dylan was performing, the film took us traveling across countries and decades.

This does not mean that *Shadow Kingdom* ignores the disorientation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. As Nathan Schmidt notes in his review of *Shadow Kingdom* in *Dylan Review 3.2*, the juxtaposition of "masked band and unmasked audience members signify the duality of the way things are and the way they used to be." By presenting both, Dylan and Har'el acknowledge the present but do not restrict the viewers to it. The film does not offer a vision of a post Covid-19 future, but it effectively recalls a past of live performances that may yet come again.

Other forms of shared communication among Dylan fans, beyond those related directly to Dylan's musical output, grew virtually during Covid-19. The growth of podcast listeners during Covid-19 has been well documented and Dylan devotees have certainly had a wide

choice. Craig Danuloff, the founder of the *FM Podcast Network*, identified fourteen Dylan podcasts in his panel on Dylan podcasting at *World of Bob Dylan 2023* in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Of these, three were launched during Covid-19, including *The Bobcats*, *Jokermen*, and *The Dylantantes*. London-based podcast host Laura Tenschert utilized her influential *Definitely Dylan* program to create a virtual international group of subscribers who continue to meet monthly over Zoom. As a proxy indicator for the popularity of these podcasts, *Definitely Dylan* has almost 9,000 followers on X/Twitter and close to 20,000 on Instagram. *Jokermen* has close to 12,000 followers on X/Twitter and 8,000 on Instagram. Music writer Ray Padgett's Dylan Substack e-newsletter, *Flagging Down the Double E's*, launched two months before the March 2020 shutdown, has over 12,000 subscribers. When the University of Tulsa Institute of Bob Dylan Studies was forced to move its second symposium, *Dylan at 80*, online in 2021, the sold-out attendance was almost double that of its initial and highly successful first in-person *World of Bob Dylan* in 2019. *Dylan at 80* drew an international sold-out enrollment of close to 1,000, and presentations from Italy and Denmark.

By the fall of 2021, a combination of effective vaccines, physical and electronic evidence of vaccination, and ready supplies of high-quality masks made the possibility of live indoor performances of music once again available. Dylan was among the first performers to respond to this opportunity. On September 26, 2021, his website and Twitter account published the message: "Bob Dylan's Fall U.S. tour dates have been announced. The first dates go on sale starting Friday, October 1." Perhaps even more optimistic was the attachment of the poster for the tour with the message "*Bob Dylan Rough and Rowdy Ways World Wide Tour 2021-2024."* When an 80-year-old man announces a three-year worldwide tour and invites us to join him, who are we to think we don't have a future? Concerts commenced in November, 2021, many including meetups of followers who had first engaged online during the pandemic. When he completed the last concert of his triumphant 2024 American spring tour in Austin on April 6, 2024 he had performed 202 concerts in North America, Asia, and Europe over a period of thirty months, something that seemed unthinkable when society shut down in March of 2020.

It is not always clear when pandemics end. Though the World Health Organization called an end to Covid-19 as a public health emergency in May, 2023, 10,000 people died of the virus that December. It is even more difficult to understand the effect of pandemics on society until we have the perspective of distance. But unquestionably, Covid-19 has been a traumatic event. Music was not a cure for that trauma, but there is evidence that it helped relieve stress and isolation. The music that Dylan provided and his use of technology to make it available achieved both of these outcomes. As Dylan noted in his interview with Jeff Slate in

December 2022, "Technology can nurture us, or it can shut us out." At the height of our isolation, he merged his art and technology to nurture us. In the same interview, Slate asked Dylan why, in *The Philosophy of Modern Song*, does he thank the crew from Dunkin' Donuts. Dylan responded, "Because they were compassionate, supportive and they went the extra mile." During our plague years, so did he.

Works Cited

Brinkley, Douglas. "Bob Dylan Has a Lot on His Mind," *New York Times*, June 12, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/12/arts/music/bob-dylan-rough-and-rowdy-ways.html

Buchanan, Larry; Bui, Quoctrung; Patel, Jugal K. "Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S, History." *New York Times*, July 3, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html

Centers for Disease Prevention Museum. "CDC Covid-19 Timeline." https://www.cdc.gov/museum/timeline/covid19.html)

Chiu, Remi "Functions of Music Making Under Lockdown: A Trans-Historical Perspective Across Two Pandemics," *Frontiers in Psychology*, December 16, 2020, Sec. Cultural Psychology, Volume 11-2020. https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychology/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.616499/full

Chiu, Remi. *Plague and Music in the Renaissance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

Daniel, Anne Margaret. "Murder Most Foul." *Dylan Review*, Vol. 2.1. Summer 2020.

---. "Functions of Music Making Under Lockdown: A Trans-Historical Perspective Across Two Pandemics. *Frontiers in Psychology*, December 17, 2020, Sec. Cultural Psychology
Volume 11 - 2020 https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.616499

Empire, Kitty. "Bob Dylan Shadow Kingdom Live Stream Review: Dylan's Juke Joint of Dreams." *The Guardian*, July 24, 2021. https://www.theguardian.com/music/2021/jul/24/bob-dylan-shadow-kingdom-live-stream-review

---. "Bob Dylan the Jokerman." *Expecting Rain*. https://www.expectingrain.com/jokes.html

Fraser, Trisnasari; Crooke, Alexander Hew Dale; Davidson, Jane W. "Music Has No Borders: An Exploratory Study of Audience Engagement With YouTube Music Broadcasts During Covid-19 Lockdown, 2020," *Frontiers in Psychology*, July 8, 2021, Sec. Cultural Psychology, Volume 12 – 2021. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.643893

Gensler, Andy. "Veeps' Joel Madden On Bob Dylan's *Shadow Kingdom* Livestream: "We're on the Edge of Our Seats Like Everyone Else." https://news.pollstar.com/2021/07/07/veeps-joel-madden-on-bob-dylans-shadow-kingdom-livestream-were-on-the-edge-of-our-seats-like-everyone-else/

Grant, Ian and Laffer, Evan. "Bob Dylan: Murder Most Foul," *Jokermen*, November 22, 2023.

Matos, Michaelangelo. "Bob Dylan Makes His Classic Songs Seem Stunningly Brand-New on *Shadow Kingdom*," *Rolling Stone*, June 1, 2023.

Schmidt, Nathan. "*Shadow Kingdom: The Early Songs of Bob Dylan*." Dylan Review, Vol. 3.2, Fall/Winter 2021-2022.

Sheffield, Rob. "Bob Dylan has Given Us One of His Most Timely Albums Ever With *Rough and Rowdy Ways*." *Rolling Stone*, June 15, 2020. https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-album-reviews/bob-dylan-rough-rowdy-ways-1015086/

Slate, Jeff. "Bob Dylan Q&A About *The Philosophy of Modern Song*." December 20, 2022. https://www.bobdylan.com/news/bob-dylan-interviewed-by-wall-street-journals-jeff-slate/

Snowden, Frank M. *Epidemics and Society From the Black Death to the Present*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020.

Vozick-Levinson, Simon. " 'Murder Most Foul' Is The Bob Dylan Song We Need Right Now,' " *Rolling Stone*, March 27,2020. https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/bob-dylan-murder-most-foul-974108/

.

Designing Dylan: Form and Content in *Bob Dylan: Mixing Up the Medicine*

BY Jason Grant

Books are aesthetic objects. As much as the collected material it documents, *Bob Dylan: Mixing Up the Medicine* – the official publication of The Bob Dylan Center in Tulsa, Oklahoma – is a physical design artifact, and the content it holds is just as constructed. Like all aesthetic objects, *Mixing Up the Medicine* is a product of the choices of its creators, the imprint of its historical moment, and the inextricable link between the two. Following Alessandro Carrera's review of the book in *The Dylan Review's* previous edition[1], our challenge here is understanding what was actually designed, in the sense of consciously created, and what is also routine cultural reflex, born from the systemic, ongoing effects of design and its evasive relational complexity.

Any published account of Dylan's career is automatically *epic* due to the mythology of its shape-shifting subject. *Mixing Up the Medicine*, like many of the earliest literary works, is an adventurer's log book charting the landmarks of a pioneering explorer's discoveries. From the very first book, the travails of *Gilgamesh*, transcribed in cuneiform on clay tablets, to Chinese Song-dynasty block-printed travel literature, books have long been produced as mythological and historical records of heroic travelers' adventures.

In their day, the lead-set printed European colonial conquests were a publishing phenomenon. I recently donned white gloves to view the first ever published account of Captain James Cook's (ultimately genocidal) journey around the world, and the rarest published work relating to Cook's Endeavour voyage, a collection of charts of the east coast of Australia and New Zealand. Until the late 19th century most books did not have illustrated covers, so in the absence of pictures, extravagantly descriptive titles were needed to evoke content and attract readers. Although from a contemporary perspective, reading the whole title almost risks negating the need to read any further. One of the Cook books is titled: *Astronomical observations made in the voyages which were undertaken by order of his present Majesty, for making discoveries in the Southern Hemisphere, and successfully performed by Commodore*

[1] https://thedylanreview.org/2024/02/21/review-of-bob-dylan-mixing-up-the-medicine/

Byron, Captain Carteret, Captain Wallis, and Captain Cook, in the Dolphin, Tamer, Swallow, and Endeavour.

In contrast, *Mixing Up the Medicine*'s front cover is all image. The single striking photo without a title, or any text at all, may reveal as much about evolving socio-technical conditions as it does about Dylan's fame. For centuries, books have been sold in brick and mortar stores, romantic sites that persist in our imagination even as they vanish from our communities (support your local independent bookstore!). Like the album covers increasingly designed to be viewed as thumbnails on digital streaming platforms, the majority of books are now viewed initially on a screen and sold online (by 2020, over 71.2% of the United States publishing industry's total revenue was coming from online book sales).[2] As a consequence, covers are becoming simpler, bolder, and in some cases are exaggerating their formal, material qualities in opposition to the intangible ephemerality of digital information. The distillation of visual information on book covers isn't just down to a new diminished virtual viewing context, but also the ability for less literal images to be accompanied online by descriptive texts. It's also worth noting that the magnetic, unadorned photo on *Mixing Up the Medicine's* cover is by Jerry Schatzberg from a post-*Highway 61 Revisited* studio shoot, and prefaces his *Blonde on Blonde* cover shot, which began a brief, anomalous period (1966–1970) when most of Dylan's album covers were similarly devoid of title typography.

There are thousands of photographs of Dylan at every age and in every era. However, reinforcing the archaic characterisation of Dylan as a folksinger singing protest songs defaults stubbornly to the 60s. As Dylan himself said in a 1985 interview: "It's kinda funny… When I see my name anywhere, it's (often) 'the 60s this or the 60s that.' I can't figure out sometimes if people think I'm dead or alive."[3] As a marketable medium, perhaps an image of iconic 60s Dylan is highly *legible*, while Dylan's older visage is just harder to read. Regardless, the cover image suspends him in amber as some kind of estranged historical subject. A "walking antique" for the hypnotist collectors. For the cover of a Dylan book published in 2023, at the tail end of an unprecedented seven decade career, should designers still be searching through mid-century photographic proofs? At the time of writing, Bob Dylan is 83 years old. Can't this resilience and maturity be visually celebrated, rather than habitually ignored? Give me a portrait of the old explorer still powerful and relevant: "I can see the history of the whole human race / It's all right there – it's carved into your face."

[2] https://wordsrated.com/online-book-sales-statistics

[3] https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1985-11-17-ca-7231-story.html

The book exists because of its subject, for its subject's audience. Then again, Dylan, as a popular performer and songwriter, is actually the direct result of the book form – not just as a source of content, or influences ("I read Erica Jong!") but more fundamentally as a transformative technology. The development of the printed word manifested the possibility of an audience. This is Marshall McLuhan's idea that books created the phenomenon of a public: "The old manuscript forms were not sufficiently powerful instruments of technology to create publics in the sense that print was able to do — unified, homogeneous, reading publics."[4] One of Dylan's influences acknowledged in his Nobel lecture, Charles Dickens, caused a riot in 1841, as legend has it, when frenzied readers stormed the New York harbor in anticipation of the British ship arriving with the final installment of his serialized novel, *The Old Curiosity Shop*.[5] Long before recorded music and film, books manifested *fans,* not just for a writer, but for an actor, artist and "song and dance man": "I see the turning of the page / Curtain risin' on a new age."[6] Gutenberg's printing press and Dylan's guitar are playing the same song.

Offering the book's content as a more broadly accessible online archive would involve obtaining unlikely permissions from rights holders, but who knows, they may yet. Even so, the digital transmission of the written word, for all its convenience, has not replaced traditional print, especially not for longer texts (and not always as a foolproof monetizable commodity). Popular predictions of prints' extinction now seem obsolete themselves. The unique sensorial qualities of the printed page, with its ink solvent aromatics, the vanilla and almond notes from a complex organic polymer in the paper called lignin, and the medium's tactility – as well as the ways in which light is absorbed and reflected from its surface – combine to offer unique haptic, optical and olfactory pleasure. Then there's the growing body of research showing the reading benefits of a book's physicality, for example that print reading can enhance comprehension by up to eight times more than reading on digital devices.[7] And *Mixing Up the Medicine*'s hefty 608-page hardcover format is plenty of print, enabling provisional global dissemination of the Dylan museum's Oklahoma-based collection.

---

[4] Marshall McLuhan interview by British literary critic Frank Kermode, on BBC, *Monitor*, 1965, published as a transcript in *Understanding Me: Lectures and Interviews*. Editors Stephanie McLuhan, David Staines. (McClelland & Stewart, 2003), 59

[5] Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens*, (HarperCollins, 1990), 319

[6] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DcPoZZVm3Dk&t=152s

[7] https://www.uv.es/uvweb/scientific-culture-innovation-unit-chair-scientific-dissemination/en/recent-news/playful-reading-paper-helps-understanding-more-than-if-it-is-done-digital-media-1285899375231/Novetat.htm

There is a typical limit to the scale of a large format hardcover, that relates to both the economics of conventional publishing efficiencies and the human body itself. To accommodate more of the museum's collection, *Mixing Up the Medicine* could have easily been many multiple times its current length. The authors, Mark Davidson and Parker Fishel, claim the book represents just 2% of the Bob Dylan Archive.[8] But it deserves to be read, not just looked at, and that means conforming to some physical constraints. Odds are you're not reading many of German publisher Taschen's "Sumo" sized books in bed, for example, some of which are 44 pounds and come with their own custom stands. *Mixing Up the Medicine*'s own publisher, Calloway, has titles that include the limited edition "super-deluxe" *Sistine Chapel*, with a total of 822 pages across three volumes, weighing 75 pounds and costing $25,000.[9]

A museum can update and rotate its collection, and a website is a bottomless pit of mutable data, but a book is a fixed and finite codex. This is the printed publication's simultaneous strength and limitation. Carving something in stone takes nerve – it stays carved, while history dissolves around it. In a limited exhibition space, as on the bounded pages of a book, the quantity of information is as critical a design decision as choices regarding the nature and presentation of the content. Squeezing too much in can result in missing a lot out. As *Mixing Up the Medicine* emerges from the 60s and 70s, many entries list awards and industry honors, as if to reassure the reader of the subject's ongoing cultural relevance. Maybe the aim here is to ground Dylan in the pop-culture context of the day, but traces of hagiographical deification taint the book's otherwise focused editorial narrative. This is evidenced, not by the celebratory tone, which is arguably unavoidable, but by the omission of shadow, struggle, and failure.

It's well acknowledged that one of the artist's most defining qualities is his creative risk-taking, his willingness to chance falling down and failing, and his ability to pick himself up and forge ahead in new directions, just to risk it all again. Not to mention the creative bravery of changing tack just when success is assured. But we can't have it both ways. Glossing over career missteps, personal misadventures, and creative miscarriages never works out as intended. Rather than elevate the art, it robs it of substance. Can't we also accept the failure, the sexism, the appropriation, the reactionary rants, the lingerie peddling, the dud films, the

[8]https://www.reddit.com/r/bobdylan/comments/17v5dyg/we_are_mark_davidson_and_parker_fishel_coauthors

[9] https://www.callaway.com/sistinechapel

sub-par songs, and more? "Won't you descend from the throne, from where you sit?" This is the challenge for the creators of a book like *Mixing Up the Medicine*, as it is for all custodians of cultural legacy: how to honor an artist without selectively airbrushing their art and life. After all, "To live outside the law, you must be honest."

The design, by Nicholas Callaway, Jerry Kelly, and Toshiya Masuda, fares best when playing it straight, especially with the texts of the twenty-nine invited writers who contribute essays responding to material in the archives. These are distributed regularly amongst the editorial sections and visually differentiated with a gray background, alternate typography, and more consistent, full page column widths. The book's main body text is set in Century Schoolbook, a highly legible, transitional serif typeface designed for the American Type Founders by Morris Fuller Benton in 1924. Here again, the design reaches back to the comfort of the past, with the typeface bathing the book in an aura of authoritative nostalgia. Century Schoolbook was ubiquitous in the first half of the 20th Century in US American textbooks, and will be subconsciously familiar to many US Americans as the typeface they learned to read with.

If reviews mention the book's *form* at all, they invariably praise its design: "immaculately designed compendium";[10] "the very design of *Mixing Up the Medicine* may be its greatest virtue";[11] "gorgeous and luxurious."[12] But for all its considerable merit, the book is not quite any of those things. It looks handsome at first glance, but the book's sensitive typography and compelling images excuse compositional and rhythmic lapses. For example, with the Newport Folk Festival spread (pages 158-159), the layout gets cramped and cluttered, with too many images, every one a different size and shape, and text in awkward spaces between.

With a dynamic page composition, not unlike songwriting and performing, the appearance of effortlessness belies considerable ingenuity and dexterity. Making it look easy is never easy.

Perhaps a mix of messy scrapbook and grid-conforming template could have worked, mirroring Dylan's own inventiveness on albums like *Blood on the Tracks*. If it's good enough

[10] https://www.bookpage.com/reviews/bob-dylan-mixing-up-the-medicine-book-review

[11] https://www.allaboutjazz.com/bob-dylan-mixing-up-the-medicine

[12] https://thefm.substack.com/p/mixing-up-the-medicine-book-review

for Dylan, it's good enough for a book about Dylan. Here's Greil Marcus from the infamous 1970 review of *Self Portrait*:

> What matters most is Bob's singing. He's been the most amazing singer of the last ten years, creating his language of stress, fitting five words into a line of ten and ten into a line of five, shoving the words around and opening up spaces for noise and silence that through assault or seduction or the gift of good timing made room for expression and emotion. Every vocal was a surprise. You couldn't predict what it would sound like. The song itself, the structure of the song, was barely a clue. The limits were there to be evaded.[13]

Raymond Foye describes some of this in more formal terms in his essay "Reflections on Dirge," where he considers Dylan's "unique rhythmic sense," his use of syncopation, as well as rubato: "borrowing time from one bar while giving it back to the next, without disrupting the overall rhythmic flow." From liberated page to unbound song, Dylan himself has made these kinds of direct visual/musical comparisons. Speaking about "Tangled Up in Blue," Dylan said: "I guess I was just trying to make it like a painting where you can see the different parts, but then you can see the whole of it."[14]

Now I'm fantasizing that if Dylan had discovered pioneering modernist designers like Kurt Schwitters and Paul Renner, instead of Woody Guthrie and Arthur Rimbaud, he might have made an inspired avant garde editorial designer…

Mixing Up the Medicine compares with other "inside-out biographies" (as Davidson and Fishel describe the volume in their introduction), such as Nick Cave's *Stranger Than Kindness*, another ephemera-built biography whose material artifacts Cave introduces as a "wild-eyed and compulsive superstructure… a support system of manic tangential information."[15] Designed by Tom Hingston and Rasmus Koch, the "peripheral stuff" is beautifully photographed and controlled on the page. Or something like *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, based on the BBC's radio series, in which a "history of humanity" is told with illustrated and interpreted artifacts from the British Museum.[16] To be fair, these are not exactly

[13] Greil Marcus, "Self Portrait No.25" review in *Rolling Stone Magazine* (#63, July 23, 1970), 14

[14] Bob Dylan, *Biograph* liner notes. (CBS, 1985), loose leaf

[15] Nick Cave, Stranger Than Kindness. (Canongate Books, 2020), 3

[16] Neil MacGregor, A History of the World in 100 Objects. (Penguin Press, 2010)

the same kind of book as *Mixing Up the Medicine*, the former having far fewer texts and a much smaller archive to draw from, and the latter's vast collection winnowed by an arbitrary tally, both allowing for a more disciplined sequencing and layout. They do however demonstrate the potential of ensuring the design is equal to the other creative contributions.

The best of the book's essays use the Archives' manuscripts and other records for revelatory excavations of Dylan's work. This great round-up tempts readers to curate their own wish lists: how about Nick Cave, Salman Rushdie, and Haruki Murakami, or Patti Smith, Stephen King and Molly Ringwald? The texts, accompanied by images of related artifacts, support a re-evaluation of previously neglected or denigrated periods. Griffin Ondaatje's investigation of Dylan's relationship to Joseph Conrad, and the way Conrad's novel *Victory* regularly surfaces in Dylan's songs, is exciting, convincing detective work. Raymond Foye's reflection on "Dirge" from 1974's *Planet Waves* goes to the manuscripts and uncovers Leonard Cohen as the initial "animating spirit behind the song," even though the final lyric erases the explicit namecheck. For Foye, the Archive manuscripts also reveal "long-standing interpretation of any given album to be diametrically opposed by the drafts in the notebooks." With *Planet Waves*, what he had assumed were songs informed by fond childhood memories of Dylan's Minnesota youth were manifestly forged as a "dark lament for a country where things have gone seriously wrong." Larry Sloman's more instinctive, personal take on "Handy Dandy" from 1990's *Under the Red Sky* charts the evolution of the song's lyrics on pages of painstakingly reworked drafts. Entries such as these are an overdue expansion of Dylan's popular anthology, illuminating dark corners of his oeuvre. However, many of their accompanying images deserve to be treated with greater respect and sensitivity. For example, some of the smaller images just don't work at their reduced scale, and an artificial, overbearing drop shadow has been grafted onto many of the images, clumsily signifying three-dimensionality. This lack of finesse doesn't do the material justice.

For many readers, the publication's encyclopaedic, chronological structure will be an invitation to leaf straight to a personal watershed album or period. For this reader, that album was *Oh Mercy*. Coming out of an eclectic diet of late punk, early hip hop, and top forty radio, I fell into Dylan's ocean in the late 80's when I was 16 or 17 years old. And it was a deep and mysterious abyss to get lost in. But with his last three records being *Down in the Groove*, *Dylan and the Dead*, and *Knocked out Loaded*, it was also an unflattering period in which he'd been widely written off ("dismissed, derided and misunderstood" as Amanda Petrusich writes in her essay about *Tarantula*) – when his previous eminence was diminished, and future multi-generational canonization was implausible. Nevertheless, for a hungry teenager in working-

class suburbia there were still a couple of decades of potent music to explore, and just a short train ride away, the local library had most of it on cassette. Then one day, while skipping Uni to browse for records, popular music's past warped into my personal present when I came across a newly released album of Dylan originals at my local record store. *Oh Mercy* was a revelation and felt like a vindication. The songs were at once sublime and uneasy. Amid late 80s Australian radio dross, I was getting my head around "Most of the time / I can't even be sure / If she was ever with me / Or if I was ever with her," and "There are no mistakes in life some people say / And it's true sometimes you can see it that way." That extraordinary voice didn't sound like a cornered "legend," it sounded like a seething spirit: "Whatever you wanted / What could it be / Did somebody tell you / That you could get it from me?"

That sustained rejection of conditional acceptance, that endless creative struggle, is part of Dylan's story, perhaps even the heart of it. Any narrative twisting of Dylan's art towards infallibility betrays legitimate artistic triumph. There is so much that is remarkable about *Mixing Up the Medicine*, yet as a designed object, it could have gone further in mirroring its subject's creative ambition and inventiveness. The two paradoxical sides to Dylan's creative process, so powerfully evidenced by the Archive's manuscripts and recordings, are persistent iteration and inexplicable inspiration – a good method for making books as writing songs.

Interview

The Dylan Review *spoke to Dylan scholars Erin Callahan and Anne-Marie Mai during "Bob Dylan – Questions on Masculinity," a conference hosted by Callahan and Mai at the University of Southern Denmark. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.*

***Dylan Review*: How did this conference come about?**

Erin Callahan: Anne-Marie [Mai] and I met in 2018 at the Dylan in the 21st Century conference in Arras, France. And then I reached out to her when I was doing interviews for Jim Salvucci's *The Dylantantes*. During the interview, we started talking about Dylan and gender, and I don't know if you [Anne-Marie] said we should host a conference, or if I said it, but you said "We should do that." And it really was just in the course of that conversation that we decided to do it. And when we got home, she came back here [to Odense, Denmark] and I went back to Houston, we followed up and that's how it happened.

Anne-Marie Mai: I was lucky to get a research award, some money I could spend on interesting topics of my own choice, so I decided to spend part of it on this conference.

***DR*: The conference is called Bob Dylan: Questions on Masculinity. Why are questions on Bob Dylan and masculinity important?**

EC: Gender is interesting in general. Identity studies are interesting. And part of my dissertation was focused on the voices or the different identities Dylan occupies. And so what Sean [Latham in his paper "The Cowboy Angel Rides"] was doing with the cowboy identity was central to my dissertation. But I think looking at the way Dylan shifts his identity performance throughout his career can tell us a lot and open the discussion on Dylan, as we saw throughout the two days. And I think that's another piece of understanding Dylan and his art.

AM: I agree, but I was also interested in his fans' and followers' ideas of him and how they relate to masculinity. What are their images and ideas of him? Because I think it was important to the respondents of my questionnaire, who are elderly men, to be men in another way to their fathers. Of course, we used to talk about the youth rebellion, but perhaps we neglect how much it was a rebellion against a certain modern masculinity. We think of it as a rebellion towards the older generation, but it was definitely a rebellion against a certain modern masculinity, too.

EC: As I said when I was introducing Carsten [Lang-Jensen and his paper "Sitting on a Barbie-Wire Fence"], we have two different fields that converge. There's the fanbase community in Dylan studies, who understand his masculinity in a very personal way, and I think your presentation [*Dylan Review* interviewer Paul Haney and his paper, "Queering Bob Dylan Through Creative Nonfiction"] spoke to that and merged the two fields: academic and fan culture. Because you intellectualize that process, almost like a hero's journey. I think it gave us that real focus from both the fan perspective and the academic perspective to see how masculinity is at play in Dylan's work throughout the trajectory of sixty-plus years.

AM: And then we also heard some wonderful presentations on Dylan and gender issues in Tulsa.

***DR*: Do any of those stand out? There was the Anne Powers's keynote ["Bob Dylan's Body" from World of Bob Dylan 2019]**

AM: Yes. That was a great inspiration to me. And also there are essays on Dylan and gender in some of the anthologies on Dylan. But this topic develops slowly, and we decided we should try to go further into that.

***DR*: And so we're here in Odense, in the Noble Woman's Monastery.**

AM: Perhaps you call it a convent, for noble women who decided not to marry. Some couldn't find a husband, but there were some who definitely chose not to marry. And they came here instead of living in a terrible marriage.

***DR*: It's a beautiful location, and you showed us around the various rooms and offices. Was it a deliberate choice to have this conference on masculinity here in a woman's convent?**

AM: Yes. It was thought provoking to have this discussion on modern masculinity in these surroundings where women for centuries have been studying, have been writing, have been discussing things. I figured it would be nice to continue that tradition with this study of masculinity.

***DR*: You've hosted other Dylan conferences before.**

AM: We had two Dylan conferences – one in 2009 when we first started discussing his nomination for the Nobel Prize. We were so unhappy that a member of the Swedish Academy had declared that no American author could get the prize again, because artistically they were

no good. That was what the secretary at that time had said of American literature: it is not qualified for the Nobel Prize. We decided this couldn't be right. And I'm asked every year, as are several other literature professors all over the world, to nominate for the Nobel Prize. But you're also asked not to tell who you nominate. But I decided I'd make it public because the Secretary made it public that American literature is no good. So we wanted to show that there were strong candidates.

***DR*: Allen Ginsberg had made it public that he was nominating Dylan for years, right**?

AM: That's right. There were some Norwegian professors who did it, perhaps influenced by Ginsberg. He asked them to nominate Dylan.

***DR*: He lobbied the nominators?**

AM: Yes. Both for Dylan and himself.

***DR*: So that conference in 2009, you were discussing Bob Dylan?**

AM: We were discussing him as a poet, actually. That was a great conference, and then after he won the Nobel Prize, we had our conference in Odense.

EC: Is that when you [Anne-Marie Mai] published your book, *Bob Dylan the Poet*?

AM: That was after he won the Nobel Prize in 2016. On the day he won, I was actually not engaged in what was happening. I'd been waiting by the phone for a couple of years. The BBC had asked me to be ready to give an interview because they knew that I had done it publicly. So they wanted to have an interview. And I waited for two or three years and figured I wouldn't wait any longer. Then on the day that he actually won the prize, I wasn't prepared at all. I'd forgotten that this was the day. We had just opened a research project on the uses of literature, and when we finished our first meeting the phone began to ring. And it kept ringing. Lots of interviews, and my publisher asked me if I could write a book on Bob Dylan. I said "Yes, of course!"

***DR*: So here at the third Bob Dylan conference you've hosted, have you noticed certain themes or ideas about Dylan and masculinity that have come to the fore the last couple of days?**

AM: I should say so. I think we have the impression of "I contain multitudes" also in regard to gender and masculinity. But I think, to me, it has become clearer that there are also

contradictions. It's not just multitudes, it's also contradictions. And, of course, you might realize we are all full of contradictions

EC: I think the theme of brotherhood, and then some of the archetypal masculine identities, we kept seeing. Like today, when Sean [Latham] presented and said to Court [Carney], "I thought you were gonna steal my thunder with the Gunslinger," and so we were all converging on these similar themes. And it could be that maybe one of the benefits was that it was a small enough conference that we could engage in meaningful dialogue. Perhaps if we had a bigger conference, we would've seen more themes emerge. But I think the theme of fraternity, also contradictions, and the multitudes that he's occupied or performed throughout his career, became apparent. His relationship to women, and I think that Rebecca [Slaman] did a nice job with that this morning [with her paper "When God and Her Were Born: Dylan and the Divine Feminine"], and how Sara [Dylan] fit into the framework of that identity.

AM: And I think Andrew [Fehribach, whose paper was titled "Another Side of Bob Dylan: Another Archetype for Generation Z"] made it clear how male dominated the folk revival actually was. We think of it as a more equal breakthrough of a musical trend, but it was very male dominated in his interpretation.

***DR*: Can you say, in brief, what each of your papers were about?**

EC: My paper ["Mixing Up the Medicine: Bob Dylan's Basement Carnival and Homosocial Masculinity"] was essentially looking at the space following the motorcycle accident, the hiatus he took from touring, as a Bakhtinian Carnival, but also as a family space that deviates from his previous life. But within that, recording *The Basement Tapes* creates even a deeper sense of carnival with the homosocial relationships he creates with the members of The Band. And that then allows him to go back to what I think is an industrial, patriarchal, capitalist masculinity as a wage earner. He's a contracted wage earner as a recording artist.

AM: I just have finished the review ["Images of Bob Dylan"] that we did from 2020 to 2022. And I think it shows that our respondents, fans and followers, are mainly elderly men who grew up with a prevailing modern masculinity. They use Dylan's songs to find ways to create other gender relations and to understand their masculinity in another way than their fathers did. We will always think of the youth rebellion as a rebellion of youth against an older generation, but to me, this review shows that it's definitely also a rebellion against the modern, prevailing masculinity practiced by their fathers and grandfathers. So I think that's interesting. And that music and song can have great power in this.

***DR*: Do you have a hope or an idea that the next generation can listen to Bob Dylan in order to evolve from the masculinity they've adopted from their own fathers? Does a conference like this help extend Bob Dylan to future generations?**

AM: Hopefully, but it seems difficult. I have to say I'm a little disappointed with the Danish youth, how little they know of Dylan. There were some fans that were very eager at our last conference. We had some high school students who really wanted to attend and we had no room, so they offered to do the cleaning just to be there, serve coffee, and participate. So there are some, and perhaps more will come. But it needs communication and explanation.

EC: Timothée Chalamet is going to open Dylan up to a new generation in a way that we don't expect. We don't even know what the result of that will be. It will have an impact on the younger generation. But look at how Rebecca [Slaman] addresses masculinity, and even the way Andrew [Fehribach] did. Each generation brings a new perspective, especially as theory develops, and we see progress. Hopefully each generation will bring something new to Dylan. That will expand how we look at his identity performance, and the way that we see Dylan. What gives me hope for the future is that we're not stuck with the first generation, as with any academic pursuit. We'll keep pushing back or expanding what previous scholars have done. So I'm hopeful that conferences like this, especially those involving young people and people of different ages, will help us to broaden the conversation.

AM: It was interesting too that we had invited a young female musician [Alexandra Løvedal] to interpret Dylan's songs because it was so obvious that her interpretation is different. And it still works, still has something to it. The sensibility of the songs are so special. She has also signaled that Dylan can be communicated to younger generations, and that they can pick it up and become as interested in it as she is.

***DR*: The younger generation's out there, but it seems they need to communicate with each other because we can't dictate to them how they're going to talk about Bob Dylan. At the same time you [Erin Callahan] spoke about gatekeeping, right? How we need to keep the gates open so they can come through.**

EC: Absolutely. They're still on TikTok, Dylan Twitter, Instagram. We need to meet them on their platforms, so they can have exposure to what's going on in Dylan World and share their ideas, which I think makes us better too as older scholars, older fans, that it opens up our understanding of Dylan when they share their ideas.

***DR*: In terms of Dylan and questions on masculinity, what questions remain to be asked?**

EC: In two days, you can only scratch the surface of his gender performance and identity. And so many of us have been saying, "this is part of a larger piece." Laura [Tenschert] spoke for 51 minutes today, and she cut her paper ["Before You Call Him a Man: Bob Dylan and the Crisis of Masculinity"]. There are still a lot of questions to look at more deeply in terms of other people who have performed Dylan, female covers of Dylan. Also the interplay between how the songs tend to occupy masculine space, and what happens when women perform them. And in terms of him being a father, there's a lot out there to still cull and bring forward.

AM: I'd also like to include more on his artwork. Because there are so many interesting things going on there. To go deeper into an analysis of some of these paintings that have both male and female figures in them, that are similar and yet different. I'm also interested in Dylan and melancholy. I wrote an essay on his use of this feeling of melancholy, and perhaps this is also gendered in some way: is this male melancholy, or how does it relate to gender issues? I would like to study that further. And of course the artwork.

***DR*: What are each of you working on Dylan-wise at the moment?**

AM: I'm writing a monograph. "The whole package," as one of my respondents said. I actually have written a small book for a university publisher, only 32 pages. But they wanted so many anecdotes and stories of Dylan, all the usual stuff we've heard so many times, so I gave it up and decided to write a larger book, perhaps 150 pages. It's on the whole package. And I want to do something about the artwork, and his advertising practice that is also so heavily debated and interesting.

***DR*: The whiskey bottles with those gates on them.**

AM: The whiskey bottles, for instance. And why does he take this up? Is it because all other rock stars seem to be producing liquids? Or is there something else to it?

EC: Court Carney and I were asked to co-write a chapter by some scholars in France on Dylan and myth, and so we decided to focus on *Together Through Life* and border music, borderlands. And then we're working on – with both of you [Anne-Marie Mai and Paul Haney] – a volume reconsidering Dylan in the 80s. And then the podcast. I started the podcast, *Infinity Goes Up on Trial*, and I put that out monthly.

***DR*: Can you give us an overview of the podcast?**

EC: My idea is essentially from the lyric from "Visions of Johanna": "Inside the museum infinity goes up on trial / Voices echo this is what salvation must be like after a while." My first guest was a friend, Jason Nadler. He sent me a text in December, saying what I was thinking in the most beautifully articulate way, that in Dylan's works there are ideas that are universal, and that's what infinity is. We're bringing scholars in that are Dylan focused or Dylan adjacent – my second guest was someone who's a theologian and doesn't really study Dylan – to talk about the ideas that are in Dylan, and how they approach ideas and how these ideas are universal. And what they see in Dylan. My third guest is a Dylan scholar. I don't want to get in the same echo chamber of people that we talk to all the time. I want to talk to folks who are new to Dylan, or maybe new to the Dylan community, so we broaden the conversation, focusing on the ideas. Elizabeth Cantalamessa, I'm going to talk to her when I get home. And she's going to talk about the Dylan community, the fan perspective, but also that convergence between the academic and the fan culture.

***DR*: Are there any other questions you feel like the *Dylan Review* should be asking?**

AM: [At the conference] we touched upon *The Philosophy of Modern Song* several times. I opened the discussion last night with Sean [Latham] on that, and he is perhaps more skeptical than I am in regards to that book. But that might be because I'm European, and I don't know so much about the American song tradition. I found [the book] so full of energy, and anger, and strong emotions, and I was impressed with it in that way. I would like to continue the discussion of this book. How should we approach it, understand it, and analyze it?

EC: I agree with that. I think we're constantly catching up to Dylan. He's so prolific, I don't know what questions to ask because I'm still trying to catch up to what he's done. And he keeps going. It's hard to say what questions we should ask. Maybe what's next from him?

Contributors

Nora Bonner is a fiction writer, singer-songwriter, and college writing instructor from Detroit, Michigan. She teaches composition at Georgia State University, where she obtained her PhD in Creative Writing. Her stories have appeared in *Third Coast, Redivider*, and the *Best American Non-Required Reading*.

Andrea Cossu is Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology and Social Research at the University of Trento, where he obtained his PhD in Sociology. He is the author of *It Ain't Me, Babe: Bob Dylan and the Performance of Authenticity*.

Jason Grant is a designer and co-founder of Inkahoots Design in Brisbane, Australia. He occasionally writes about design and culture.

Roberta Rakove has a Master's degree in Public Health from the University of Illinois at Chicago School of Public Health. Roberta developed a class on Bob Dylan for the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at Northwestern University, and has been interviewed on *The Dylantantes*, *Pod Dylan*, and *Songs of Experience: A Bob Dylan Podcast*.

Bob Russell is a retired IT Manager. He is an admirer of rock, folk, and traditional country and bluegrass music, and a longtime listener to the music of Bob Dylan.

Books Received

Jeffrey Edward Green, *Bob Dylan: Prophet Without God*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024.

Jonathan Hodgers, *Bob Dylan on Film: The Intersection of Music and Visuals (Ashgate Screen Music Series).* Oxford: Routledge, 2024.

Thomas Palaima, *And The Nobel Prize in Literature Goes to... Bob Dylan?*. Virginia Beach: Koehler Books, 2024.

Copyright Information