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Masthead

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Reviews

Dimitrios P. Naskos. *And the Nobel Prize in Literature Goes to ... Bob Dylan?*. Virginia Beach: Koehler Books. 2024. 221 pp.

Reviewed by Thomas G. Palaima, University of Texas

> Δεν μένει τίποτα ίδιο / Συνήθειες έρχονται πάνε / Μεταβαλλόμενος κόσμος / Εύκολα οι μνήμες ξεχνάνε
>
> Nothing stays the same / Customs come and go / The whole world is changing / Memories are easily forgotten
>
> Dimitrios Naskos
>
> Everything passes
> Everything changes
> Just do what you think you should do
>
> Bob Dylan "To Ramona," 1964

We are nearing a decade since Bob Dylan was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature. Most of the controversy, which has now subsided, surrounding the award had to do with whether writers and performers of songs should be eligible because their songs are delivered to us in different ways than written poems are. In the modern age poems are transmitted to an audience by being read aloud and not sung. Mostly we take in poems by reading them silently as printed words on pages and screens.

Is there anything more to say about whether Dylan's songs, or any modern songs, are poems? Does anybody, including succeeding Nobel Prize committee members, have a clear idea of what the 2016 committee meant when it conferred the prize on Dylan because he had "created new poetical expressions within the great American song tradition"? There are many other questions that can be asked or asked again about Dylan's Nobel Prize award and each one will surely generate many new answers.

The curious book under review here gives some good answers.[1] It is well worth reading because it offers what we might consider a unique outsider's cultural perspective. The author Dimitrios Naskos is Greek, from the Greek "north country" area around Thessaloniki, in many ways now the second city, i.e., the Chicago, of Greece. Thessaloniki has a major international

[1] The book was originally published in Greek: *Και το Βραβείο Νόμπελ Λογοτεχνίας πηγαίνει στον ... Bob Dylan*. Athens: ΕΚΔΟΣΕΙΣ ΔΙΑΥΛΟΣ. 2021. 280 pp. info@diavlosbooks.gr

university, well-regarded annual international book, theater and film festivals, and is a prominent scene in Greece for music, theater, movies and literature.

Naskos, since he is Greek and well enculturated into the long-perpetuated traditional values of classical Greece, one of the historical foundations for modern high western culture, understands the origins of literature in periods when writing did not exist or was used for limited purposes. The Ur-stages of regional song cycles that formed the basis for the Homeric poems go back to at least the fifteenth century BCE. As Bob Dylan would put it, that is long before the first crusade. It is also long before any controversy about spoken versus sung versus written creativity was made.

When I read Naskos's *farrago* of ideas and component elements in *And the Nobel Prize Goes to … Bob Dylan?*, it took me a while to get my bearings. The book *is* a real smorgasbord with a detailed menu (table of contents) but no index to help in locating specific topics and subjects, for example, the titles of songs discussed in the text.

And the Nobel Prize is in line and in spirit with the rather random feel of Dylan's own *Chronicles, Volume One*. Like Dylan's "memoir" that isn't a memoir, Naskos's book is not a systematic or logical argument about the awarding of the Nobel Prize to Dylan. However, it does include several long arguments in favor of the award.

Mainly it is a collection of "takes," by a man about half the age of Bob Dylan and possessed of a strong social conscience, on Dylan's body of work. In these "takes," Naskos explores various ideas and ideals that Dylan, rightly or wrongly, has been thought to come to represent. In the closing section of his book (pp. 186-220) Naskos enables us to compare Dylan's accomplishments and contributions to our understanding of *humanitas* with those of other major figures in world culture, a good many of them Nobel Prize winners. Naskos does not noticeably "cook the books" in Dylan's favor, despite being solidly in the camp that believes Dylan was eminently worthy of the award.

And the Nobel Prize therefore will seem both to be and not to be well titled unless you let yourself do what we do with most of Dylan's songs, his own and songs of others that he performs. Let whatever you are reading next in Naskos's book seep into your souls, as Plato says music does, directly. Naskos's words and thoughts will sink in, and you will be the better for it.

After all, the Latin inscription on the gold medallion given out to recipients of the Nobel Prize in Literature reads, "it is beneficial to have improved (human) life through discovered arts." The emphasis is therefore not so much on artistic details or fine points of creativity, but on social impact. Given that Alfred Nobel as he neared death was trying to atone for making a

fortune as a "master of war armaments" by setting up the Nobel Prizes, especially, but not only, the Peace Prize, this emphasis by the Academy and by Naskos is understandable and laudable.

After five opening chapters (Part One pp. 1-55) that survey Dylan and his career from St. Mary's Hospital in Duluth on May 24, 1941 to the beginning of the Covid plague years in 2020, readers will find assortments of essays, ample song lyrics placed here and there,[2] a few discussed in detail, and a discography paired with a "panoramic timetable" (pp. 135-140) that lists in five chronologically arranged columns: (1) date 1941 to 2020 – with many years left out; (2) a selection of Dylan's albums; and idiosyncratically chosen events in (3) history, (4) science and (5) music.

Naskos, who was trained in music and creative writing at universities in Macedonia and is now pursuing a Ph.D. in creative writing while teaching music arts to secondary school students, is not someone who came of age and lived "together through life" with Dylan's songs. He was born in the environs of Thessaloniki in 1980 after the fall of the right-wing military junta that the United States supported during the Cold War (1967-1974).

Naskos approaches Dylan's music with a much stronger sense of political ethics and social morality than most American or even European writers and critics of Dylan's music ever have. He is not a member of the now disappearing generation who heard Dylan's first Columbia Records albums 1962-1965 when they were in their teens and therefore have lived their lives with Dylan's songs as soundtrack, commentaries, or escape routes – nor even as sources of laughter or wry, knowing mirth.

Naskos has some of the same sensitivities of heart and soul – bred from somewhat parallel life circumstances – that Bob Dylan has. Like Dylan, Naskos cares deeply about the long history of songs and poems, in Naskos's case specifically in Greek culture going back to Homer, Sappho, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, and Callimachus and extending up through Cavafy, Kazantzakis, Seferis, Ritsos, Elytis, and beyond in modern times. Naskos quotes then secretary of the Swedish Academy Sarah Danius offering up the same defense of awarding Dylan the literature prize (p. 61): "If you think back to Homer and Sappho, that was also aural poetry. It was meant to be performed together with instruments. But we still read them, 2,500-some years later. And in much the same way you can read Bob Dylan, too."

Naskos's and Danius's thoughts made me think hard about Homer, oral poetics, Greek *poiēma* ("song poem," literally "a thing made"); *poiēsis* ("the art of making song poems") and

[2] Given the absence of an index, I have appended to this review a list of Dylan songs quoted in substantial part.

poiētēs ("an agent of making and instantiating song poems"), and the impact of dominant songsters in human societies, ancient and modern. Among the ancient Greeks a "thing made" was a "song poem" and none of the other significant things they made and bequeathed to us. That says a lot about the importance of song poems in ancient Greek culture and by transmission in our European and American song traditions.

Naskos in fact emphasizes how inseparable poems and songs are in the Greek tradition extending back over three millennia. As one straight and unequivocal answer to the question implicit in the title of his book, he quotes the keen and influential observations of Gerasimos Spatalas (1887-1971) (p. 89) about how metrical patterns make spoken words "sing":

> Though poetry and music may seem to have broken up today, they still are two twin sisters who coexist harmoniously. Poetry makes music with words and music makes poetry with sounds. Whoever denies the verse denies the deeper essence of the poem, which is intertwined with the sonic character of language.
>
> Unfortunately, in recent years younger people have eagerly followed the fashion of writing their poems in arrhythmic and inartistic prose. The acoustical artistic level plummets again to such an extent that almost no distinction is made between artistically sonic verses and constructions.
>
> G. Spatalas, *Lyrical Art* (1997) pp. 161 and 276.[3]

Naskos is using Spatalas's own unique term "construction" here pejoratively. He is distinguishing between older and traditional verses that have meter and rhythm and modern poetic prose, which essentially lacks the beauty heard in traditional poetry. Both Spatalas and Naskos have set ideas about how a poem should be crafted even today. They think that any poem written to be read rather than to be heard, if only in our own heads, is to some degree impoverished.

Naskos states categorically (p. 89), "In other words, poetry and music have been walking hand in hand for centuries, and verse makes up the music of the poem." He believes

[3] The book is a collection of 24 studies of technical aspects of Greek meter. It is available in Greek: as *Η Στιχουργική Τέχνη* (https://cup.gr/book/i-stichourgiki-techni/) which means literally "the art/craft of poetic-line making." ISBN 978-960-524-025-7.

that the first half of his book "accurately answers the question of whether Dylan deserved such an honor" with an emphatic *yes*.

Naskos's discussion, even as summarized here briefly by me, helps us see how thorny the Nobel Prize question is and what good can arise from contemplating even extreme or downright silly arguments. As a matter of fact, the poems of Homer, Sophocles and Sappho have for centuries been taken in without the music that went with them. Even knowing the intricacies of different forms of meter used by Greek and Roman poets falls into the realm of specialization in many Classics graduate programs. And graduate study of ancient music is hyper-specialized. As for that, except for "Auld Lang Syne," almost all of us know the folk song collection of the great Scottish ethno-musicologist Robert Burns as poems.

It is clear then that Naskos's book really is about the social significance of Dylan's music, how taking Dylan's songs into our souls prepares us to face the challenges of modern life.

I am sympathetic to this view because Dylan's songs give us keenly observant perspectives on the lives *we* are likely to live as well as sharp criticisms of those who would crush others with wealth and power, feed the military industrial complex, knock us off balance, view problems in our lives as social creatures as insurmountable, and invite us to consider striving to do things for the benefit of all mankind as a vain pursuit.

However, about twenty years ago, Willie Nelson told me that he had learned in the Air Force in the 1950's to "police your own area."[4] This translates for Willie as do whatever good you can do with your own unique skill sets whenever you can and wherever you can and for whomever you can. Naskos believes that Dylan's music helps us do these things. At least his critical take of human social behaviors makes us think twice about what we are doing with our lives, even if it is beyond Dylan's grasp now and forever ("Tangled Up in Blue" last stanza).

Citing John Sutherland's 2013 book *A Little History of Literature*, Naskos (p. 88) agrees that "[b]estselling [or 'mass-trade'] poetry is a contradiction in terms, unless we count balladeers such as Bob Dylan and David Bowie." Naskos then examines what we would consider Dylan's bigger or more widely popular songs, not songs familiar only to devoted Dylanologists. One truly singular way of covering a highly socially critical song is the simple and moving short story that Naskos writes (pp. 104-118) to get across the message of "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll." He puts us at the Baltimore hotel society gathering in

[4] Tom Palaima, "Alive and Singing the Truth," *The Texas Observer* January 11, 2008, 37-39. https://www.texasobserver.org/2665-alive-and-singing-the-truth/ .

February 1963 through the memory of a fictional eighty-year-old black man named Morgan who is thinking back fifty years to when the 51-year-old Hattie Carroll got him as a thirty-year-old a one-night job busing tables at the hotel where she had steady work as a maid of the kitchen. We see the evening's events unfold through the eyes of Morgan who was nervous because he had never worked even in a lowly cafeteria or diner for whites. Morgan was jumpy around upper-class whites attending the Spinsters' Ball that evening who expected the black staff to function silently and unobtrusively as "animate tools" (Aristotle's term for slaves). On page 117 we take in a powerful punch line. I won't ruin it by giving it here.

Naskos covers Dylan's Nobel Prize speech in full, quoting it in its entirety (pp. 62-74) and again critiquing (pp. 74-77) its cultural meaning through the filter of other critical responses to it and to charges of plagiarism in it and preceding it. These charges periodically flare up. They have reached ephemeral crescendos with Dylan's newly released songs at various times (2003, 2006, 2010, 2014). Naskos' arguments are commonsensical and in line with Dylan's own *apologia pro musica sua*, given that they are based on how the craft of poetry was practiced from the time of lengthy hexameter oral-aural regional songs in the Greek Bronze Age through British Romantic poets using ancient Greek and Latin themes and metrical patterns.

Bob Dylan is now a world songster. Even though one biographical film title dictum tells us "Don't Look Back," Dylan the *aoidos* (epic bard) or *poiētēs* (maker of song poems) is perpetually looking back, reverent of tradition and convinced that creativity really is what Ezra Pound said it was, not an abandonment of the past, but making the past new and making the past live on transformed.

There is also ample discussion of how the Nobel Prize committee operates, what choices they have made in the past (pp. 202-210), and a rebuttal of criticism of the choice of Bob Dylan by citing two relatively recent winners who also did not fit the mold of a writer of conventionally defined literature: Svetlana Alexievich (2015) and Dario Fo (1997). Naskos also reminds us (pp. 208-210) that the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore won the Nobel in 1913 "for writing songs and hymns for many countries around the world."

As far as the influences of different literary movements, authors and critical approaches upon Dylan, Naskos devotes succinct chapters to Symbolism, Arthur Rimbaud, Surrealism, Intertextuality, Carl Jung, Metalanguage, and Commedia del'Arte.

To work out a ring construction and go back to the beginning, the first five chapters might well be effective if assigned to students to get a quick sense of:

a. Bob Dylan and his work (pp. 12-23); key influences on Bob Dylan (pp. 29-46); eighteen key paragraph-length passages (pp. 47-50), well known to serious Dylanophiles and gleaned from *Chronicles* that explain what kinds of songs seeped into Dylan's own soul, how he thought about them twenty years ago looking then back forty years, and how they furnished him with a powerful repertory that set him apart from other voices playing folk music;
b. thirty characteristic Dylan quotes (pp. 51-53); and
c. how Dylan's "sun continues to shine" since the resurrection of his career, which Naskos dates to *MTV Unplugged* in 1994.

That last statement (c.) in and of itself is likely to cause considerable debate.

I view Dylan's career as a continuum that moves like our now polluted oceans once used to move. No death. No resurrection. No comeback, because he's always moving on. Like the life and adventures of Odysseus, the man of constant sorrow, whose *Odyssey* Dylan discusses in his Nobel Prize speech, Dylan's career and life have had highs, lows, and doldrums, but even his doldrums follow Willie Nelson's observation: "still is still moving to me."

The very notion of a career with peaks and valleys in Dylan's case, experimental and trail-blazing as his music has always been, is a worthless measurement taken largely by how visible he is in contemporary popular culture at any one time and what consumer dollar figures his music and other endeavors are generating. It is not a criterion we use to judge Dylan's music. In my view "Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues," "Shenandoah," "Ugliest Girl in the World," "Wiggle Wiggle," "Love Sick," "Under the Red Sky," and "Murder Most Foul" all contain their own important, humanly felt messages.

Naskos takes Dylan's role as a *prophētēs*, "an agent of proclaiming" or prophet, to be literally significant with songs bearing upon major events in modern American culture. He views three songs "Mississippi," "High Water," and "Workingman's Blues #2" as portending, respectively, the 9/11 World Trade Center attack, the devastation of New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina, and the global financial crisis (2008) that signposted the modern period of pure capitalism unchained. Yet he reminds us:

> But let us not forget that we live in a postmodern era. Thus, Dylan's third period, although without a doubt of great musical and poetic interest, was also characterized by a mood of commercial lightness.

> While he began his career with hopes, ambitions, goals, and objectives, things are not as he once imagined they would be. Despite his best efforts and his countless struggles for a better and fairer world, he is deeply disappointed with what has emerged. (pp. 54-55)

As proof of the second statement, he cites the Victoria's Secret commercial (2004),[5] the Chrysler cars ad (2014), and even Dylan's Sinatra period, Dylan's "favorite singer ... who liked to hang out at bars and disappear into the blue shadows of the night." Yet, in a Dylanesque gesture, Naskos ends this particular assessment of Dylan's career with the reminder (p. 55) that Sinatra once said, "alcohol can be man's worst enemy, but the Bible says to love your enemy."

As a working-class boy myself, from Cleveland no less, and something of a perpetual outsider in the higher circles of Boston, New York and Austin culture, I appreciate Dimitrios P. Naskos's ways of interpreting the social impact that some of Dylan's songs might have on listeners.

Yet I highly stress that we should keep in mind that, if Dylan's songs are poems, even they can be remembered as songs are often remembered, for the moods and feelings they create. People can groove on them without really listening to the lyrics. Sappho come back to life would certainly groove on "Love Sick" and its way of getting across the power of "love" as a *glukupikron orpeton*, a "sweetbitter serpent," just from hearing "I'm sick of love ... I'm love sick" and the ingenious ironic close: "I wish I'd never met you / I don't know what to do / I'd give anything to / be ... with ... you."

Citizens of imperial Athens annually held public competitions of poet songsters performing passages from Homer. One overall takeaway I have from *And the Nobel Prize in Literature Goes to ... Bob Dylan?* is that Bob Dylan would have been right at home in fifth-century BCE Athens.

[5] For a positive view of what Dylan is doing in this commercial, see https://sites.utexas.edu/tpalaima/files/2017/11/LookingPast.pdf .

Appendix

Song lyrics quoted at length or fully and discussed in *And the Nobel* Prize ... by page number:

"A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" – 14

"Chimes of Freedom" – 15

"Like a Rolling Stone" – 17

"Gotta Serve Somebody" – 23

"Things Have Changed" – 25

"Talkin' World War III Blues" – 41-43

"The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll" – 102-103

"Masters of War" –126-128

"Only a Pawn in Their Game" – 129-130

"Hurricane" – 131-134

"Maggie's Farm" – 171-172

"Ballad of a Thin Man" – 176-178

Lucy Sante. *Six Sermons for Bob Dylan*. Tenement, 2024. 74 pp.

Reviewed by Michael Gilmour, Providence University College, Canada

Lucy Sante's *Six Sermons for Bob Dylan* is the script she prepared for the Jennifer LeBeau film *Trouble No More – A Musical Film* (2017), and consequently a review of her book ought to have some parallel discussion of that setting. The eight CD, one DVD boxset *Bob Dylan, Trouble No More, the Bootleg Series Vol. 13 / 1979–1981, Deluxe Edition* (2017) is a revelation (fitting term), adding considerably to the three-album gospel trilogy – *Slow Train Coming*, 1979; *Saved*, 1980; *Shot of Love*, 1981 – that previously constituted the official record of this divisive period. Some love(d) it, some loath(ed) it. Joel Selvin's oft-quoted '79 review "Bob Dylan's God-Awful Gospel," written after hearing the singer in concert beat "the drum for God as surely and thoroughly as Billy Graham," encapsulates the latter camp's assessment. For many on both sides, Dylan's post-*Street-Legal* turn to fundamentalist Christianity remains a lyrical and attitudinal shift that continues to baffle. This bootleg collection takes us well beyond that earlier trinity of albums, providing listeners with more material to sort through, all of it previously unreleased, as they attempt to make sense of Dylan's changed way of thinking.

Without question, the pearl in this oyster of a release is *Trouble No More–A Musical Film*, produced and directed by LeBeau. The concert and rehearsal footage that constitutes the bulk of the hour-long film includes many familiar songs from the time but also lesser-known ones like "Ain't Gonna Go to Hell for Anybody," and a touching rehearsal cover of Dick Holler's "Abraham, Martin and John" (which Dylan sings with Clydie King). What concerns us here is the series of scenes interspersed among the twelve songs involving "The Preacher," played by actor Michael Shannon. With the camera focused on him, Shannon delivers brief, two-or-so-minute homilies, each a tirade on a moral issue directed at an implied congregation. The titular six sermons of Sante's recent book, *Six Sermons for Bob Dylan*, are the full text scripts used for Shannon's clergyman, somewhat abbreviated for the film.

Those interested in this bootleg collection, and sympathetic to or curious about Dylan's work during his gospel years more generally, are likely to appreciate Sante's short book and the peek-behind-the-curtain it offers. It opens with a brief account of how the assignment came about, and her process for researching and writing it. This was not the first time the Dylan camp reached out to her. Earlier assignments included "speeches, press kits, prefaces, [and] a Buick commercial" (13). A request for sermon scripts was something altogether different from previous requests coming through Jeff Rosen's emails. But what kind of sermon would suit

such a project? It required research to ensure the texts produced matched the spirit (another fitting term) of the film's musical setting. Sante then explains how the hunt for appropriate source material took her back to early twentieth-century recordings of preachers like Reverend J. M. Gates, Reverend D. C. Rice, Reverend A. W. Nix: "These were Black, mostly Southern preachers of the 1920s and '30s, whose recorded sermons, often unaccompanied, handily outsold the blues issued on the same labels" (13). The Sante-LeBeau-Shannon "Preacher" and his messages are thus an amalgam that captures a homiletical style with deep American roots, one "grounded in the rhythms and imagery of the King James Bible" (14). A series of black and white photographs of churches, clergy, wall-mounted Bible verses, baptisms, and other sacred gatherings from those bygone days help evoke this slice of interwar American religion.

With respect to content, Sante explains that "Bob had assigned me six topics: Hypocrisy, Virtue, Gluttony, Temperance, Justice, [and] Prudence" (16), a list perhaps meant to be loosely suggestive of the traditional seven deadly sins. In the film, LeBeau divides these six topics into eight separate episodes. The concert recordings included come from different shows, so "The Preacher" segments provide a degree of continuity to the film. Shannon delivers all the exhortations in the same church, standing most often near his pulpit, Bible in hand, with stain glass windows and organ pipes in the background. His suits and ties change topic-to-topic, so presumably we should imagine these to be services across a series of Sundays delivered to the same congregation.

Quite apart from Shannon's preacher, the gospel-era concerts themselves already had a Sunday-go-to-meetin' vibe about them, which is evident in the footage included in the film. This goes some way toward explaining why Sante found appropriate inspiration in the southern American gospel traditions she describes in the book's introduction. Shared elements include the presence of Black gospel singers with tambourines in hand, use of an organ in the musical arrangements (played admirably by Spooner Oldham), and structurally the call and response pattern so characteristic of southern preaching, with audiences responding to everything Dylan said or sang just as congregations did and do with an animated pastor. "If you don't know Jesus," the singer advised his San Diego audience on November 27, 1979, "you better check into it. He's real," to which, and without missing a beat, a woman in the audience shouted back, "He's real!" (transcript in Clinton Heylin's *Trouble in Mind: Bob Dylan's Gospel Years, What Really Happened*, 302). Much of the stage-to-seats back and forth of these shows resembles the pulpit-to-pews exchanges in many churches where shouts of "Amen" and "Hallelujah" and the like are a hallmark of the community's shared worship experience. And these church-styled performances of 1979–1981 included sermons. The Dylan of earlier and later decades is not

known for stage banter, so it is hard to imagine him evangelizing from the stage during the gospel years, often antagonizing concertgoers in the process. "People were walking out of the shows," writes Amanda Petrusich in her essay "Fire in My Bones," part of the *Bootleg Vol. 13* liner notes. "In Tempe, Arizona, in the fall of 1979, Dylan was seething at the crowd's reaction, admonishing his hecklers for their Godlessness. It is hard to say whether any of these sanctified jeremiads – and they were frequent – actually furthered his message" (10). In one harangue early in the tour, the singer shouts down calls for "Rock 'n' roll!" from an audience frustrated that he wouldn't perform the old songs: "Pretty rude bunch tonight! You all know how to be real rude. You [all] know about the spirit of Antichrist! … If you wanna rock 'n' roll … You can go see KISS, and you [can] rock 'n' roll all your way down to the pit!" (Heylin, *Trouble in Mind*, 105).

Since Dylan preached this way during the shows, it makes sense to include an equivalent in a film meant to replicate them. Sante's Shannon-delivered homilies thus stand in for those "sanctified jeremiads." Viewed one way, there's a bit of revisionist history at play here, and it's possible to see this official release engaging in reputational mending. Dylan's own sermons at the time were earnest but arguably meandering, and often confrontational and odd, if not incoherent. Among examples that could be cited are Dylan's end-times rants that reflect some awareness of writings by doomsday evangelist Hal Lindsey, best-known for books like *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970) and *Satan Is Alive and Well on Planet Earth* (1972). "In a short time," according to Dylan, "I don't know, maybe in three years, maybe five years, could be ten years – there's gonna be a war … called the war of Armageddon. It's gonna happen in the Middle East. Russia will come down and attack first. You watch for that sign." And again: "Russia is gonna come down and attack the Middle East. It says this in the Bible" (taken from Heylin, *Trouble in Mind*, 101, 103). Such abstruse dialogue (the Bible doesn't say anything about Russia attacking the Middle East) would certainly have puzzled more than informed. The film does not include any of those rambling talks, so the insertion of the eloquent Shannon-Sante sermons between songs not only serves to reproduce the rhythm of the concerts but also serves to rehabilitate that aspect of the shows. Sante is a great writer and Shannon a brilliant actor, and quite apart from the religious content, however off-putting that may be to some, we encounter something elegant when reading, watching, and listening to the Sante-LeBeau-Shannon hexalogy of performances. Consider, to illustrate, this simple but elegantly crafted conclusion to the "Prudence" sermon, based on Proverbs 13:16 in the Authorized Version ("Every prudent man dealeth from knowledge, but a fool layeth open his folly" [55]):

> … if we are living right, we prepare for our passage into the next world. We read the manual, which is scripture. We take out insurance, which is good work. We trim down our luggage, by cutting out sin and vice. We speak to the manager, who is almighty God. And even if we are fools in every other part of our lives, but we prepare for heaven, then we are the wisest of all. (56)

No arcane esoterica, no strange end-time speculations. The "Preacher's" messages are uncomplicated and easily translated into a moral takeaway.

The book itself is rather spartan in design – plain cover, black and white pictures, lots of unadorned, blank pages, generous spacing – and whether intended or not, this otherwise irrelevant detail subtly reinforces the atmosphere of both the text and the Shannon sermons. The preacher that emerges on the page and screen is not flashy either. No trappings of high church religion here. The man is well groomed, wearing dark-toned suits (if I had to guess, off the rack as opposed to tailored), sometimes lightly accessorized with a vest, matching pocket handkerchief, and a cross worn overtop the tie. He's humorless and plain spoken, perhaps shepherding a small, rural, evangelical church. The messages delivered are not theologically sophisticated nor do they allow for ambiguity on moral matters. In his lesson on "Temperance," the Preacher comes out swinging in his opening sentence: "I feel that I should not have to tell you about the evils of strong drink, brothers and sisters" (43; with proof text Proverbs 20:1: "Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging, and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise"). On the subject of "Gluttony," he is equally blunt in his assessment of fast food: "When you replace the fruits of nature's bounty with that sweet, fat, salty, dripping mess made in a factory somewhere … you are spitting in the temple [of God]! You are drawing devil's faces on its walls! You are cursing God just as you are cursing yourself" (39; with proof text 1 Corinthians 3:16–17). He sees the world in black and white. I imagine him closing his sermons with altar calls, not invitations to debate interpretations of his chosen proof-texts. He likely graduated from a fundamentalist Bible college, perhaps along the lines of a Bob Jones or Liberty University, rather than the religious studies department of an Ivy league school. He prefers the Authorized Version to any other translation and would be more comfortable at a tent revival meeting than a scholarly biblical studies conference. The sermons are folksy, practical, and accessible, and at moments charming, even if harsh and judgmental.

For my part, I enjoy the film and Shannon's performances. They are beautifully crafted by LeBeau. But it's not the content of the messages that appeals, with their critical tone, lack of nuance, condescension, and oversimplified worldview. And I don't mean that as a criticism

of Sante. She set out to capture in these homiletical snapshots a glimpse of a uniquely American form of religious rhetoric, and she achieved it admirably. It is the artistry of the whole project I admire: Sante's research and writing; LeBeau's directing; Shannon's acting; and of course, Dylan's music. As Greil Marcus puts it in his Afterword (59–66), Sante's sermons "sing on the page" (64), and when experienced as part of this larger whole, they offer fans an education in this expression of American religiosity and its attendant culture. For those interested in this period of Dylan's career, it is well worth reading, and for full appreciation ought to be paired with LeBeau's film.

Joan Osborne. *Dylanology Live*. The Cabot, MA, 7 June 2025.

Reviewed by Britt Eisnor

Thirty years after the release of her debut studio album *Relish*, Joan Osborne is on the road paying homage to one of her earliest influences: Bob Dylan. This tour, affectionately titled Dylanology Live, is in support of a new live album by the same name from Osborne's 2018 Dylanology tour. That tour followed her successful 2017 album of Dylan tunes *Songs of Bob Dylan*. While Dylanology Live is the result of this sequence of events, it's far from the beginning of Osborne's relationship with Dylan's music and with the man himself.

As she told us from the stage where I saw her in Beverly, Massachusetts on June 7th, 2025, *Oh Mercy* was the first full Dylan album that Osborne had owned and loved. She honored her devotion to the 1989 album with a cover of "Man in the Long Black Coat," which sat alongside her inescapable hit single "One of Us" on *Relish*. That cover, she believes, is what caught the attention of Bob Dylan himself. A couple years after its release, Dylan's team contacted Osborne and asked her to accompany the songwriter on a new studio recording of "Chimes of Freedom." The track was intended for use in a now relatively forgotten and less-than-favorably reviewed miniseries called *The 60's* – which is described as "an epic blend of music, drama and real live events that bring the decade's most explosive events to life." (One chapter on the DVD is titled "Dylan.") Dylan and Osborne's duet of "Chimes of Freedom" was the only new recording featured in the series.

Osborne began her career, like Dylan, as a live performer. She started playing open mics in the East Village in the early 90s, eventually leaving her established position in the New York City music scene for regional tours. In fact, *Relish* was preceded by a live album recorded at Delta 88 Nightclub in New York City. Osborne is often referred to not just as a singer/songwriter, but also as an interpreter of music. This seems to be in reference to the fact that she not only performs her original music, but has spent a great deal of time flexing her musical chops in a variety of genres and styles. With projects throughout her career focusing on Motown classics, Dylan, The Grateful Dead, and more, she has always displayed a knack for understanding and digesting different areas of music and turning them back out with her own emotion and character. This moniker of "interpreter" is one that would also do well applied to Dylan, and his constant musical exploration. The way in which the spirit of Dylan's approach to live music resonates with Osborne was very apparent in the show I saw this year.

The run of shows Osborne performed with this concept in 2018, as well as the newly released *Dylanology Live* album, also share that spirit. With unique interpretation given to each song, and a kinetic energy among the team of musicians she had assembled seven years ago, it's easy to see why she pulled this show out of her archive for release. And although she could not assemble the same lineup that is featured on the album (among others, Amy Helm, Jackie Greene, and Robert Randolph), the group at present is, as she said enthusiastically in Beverly, "just as good!"

Just as good indeed, from veterans like the incredible Cindy Cashdollar (who has her own history working directly with Dylan) and the remarkable Gail Anne Dorsey (most well known for her tenure in David Bowie's live band from the years of 1995-2004), to relative unknowns Will Bryant and Lee Falco, the band strikes up a hell of a show.

At a time when we're still blessed with the opportunity to see Bob Dylan in concert, there is no replacement for seeing him live. The spirit of reinvention still lives with him, and nobody covering his material is going to top that. However, it is still powerful to see an artist carrying on Dylan's legacy of collaboration with other talented artists while lending new meaning to his songs. In a 2018 interview following the release of her cover album *Songs of Bob Dylan*, Osborne told the *Dylan Review*:

> When covering any song, it's the same regardless of the songwriter. The song lives through you. It takes possession of you. It lives in a way it never has. Each version is a different incarnation allowing the songs to live in a new way for another day.[1]

Admittedly, I am not one who tends to turn to other artists' interpretations of Bob's music very often. I prefer hearing how he has developed the songs over the years, with different arrangements, vocal approaches, and backing bands. It's hard for me to step outside of Dylan's own reinterpretations. Osborne's words on helping these songs "live in a new way for another day" rightfully chastise me for that position. Her show rightfully chastised me for it as well.

Not only was I impressed by the masterful reimagining that Osborne gives many of the songs (something that is a highlight of Dylan's live approach as well), but I was also satisfied by the equal degree of respect that Osborne bestowed on different periods of Dylan's career. I

[1] "Interview with Joan Osborne Following the Release of Her Album" (2019), *The Dylan Review* https://thedylanreview.org/2019/06/12/interview-with-joan-osborne-following-the-release-of-her-album/

remarked afterwards that I had, in the past, seen many Dylan cover shows – but had never before seen one feature "Tweedle Dee & Tweedle Dum."

The show spotlighted material across Dylan's catalog, including, of course, Osborne's foundational inspiration, *Oh Mercy*. After opening with a fairly standard "Love Minus Zero" and "Highway 61 Revisited" came "Shooting Star," one of my personal favorite Dylan songs. Having heard it performed four times on last summer's Outlaw Festival Tour (and many more times on YouTube, from shows throughout the years) I am no stranger to live interpretation of this deeply emotional tune. Osborne's delivery stood up to my expectations; it was clear that she was not messing around about her love for *Oh Mercy*. Her performances of songs off the 1989 album were among the night's most compelling. Osborne's voice displayed a deep, dusty passion on "Shooting Star" and the delightful following tune "Everything is Broken," with Osborne quipping mid-song, "know what I'm saying?"

While Joan Osborne is the obvious leader, the assembly of artists she brought along on this journey offered equally enticing performances. The first of those was a theatrical rendition of "Shelter from the Storm" from the delightfully melodic and sweet voice of piano player Will Bryant, brilliantly dressed in a Dylanesque cosplay of a black western shirt and wide-brimmed black hat, all while he perched behind a red keyboard reminiscent of Dylan's own. In duet with Gail Anne Dorsey, Bryant's voice was complimented through a delightful contrast of playfulness (Bryant) and soul (Dorsey). One verse was delivered by Bryant as spoken word poetry. It was as unique a version as I've heard, and the spoken word element was nothing short of mesmerizing.

In fact, the variety of interpretation and style throughout the show was consistently refreshing and exciting. Unlike some Dylan shows that lean heavily on a specific era, or genre, this one was happy to flit between both eras and approach.

Osborne regained the mic for a sultry "When I Paint My Masterpiece" and a unique "Rainy Day Women #12 & 35." The latter is a consistent crowd pleaser at any Dylan-related show, and this one was no exception. Its arrangement was almost threatening, presented in a sexy minor tone. This style is where Osborne shines the most.

Guitarist and singer Anders Osborne [no relation] was billed as "special guest" for the evening. This means that he was not present for the entire performance, like the rest of the band, but instead joined in occasionally. He first came out swinging with a passionate rendition of "The Man In Me," and afterwards the band broke into the first rocker of the evening, "Maggie's Farm."

On "Tryin' to Get to Heaven," Joan Osborne's sultry voice provided a great deal of emotional depth. A heartbreakingly beautiful slide guitar performance from Cindy Cashdollar carried that voice along. Cashdollar played the slide part on "Tryin' to Get to Heaven," on the actual album version from Dylan's 1997 *Time Out of Mind*: a fact that Osborne was delighted to share.

After this emotional interlude, the first set of the evening closed with a jaunty version of "Leopard Skin Pillbox Hat." It brought the show into a jazzy, doowop, swinging zone, supported by backup harmonies that wouldn't be out of place in the 1950s. I had never heard a Dylan song done that way. It made me giggle, and then it made me want to dance!

When the band took to the stage after a brief intermission, I nearly jumped out of my chair at the opening lick to "Tweedle Dee & Tweedle Dum." This was an intensely cool performance of one of my favorite songs. Osborne made it as smoky and sly as it deserves, leaning into the song's bluesy elements. An equally smoky "Man in the Long Black Coat" followed, the song that connected Osborne to Dylan all those years ago.

The highlight of the show, for me, was a beautiful and emotional "Lay Lady Lay," sung by bassist and vocalist Gail Anne Dorsey. With the pronouns of the song thoughtfully shifted not entirely in reverse, but rather to suit the gender of the singer and leave the subject well alone (*stay lady, stay, stay with your woman a while*…), I couldn't help but think of the song that Dylan contributed in 2018 to *Universal Love – Wedding Songs Reimagined*. That album took beloved romantic anthems and related them to the relationship experiences of same sex couples. Hearing "Lay Lady Lay" get the same treatment was both moving and revelatory. Whether through Dorsey's strong yet tender vocal or through the inherently changed narrative of an entreating plea from one woman to another, the song took on new life and new meaning in her hands:

> Why wait any longer for the world to begin?
> You can have your cake and eat it too
> Why wait any longer for the one you love
> When she's standing in front of you?

It moved me to tears.

While "*Love and Theft"* is the most contemporary well that the setlist drew from, the group still managed to travel a long way across Dylan's discography. The earliest song

performed was about as far back as one can go. The band cleared out, and drummer Lee Falco walked to center stage where he lifted an acoustic guitar and delivered a heartfelt rendition of "Song to Woody." It was touching, authentic, and helped along by the figure he cuts on stage, his curly hair ducked down in front of the microphone. This was also one of the few times in the show that we were given a rest from the clumsy, distracting lights that persisted at the back of the stage through most of the evening.

Anders Osborne returned to the stage to accompany Osborne on "Buckets of Rain." His presence brought an edge to the whole proceeding. It became a rock show, reminiscent of the kinetic and collaborative energy of the Rolling Thunder Revue. Fittingly, the band then hit us with a double blast of "Mozambique" and "Isis." In "Isis," distortion on the guitar was epic, the sound searing and grungy; when it started, I remarked to the stranger beside me, "Is he going to play a Neil Young song?" It felt wrong to be sitting politely in a theater gently bobbing my head.

Many aspects of this show, in fact, contained a distinct Rolling Thunder Revue feeling. The Dylanology Revue would've been an apt title for the whole endeavor. I had been following Osborne's Instagram posts in the weeks leading up to the show, and I thoroughly enjoyed the organic, ragtag vibe of the tour. Pictures of band members stuffed together in a van, headed out on the road, called to mind pictures of Dylan and Co. from 1975. With Osborne as the adept band leader – standing in the middle of the stage, introducing her musical compatriots, handing off solos and trading duets – Allen Ginsberg's words from Martin Scorsese's *Rolling Thunder Revue: A Bob Dylan Story* came to mind: "It is like Dylan is … presenting us. I mean, that's his conception. I mean, it hasn't been made overt. His idea is to show how beautiful he is by showing how beautiful we are by showing how beautiful the ensemble is."

That isn't to say Joan Osborne radiated ego that Saturday night in Beverly. Quite the opposite: she was so proud and enthusiastic to be sharing the stage with *these* talented people. Every single time Cindy Cashdollar hit a stunning riff, Osborne beamed and praised her name.

When "Every Grain of Sand" began, I automatically assumed we'd reached the end of the show. After all, Dylan himself has ended every recent performance on his Rough and Rowdy Ways Tour with this stunning number from 1981's *Shot of Love.* For Osborne, however, this wasn't the grand finale – they followed with "Tangled Up in Blue." A couple of verses in, Osborne tripped over the lyrics and lost her place. She dealt with the flub in a charming way, though, acknowledging her mistake with a laugh and getting right back into the groove. Afterward, she and the band left the stage to enthusiastic applause before returning with a perfect encore: "I Shall Be Released." The song has lent itself to beautiful show closing

performances many times over the years, most notably at The Last Waltz. Here, it played a similar role in drawing together the artists that we have seen throughout the evening for one last soaring performance.

It was abundantly clear throughout the show that Osborne's aim wasn't to sing over Dylan's songs – rather, she puts herself in conversation with his original versions. This seems to be a theme, in terms of her approach to other artists' material. In her 2018 interview with the *Dylan Review*, she said of her decisions on which songs to feature that "we asked ourselves, do we have a way to play/arrange the songs in a fresh way, a way to bring something unique to them, make them blossom, open up in a different way?" For the Dylanology tour, she has clearly asked herself that same question again. This wasn't a hits show and it wasn't a revival. It was a continuation of the life that these songs have already lived.

***Norman Raeben (1901-1978): The Wandering Painting*, edited by Fabio Fantuzzi. Livorno, Italy: Sillabe, 2025, pp. 250.**

Reviewed by Alessandro Carrera, University of Houston

This luscious book is the catalog of Norman Raeben's exhibition hosted in Venice, Italy by the Venice Jewish Museum and other artistic associations (Ikona, Lab Space, Azzime) from November 24, 2024, to January 14, 2025. The project was conceived and directed by Fabio Fantuzzi, with the supervision of Stefania Portinari (associate professor of Art History at Ca' Foscari University in Venice) and funded by the European Union under a Marie Sklodowska-Curie grant. It contains a preface by Dario Calimani (President of the Jewish Community in Venice), introduction by Fabio Fantuzzi, six essays by various authors (one was a Norman Raeben student), and, possibly, the most complete selection of paintings, drawings, and studio works from Norman Raeben, the painter-teacher who perhaps never knew the impact he had on that scruffy guy who in the early months of 1974 took painting classes in his studio on the eleventh floor of the Carnegie Hall building in New York. Raeben would certainly have been surprised to know that his teaching helped Dylan conceive a new approach to the narrative ballad genre, one in which the song must be contemplated like a painting where different events seem to happen at the same time, or in no time at all.

"I had the good fortune to meet a man in New York City who taught me how to see. He put my mind and my hand and my eye together in a way that allowed me to do consciously what I unconsciously felt."[1] This is Dylan's first oblique reference to Norman Raeben, given in a 1978 interview (all other references are oblique as well). As we know, the immediate result of this re-learning was the manipulation of time in the lyrics of *Blood on the Tracks*, where it is often impossible to place the events described in a linear chronology. Dylan's newly found ability to suspend or twist narrative time shows up in other songs of the 1970s, such as "Isis," "Señor," and "No Time to Think" (a title, as Chistopher Ricks observed, that must be read both ways, "there's no time to think" and there's "no-time" to think about).[2] In fact, Dylan's new style extends all over the 1980s, leaving traces in "Jokerman," "Blind Willie McTell," "Foot

[1] Interview with Jonathan Cott, "Rolling Stone," November 16, 1978, in *Bob Dylan: The Essential Interviews*, ed. By Jonathan Cott (New York: Wenner Books, 2006), 260.

[2] "In terms of the transitory language, it is not that there is no time to think, but rather that one of the things that must be promptly thought about is that there's no time." Christopher Ricks, "American English and the Inherently Transitory," in C. Ricks, *The Force of Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 427.

of Pride," and "Brownsville Girl" (and, years later, "Highlands" and "Tempest"). The process that Dylan learned was his personal adaptation of Horace's well-known saying, namely, that painting and poetry have a lot in common (*ut pictura poesis*, or "as is painting, so is poetry," *Ars poetica*, 361). The seven stanzas of "Tangled Up in Blue" are either the story in chronological order of a man desperately in love with the same woman or the same story with scrambled chronology. The song could also be the story of one man chasing seven different women, or seven men chasing the same woman. The listener is supposed to "stop time" and contemplate the song as one synchronic event.

Dylan, who attended Raeben's classes five days a week (something that he had *never* done, that is, sit down in a classroom and pay attention, since his high school years) never revealed the name of his teacher, probably to protect him from unwanted exposure. The first Dylan sleuth to name him was Bert Cartwright in the early 1990s.[3] Clinton Heylin, Howard Sounes, and Sean Wilentz picked up from Cartwright. When I was working on the first edition of my Dylan book, I did some research at the Bobst Library of NYU, and I found more biographical details in the *Who's Who in American Art*.[4] Ten years later, my few pages on Raeben spurred Fabio Fantuzzi, then an undergraduate student at the Università Ca' Foscari in Venice, to investigate further. He wrote to me, asking if I thought that he could submit a Norman Raeben research project for a Ph.D. in American Studies. I remember that I was skeptical. I was afraid that no American Studies professor in any Italian university might find the Raeben project worthy of a doctoral fellowship. How wrong I was! He was accepted at Università Roma Tre under the guidance of Professor Maria Anita Stefanelli and immediately started hunting the legacy of Norman Raeben. He went to New York, found Raeben's old students, interviewed them, found the location of his remaining paintings, motivated art historians to delve into the life and works of a quasi-forgotten heir to the Ashcan School of realist painting, wrote his dissertation, and published his first findings in a 2020 book on Dylan as an artist.[5] Fantuzzi has now crowned his research with this gorgeous catalog, which will be

[3] Bert Cartwright, "The Mysterious Norman Raeben," in *Wanted Man: In Search of Bob Dylan*, ed. by John Bauldie (New York: Citadel Press, 1991), 85-90.

[4] Alessandro Carrera, *La voce di Bob Dylan. Una spiegazione dell'America* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2001, 2011), 296-310. The title of the third, expanded edition is slightly different: *La voce di Bob Dylan. Un racconto dell'America* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2021). In his bibliographical references, Fabio Fantuzzi has conflated the two titles.

[5] Fabio Fantuzzi, "Painting Songs, Composing Paintings: Norman Raeben and Bob Dylan," in *Bob Dylan and the Arts: Songs, Film, Painting, and Sculpture in Dylan's Universe*, ed. by Maria Anita Stefanelli, Fabio Fantuzzi, and Alessandro Carrera (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2020), 209-232.

the mandatory reference for anyone who wants to know about this Norman Raeben, Dylan or not. Raeben was born Numa Rabinovitz in Ukraine and was the youngest son of Shalom Rabinovitz, better known as Shalom Aleichem, one of the major figures of modern Yiddish literature, and whose stories inspired the musical *The Fiddler on the Roof*.

The Wandering Painting is a tribute to Norman Raeben with and without Dylan, as it should be, because there's a lot to say about Raeben himself: "a sophisticated artist," Fantuzzi writes in his introduction, and:

> an erudite, influential teacher whose long career spanned across some of the most influential 20th-century American and European artistic movements and cultural milieus […] The project analyzed Raeben's career and his artistic collaborations as a case study to deepen the knowledge of the evolution of Ukrainian Yiddish-derived culture and art in New York in the 20th century. […] The most substantial part of the research, however, consisted in examining private collections belonging to the artist's students, collaborators, and relatives. The study of these archives uncovered a wide range of information […]; it also unearthed a corpus of unpublished materials, including letters and documents, videos and audios of his lessons, various lectures, excerpts of an unfinished book on art history, and an extensive collection of his paintings. (pp. 11-12)

During the 1920s and 1930s, Raeben's works were displayed in several collective exhibitions. In 1946, he opened his school in the heart of New York, and it is amazing that the Venice retrospective of his work has been the first. Raeben, who was good at many things, was not good at publicizing himself. It is also true that many of his works, located in a studio in Connecticut, were lost in a fire.

Why "The Wandering Painting"? Because, as Fantuzzi explains, "most of his works were made 'on the road'." Moreover, and starting from the mid-1930s, "Raeben stopped giving titles to cityscapes and intentionally did not provide indications, dates, or progressive numbering, forcing the viewer into a journey, both real and ideal, among and within the works in a circular path with no beginning and no end." Just like in "Tangled Up in Blue," "Where Are You Tonight," and possibly "Changing of the Guards," "the journey thus becomes the very substance of the artistic process as both subject and method. Such transposition of a wandering approach, rooted within traditional Jewish and American culture, into painting foreshadowed the incoming cultural zeitgeist that shortly thereafter would mark the essence of 1950s and 1960s Americanism" (p. 12). That may very well be, but it must be remembered that the

zeitgeist that put people on the move, albeit anticipated by the Beatniks, only began in the second half of the 1960s.

Clearly a post-impressionist modernist, leaning sometimes toward expressionism (no mere "copy from life" was allowed in his school), Raeben was neither avant-garde nor retro-garde. Raeben could do good, traditional portraits, and he did them on commission. In his personal work, however, as Fantuzzi says, he was "mid-garde," between the realism of the Ashcan school and a more stylized approach to the American genre of cityscape. In fact, the similarities between Raeben's cityscapes and the 1990s Dylan paintings cannot be missed. In more recent years, however, Dylan's large paintings have moved toward a stricter realism that probably would not have impressed his old teacher that much, but that's a different story.[6]

The volume includes six essays: "Locating Norman Raeben in American Art," by Andrea Pappas; "'Way of Seeing and Being Seen': Norman Raeben in Paris," by Stefania Portinari; "Norman Raeben, American in Paris, European in New York," by Nico Stringa; "Portraits of Wandering: An Artistic Journey from Sholem Aleichem to Bob Dylan," by Fabio Fantuzzi; "Norman Raeben: Art Telescopes Time," by Roz Jacobs (one of Raeben's students), plus the technical approach of Antonella Martinato in "Maintenance and Conservative Restoration Process Diagnostics and Study of Materials." Except Fantuzzi, the authors are not Dylan scholars, yet they share the temptation to understand what made Raeben so important to Dylan. Because, as it seems, Raeben showed Dylan the way to consciously regain access to his unconscious, Portinari comments:

> When Dylan attended that school for two months in the spring of 1974, he was encouraged not to focus on details and was taught 'to see,' to become aware of what he already felt 'in an unconscious way.' He benefited from a welcoming philosophical counseling environment that fit within a culture of synesthesia, very Yiddish yet also idealistic, existing in America within the intellectual climate of neo-avant-gardes, stemming from the European theosophies that passed to the Bauhaus masters exiled in America, to the 1970s climate of minimalist artist-thinkers like Sol LeWitt and Smithson. (p. 37)

[6] For an assessment of Dylan as a painter, see *Bob Dylan: Retrospectrum*, ed. by Shai Baitel (Milan: Skira -MAXXI Museum, 2022), and Alessandro Carrera, "Bob Dylan: pittore realista americano (minore)," in *Changes. Riscritture, sconfinamenti, talenti plurimi*, ed. by Angela Albanese (Sesto San Giovanni: Mimesis, 2024), 71-88.

Certainly, any investigation on "theosophies" that were passed on to Dylan, no matter how second-hand they were, would be fascinating. I have doubts, however, that it will ever be undertaken, except maybe for the Tarot symbolism in *Desire*.

Fantuzzi's essay opens with Raeben's alleged portrait of Bob Dylan, showing a bespectacled young man in a light-brown jacket, just a hint of a beard, and sleeves that end without hands coming out of them. *The Poet with No Hands (A Portrait of Bob Dylan)* is now at the Bob Dylan Center in Tulsa, Oklahoma (reproduced in the book at page 46, 54, and 79). Before we delve into the psychoanalytic interpretation game of the poet with no hands, however, Fantuzzi informs us that Raeben did that painting as an exercise a few days before Dylan showed up at his school. So, was the title already there or did Raeben add it later? Did he retouch the painting to make it more a portrait of Dylan? We don't know, and Fantuzzi doesn't say. A better question would be, did Dylan have heart and mind but no "hand" at painting (or writing) when he enrolled in Raeben's class? And did he regain his "hand" afterward"? There is no doubt about that. We leave the rest to the goddess of synchronicity.

The second part of the volume is dedicated to the retrospective. As Fantuzzi explains, placing Raeben's paintings in any order is a difficult task. Fantuzzi has done all he could to reverse the artist's decision, date, and locate the paintings, as it was his duty to do so (artists and scholars rarely see eye to eye on these matters), and the result is impressive in terms of scope and precision. Thanks to *The Wandering Painting*, we can see now in sequence the portraits of Raeben's father and mother dating back to the 1920s, many cityscapes and landscapes from places known and unknown (Venice included), charming drawings, nudes and dancers reminding us of Degas, figure studies oscillating between cubism and realism, many instances where the brush strokes break free from realism to create a structure of pure signs, and studio works that do not seem to need further completion.

In the end, was Norman Raeben a "great painter"? Maybe not, but that's not the point (Dylan isn't a "great painter" either). Because of his European upbringing and the time he spent in Paris, where he was familiar with Chagall, Matisse, and Soutine, Raeben never really broke with post-impressionism. He did not become a fully "American artist" like the new masters of abstract expressionism – who were not "great painters" either, yet were able to conjure up great paintings from pure concepts. Still, Raeben was a painter, to the extent that he had a vision of the America he wanted to portray. The world is full of "great painters," just as it is full of "great poets." What we miss, most of the time, are just painters, like Raeben, and just poets, like Dylan.

***Bob Dylan: Point Blank.* Halcyon Gallery, London. 9 May–6 July 2025.**

Reviewed by Angus Gibson

Point Blank is an exhibition of 97 new paintings by Bob Dylan at the Halcyon Gallery on London's New Bond St from May 9th to July 6th, 2025. The gallery is located in the heart of Mayfair, one of the city's wealthiest districts. King Charles III has his suits made around the corner at Anderson & Sheppard on Old Burlington Street, and the Halcyon itself is flanked by high-fashion boutiques Gucci and Balenciaga. Dylan has regularly presented his artwork at the Halcyon since 2008's *Drawn Blank*. On each visit the Dylan fans – imitating our man's scruffy Greenwich Village style – stand in contrast to the sharply-dressed locals.

On one level, Dylan's now extensive collection of artwork is a commercial enterprise, no different to the luxury handbags and jewelry in the windows of New Bond St's other shops. Signed prints start at £1,950 ($2,645). An original costs tens of thousands. But the gallery's plush location also has a rich and authentic artistic history. Handel lived a stone's throw away at 25 Brook St, in an apartment later rented by Jimi Hendrix. The Beatles' Apple Records was headquartered at 3 Saville Row, and if you stood outside the Halycon Gallery on January 30th, 1969, you would have heard the Fab Four's final concert booming out from a nearby rooftop. Notably, Robert Fraser's Indica art gallery was once in the neighborhood at 6 Mason's Yard. Here, John Lennon first met Yoko Ono, and Paul McCartney bought the Matisse painting that inspired the band's apple logo.

Art and commerce have long been interwoven in Mayfair, and this duality is also present in Dylan's artwork. Though Dylan has painted since at least the mid-60s, he held his first exhibition in 2008, titled *Drawn Blank* and composed of watercolors based on sketches made in the late 80s and early 90s.[1] After this first exhibition, new collections – from oil paintings to metalworks – followed routinely: the *Brazil Series* (2010), the *Asia Series* (2011), *Revisionist Art* (2012), *Face Value* (2013), *Mood Swings* (2013), the *New Orleans Series (2013), The Beaten Path* (2016), *Mondo Scripto (2018),* and *Deep Focus* (2021). Thousands of signed prints from each series are distributed by Castle Fine Art, who also sell works by other celebrity painters such as Billy Connolly and Ron Wood. Dylan has grossed millions of dollars from this business model.

[1] Notable early paintings include covers for *Sing Out!* magazine and The Band's *Music from Big Pink*, and illustrations for the book *Writings & Drawings* (1973).

It would be wholly unfair, however, to dismiss Dylan's efforts purely as a cash grab. One of the joys of regularly visiting Dylan's shows at the Halcyon is witnessing his progress as a painter. What started with *Drawn Blank* – as relatively simple pencil lines and watercolors – has advanced in ambition both technically and compositionally, culminating in the epic landscapes of *The Beaten Path* and Hopper-esque oil paintings of *Deep Focus*. Slowly, Dylan has won over the art establishment. Critic and Turner Prize judge Jonathan Jones wrote of *The Beaten Path*: "[Dylan's] drawings are intricate, sincere, charged with curiosity ... He has a surprising amount in common with [David] Hockney. His art looks more serious with every exhibition."[2]

We can look at *Point Blank*, therefore, as Dylan showing off his development as a painter in comparison to his first show, *Drawn Blank*, as the similar titles suggest.[3] Like that earlier collection, the works in *Point Blank* started as pencil sketches on thick drawing paper that the artist later painted over in acrylic, using broad brush strokes and bold color. But unlike *Drawn Blank*, which dazzled in bright primary colors, *Point Blank*'s use of color is more sophisticated, preferring earthy tones, dark blues and lipstick red. The subject matter is also more varied and complex: portraits of musicians, boxers, cowboys; still life studies of eggboxes, Scotch tape, binoculars; landscapes of rural America. Dylan's brushwork is also now more skilled; he uses thick blotches of paint to add texture in places, and he frames his subjects with big rectangles of color that have an almost Rothko-like quality. As such, *Point Blank* evidences Dylan's considerable progression as a painter.

As you enter the Halycon Gallery, you are greeted with a quote from Dylan printed in large black letters on the wall making this connection, while considering his work in poetic but vague terms:

> The *Point Blank* series is an extension of the *Drawn Blank* series that was done some years ago. It can be looked at as an update, or a continual refinement of a certain process

[2] Jonathan Jones. "Bob Dylan: a Hockney-like painter of America's strange essence" The Guardian, 8 Nov. 2016. www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2016/nov/08/bob-dylan-paintings-halcyon-gallery-london-beaten-path

[3] The title may also reference the 1967 spy film *Point Blank*, starring Lee Marvin, as suggested by *Expecting Rain* user Mirte (https://expectingrain.com/discussions/viewtopic.php?t=108402). Indeed, Scott Warmuth has noted (https://www.instagram.com/p/DDDdS7nu9uQ/?img_index=1) that a number of Dylan's paintings from the recent series *Deep Focus* are based on stills from Hollywood movies of the late sixties and early seventies. The film *Point Blank* is of this era, but none of Dylan's compositions in the *Point Blank* appear to be based on film stills.

> ... The idea was not only to observe the human condition but to throw myself into it with great urgency ... to create living breathing entities that have emotional resonance, colours used as weapons and mood setters.

This is evocative writing, but it doesn't tell us much about Dylan's real process. It's naive to expect much insight from the ever-vague artist – especially in a sales blurb – but if Dylan is a serious painter now, it would be fascinating to know how he actually paints. Where does he work – on the road or at home? What brushes does he use? Dylan has previously described his technique in itemized detail, writing in a 2016 *Vanity Fair* article ("Why Bob Dylan Paints") of his system for composing *The Beaten Path* landscapes: "I went to the camera-obscura method ... I put a 58-mm 0.43x wide-angle conversion lens onto a used Nikon D3300 Af-p on quite a few paintings."[4] The promotional literature accompanying *Point Blank* is less elucidatory. While a line such as "the idea was not only to observe the human condition but to throw myself into it with great urgency" might describe Dylan's artistry as a whole, it doesn't shed much light on Dylan *the painter*. Still, the evidence of his work – whatever the process – is proudly displayed across Halycon's two floors.

The first paintings on ground level are a dozen or so portraits. These are reminiscent of Dylan's earlier *Face Value* collection and display a great leap forward in ability from *Self Portrait's* album cover. Unlike that LP sleeve, painted in an underdeveloped style over fifty years ago, the faces here are well-defined and carry emotive human expressions. Dylan tempts the viewer to imagine each subject's back story. The viewer is led to ask: why is one woman wearing 1920s flying goggles? Is the man with the clean-cut hair and 1940s-style shirt from decades past, or a character from the present day wearing vintage clothes? Some portraits have odd proportions. There is a bearded man with an unusually thin head; another man with an unnaturally bulky chin holds his hand to his eye as if peering through a telescope. Ten years ago, critics might have attributed these strange proportions to Dylan's poor draftmanship. But there's now enough evidence to suggest he's a skilled drawer, making deliberate and effective choices. The strangely-shaped faces make the viewer feel like Mr. Jones in "Ballad of a Thin Man," staring back at a rogues gallery of sword-swallowers, lepers, and crooks. And the titles of these portraits in the accompanying catalogue add to this sense of carnival. Dylan has

[4] Bob Dylan. "In His Own Words: Why Bob Dylan Paints." Vanity Fair, 2 Nov. 2016. www.vanityfair.com/culture/2016/11/why-bob-dylan-paints

evidently enjoyed creating exotic names for each subject: "Dennis Manga (Man with a Crooked Smile)," "Peeping Tom," "Vag Siska (Stunt Flyer)," and "Mr. Soup Can," to cite a few.[5]

Among the most interesting entries in the catalogue is the portrait of "Vera Silverlake," a Black woman with striking features. Like a number of works in the catalogue, this portrait is paired with short prose. However, unlike others, the text beside "Vera Silverlake" is written in first person and uses Dylan's distinctive voice:

> I dreamed about her the other night, we were in the bar at the Adolphus Hotel and she was talking about my Nobel Prize, and said that "The only people pissed off about you winning that, were white people. You deserve that Nobel prize honey, you really do. At your best, you're wonderful." I asked her if I could see her later. She wrote down her address and gave me instructions on how to get there. Then I woke up. It was one of my better dreams.[6]

It's unclear if Dylan wrote this himself. The catalogue's title page notes "Text by Eddie Gorodetsky, Lucy Sante, and Jackie Hamilton," though the individual entries aren't credited. And while Gorodetsky and Sante regularly collaborate with Dylan, at the time of writing it's not obviously clear who Jackie Hamilton is.[7] This mystery aside, the catalogue is a worthwhile purchase at £45 ($61), with a hardcover, thick high-quality paperstock, and 193 pages of Dylan's original pencil sketches shown before he added paint.

The rear half of the ground floor contains still life studies and a series of paintings of musicians. The still life paintings detail a variety of eccentric objects. A box of eggs recalls the scene in *Hearts of Fire* (1987), where Dylan's character opens a fridge filled only with eggboxes.[8] A painting of a Scotch tape holder is particularly intriguing. While Dylan's compositions have historically tended towards cliché – open highways, fifties diners, retro Cadillacs – this painting looks genuinely original. Another study is of a wooden crate of grapes, emblazoned with a cartoon logo of a woman holding a bowl of fruit under the words "MIXED

[5] Bob Dylan. *Point Blank (Quick Studies)*. Castle Fine Art, 2025.

[6] Dylan, *Point Blank*, p.126.

[7] Eddie Gorodesky is credited as writer and producer of *Theme Time Radio Hour* and received thanks as Dylan's "fishing buddy" in *The Philosophy of Modern Song*. Lucy Sante wrote the sermons for the film *Trouble No More*, included in *Bootleg Series Vol. 13.*

[8] *Hearts of Fire*. Directed by Richard Marquand, performances by Bob Dylan, Fiona, and Rupert Everett, Lorimar Motion Pictures, 1987.

GRAPES." The woman's face is visibly contorted as if to emphasize that she is part of a logo branded on the box, not a real person. This brings to mind the *Ekphrasis* – where art depicts other art – discussed in relation to Dylan by Raphael Falco previously in this journal, as well as Warhol's Brillo box pop art.[9]

On the opposite wall from the still life, the series of musicians is presented as a set of four paintings: two pianists, a guitarist, and a saxophonist. Placed together, they look like a band, with each dressed in a 50s-style suit like some well-regarded jazz combo. It's hard to view the piano players and not think of Dylan's current live shows, where he's usually seen behind a baby grand. These aren't self portraits, but they are evidence of a musician studying the poses of other musicians. The viewer is naturally inclined to wonder what, if anything, these paintings can tell us about Dylan's own impression of himself as a pianist.

A disappointing aspect of this set of paintings, and indeed of others in *Point Blank*, is Dylan's inability to competently draw fingers. In the painting "Young Man with a Horn," the saxophone player's digits are long and bulky, like lifeless sausages indelicately sprawled over the instrument. Unlike the misshapen heads in other portraits, this rendering does not have any positive effect, nor does it suggest controlled distortion. Rather it looks amateurish. Dylan's artistic skill has advanced greatly, but he can still improve if he is to finally paint his masterpiece.

Downstairs, the basement is furnished with a similar number of paintings as upstairs and a short film that plays on a loop. The film is a dull hagiography that merely lists Dylan's various awards, as if to convince deep-pocketed but uncultured clientele of his worth. It's an unnecessary addition, as the quality of the paintings here is enough to speak for Dylan's talent alone.

As with the quartet of musicians on the level above, the basement walls display several sets of paintings arranged around coherent themes. There is a set of characters in evening wear. One sports a mask and cocktail dress, like the woman on the rear cover of *Shadows in the Night*. In the next picture, a man in a tuxedo lies on a table. It is unclear whether he is dead or alive. Another set of paintings depicts landscapes, while a further set collects nudes.

Of particular interest is a group of four paintings showing couples. Upon first look, they each appear heteronormative, but this assumption gives way on further inspection. One painting is of a pair in a passionate embrace. But up close, the male subject has feminine

[9] Raphael Falco, "'Unheard Melodies': Ekphrasis and Possible Gaze in Dylan's Lyrics," *Dylan Review*, 5.1 Spring/Summer, 2023.

features accentuated with makeup. A second picture, called "Outlaws," shows two people in a window. One is wearing a polka-dot dress and hat, the other is in a shirt and tie. Both have feminine features and also seem to be wearing makeup. Someone else's hand is reaching across them towards the window, as if trying to halt their escape. Awareness of the discipline of gender studies is growing among Dylan scholars, following the "Bob Dylan: Questions on Masculinity" conference at the University of Southern Denmark in 2024.[10] An examination of these paintings from such a perspective may prove worthwhile.

The most moving set of paintings in *Point Blank* is a collection of eight pictures illustrating a 1940s house. It looks very much like the sort you might find in northern Minnesota. One shows a fireplace, another a staircase, one more a kitchen. But a painting of a crib below a small bedroom window caught my eye. I visited Dylan's family home in Hibbing, Minnesota recently; the room in this painting, with the upstairs window and neat period furniture, looks strikingly like Dylan's childhood bedroom. Many people remember the view from an early bedroom window, and carry it with them forever. It's touching to think that Dylan might have done the same, remembering it one day as he sat down to paint. This picture, titled "Crib" in the catalogue, gets to the heart of *Point Blank*. Most of these images are about memory. They depict scenes from the past: people in archaic clothes, 50s cars, old-timey gamblers and boxers. Just as Dylan's music in the two decades since *"Love & Theft"* has increasingly taken influence from the music of his childhood (Frank Sinatra, Bob Wills, Hank Williams), so too has his visual art focused on subjects from the pre-Bob Dylan era (cowboys, jazz musicians, men in hats and ties). The viewer is left to consider whether these paintings, like "Crib," are from Dylan's own memory, or are merely a nostalgic invention of his imagination.

I asked myself this question as I left the gallery and walked past the diamond rings and shiny watches in neighboring windows. Ultimately, for those who buy paintings from the Halcyon Gallery, Dylan's artwork may be nothing more than another of Mayfair's superficial luxury gifts – and for Dylan another large check. But there's more to *Point Blank* than naked commerce. Dylan is adroitly displaying the progress he's made as an artist since 2008's *Drawn Blank*, and in doing so is furthering his exploration of pre-1960s American

[10] Bob Dylan: Questions on Masculinity." Conference, University of Southern Denmark, Odense, 23–24 May 2024. event.sdu.dk/dylan/conference.

culture. That it's on display in Mayfair, where London's old-school financiers have long cut loose with artsy bohemians, is perfectly fitting.

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The Dylanista

"Dylan's craft or Sullen Art"

Kudos to Timothée Chalamet for creating a Bob Dylan role tremblingly balanced between total immersion and dramatic restraint. Chalamet's portrayal is memorable as much for the unexpected gentleness of his young Bob as for the familiar saber-toothed ambition.

Let's not forget, though, that Chalamet is working from a script, and not only the script written by Jay Cocks and Jerry Mangold, the director. In fact, the script is an old one. As Joan Baez puts in her song "Diamonds and Rust":

> you burst on the scene
> Already a legend
> The unwashed phenomenon
> The original vagabond

She's describing the Dylan of the early Village days, the same period as Chalamet's portrayal. But in the film Dylan isn't the "original vagabond." On the contrary, in one of the film's earliest scenes he goes to visit the real original vagabond, the Great Historical Bum himself, Woody Guthrie (Scoot McNairy). As Dylan stands awkwardly at the foot of Woody's bed in the squalid Greystone hospital room, Pete Seeger (played by Edward Norton) asks him why he came. Chalamet mumbles, "Maybe to catch a spark."

The "spark" is a conventional image of inspiration. In the hospital scene, the spark comes from Woody, but more often the Muses, or ancient deities, or Christian God supply the source of inspiration for poetry and song. Whatever their names, though, the implication is that poets compose their masterpieces through the intervention of outside forces.

This is a misprision of artistic production, diminishing the importance of human skill. Unfortunately, Dylan has from time to time endorsed a comparable view of his own creativity. He never quite claims that any specific gods (or G-d, his spelling in the manuscripts) speak through him "as through trumpets," to quote the Renaissance philosopher Marsilio Ficino on the subject. Yet Dylan has openly surrendered agency when trying to account for his early songs. In a 2004 interview with Ed Bradley for *60 Minutes*, he quotes "It's All Right, Ma" (1964):

> All those early songs were almost magically written. Ah... 'Darkness at the break of noon, shadows even the silver spoon, a handmade blade, the child's balloon...' Well, try to sit down and write something like that. There's a magic to that, and it's not Siegfried and Roy kind of magic, you know? It's a different kind of a penetrating magic. And, you know, I did it. I did it at one time.

It's a curious statement: Dylan accounts for the song's lyrics as having been "magically written." But he seems to take credit for the magic, while conceding that kind of thing is now beyond his present powers: "I did it. I did it at one time." Is he mixing up the medicine? Does he mean that in 1964 he had power over the "penetrating magic," that he deployed it or tapped into it? Or does magical production of any kind preclude Dylan's agency?

At other times, Dylan has been less ambiguous, crediting "ghosts" with the composition of the early songs. When, in 2004, Robert Hillburn asked about "Like A Rolling Stone," Dylan replied: "It's like a ghost is writing a song like that. It gives you the song and it goes away, it goes away. You don't know what it means. Except the ghost picked me to write the song."

But he also told Hillburn that, while working on "Like a Rolling Stone," "I'm not thinking about what I want to say, I'm just thinking "Is this OK for the meter?""[1]

One couldn't ask for a sharper contrast between otherworldly inspiration and poetic craft.

The contrast wasn't as clear in Dylan's interview with Jeff Rosen in *No Direction Home* (late 2000). While discussing growing up in Minnesota, Dylan says it was "the last days of carney shows," where you could see "everything from the snake woman to pygmies ... the fat man ... it'd be hard core burlesque ... guys in blackface, George Washington in blackface, Napoleon in blackface, weird Shakespearean things." He adds, it was "stuff that didn't make any sense at the time." Then he quickly revises that: "But actually I retained a lot of it because when I started writing songs, I started subliminally writing a lotta songs I wouldn't have attempted even to think about unless I had some concept of that type of reality." When we remember "Napoleon in rags" or "Fat man eating his last meal," Dylan's reflections might seem too pat. But the upshot of his statement is that his creative process was and, at the same time, was *not* under his control: subliminal effects are not the same as conscious creativity. In

[1] Robert Hilburn, *"Rock's Enigmatic Poet Opens a Long-Private Door*," *Los Angeles Times*, April 4, 2004. [https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2004-apr-04-ca-dylan04-story.html] Cited by Bill Lattanzi in this issue of the *DR* (7.1).

the same interview that briefly discusses his early career, Dylan says he wrote a lot of songs "in a short amount of time." As in the Bradley interview, he says, "I could do that then." But his reason is more extensive: "The process was new to me. I felt like I'd discovered something no one else had ever discovered and I was in an arena no one else had ever been in before. Ever ... I thought I needed to press on, you know, and get into it as far as I could."[2] Dylan's final assessment here skirts the question of mysterious sources, and seems to give the young songwriter a great deal of control over his exploration of the "arena no one else had ever been in before." He seems reluctant – in 2000, at least – to give up possession of his talent, as if even in the throes of "penetrating magic," his consciousness contributes to the final product. As Dylan put it to Jonathan Cott in *Rolling Stone* in 1978: "It took me a long time to get to do consciously what I used to be able to do unconsciously." After all, as he has said many times, his songs are written to be performed *by him*, which surely indicates an element of human agency.

This ambiguity has a long history. Wondering where the songs come from resonates with the ancient debate about the source of art, precisely, the relationship between divine inspiration and conscious agency. The first and most influential voice in the debate was Plato's, and he probably deserves the most blame for removing human agency from poetic production. In the *Phaedrus*, *furor poeticus* is the third of four forms of madness.[3] The frenzied poet is virtually insane. In the *Ion*, which is probably the most damaging to the idea of human agency, Plato adds that both lyric and epic poets compose not by art but through divine possession; he compares poets to Corybantic revelers, insisting that "God" takes away the minds of poets and speaks through them while they, like divine prophets, remain in a state of unconsciousness.[4]

The original meaning of the word *genius* somewhat revises Plato and might help us capture the valence of Dylan's creativity. The word derives from two Latin roots, *genius* and *ingenium*. The first comes from *gens*, or family, whose otherworldly tutelary spirits are identified with and embodied in (mostly) men and worshiped on each birthday. In this sense, the Roman *genius* is comparable to the Greek *daimon* (demon), a spirit that directs one's actions *from outside*. The other root of *genius*, the Latin *ingenium*, referred more clearly to "natural talent or aptitude and proficiency." While the maxim *poeta nascitur non fit* (the poet is born,

[2] *No Direction Home*, a film by Martin Scorsese, 2005. The Rosen interview was conducted in late 2000.

[3] See *Phaedrus* (244a<n->245a, 265a<n->b). For the discussion of *furor poeticus* and *genius*, I've referred to my articles in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*.

[4] See *Ion* (533d, 534b)

not made) increased in popularity from antiquity to the eighteenth century, poets sometimes countered it pluckily by insisting on the importance of acquired skill. The classically trained Ben Jonson in the early seventeenth century coined the phrase *poeta fit non nascitur* (a poet is made, not born).[5]

The division between genius as the poet's inner world, his or her agency, and something external to the poet remains part of the meaning of genius today. More to the point for Dylan studies, these alternate versions of genius, the choice between inspiration and agency, continue to reflect – or afflict – ideas of Dylan's creativity. Despite brilliant critical forays into the songbook, despite a half-century of parsed lyrics and revelations about old performances, a stubborn strain of *furor poeticus* seems to persist in the appreciation of the oeuvre.

We know all about the Dylan myth and the magical thinking attached to his creativity. There's a scene in *A Complete Unknown* that extends it. When Dylan retreats from McCann's Bar to Sylvie's apartment, only to find that "anyway [she's] not alone," he sits for a moment quietly, holding a towel to his mouth, still traumatized from the punch-up fiasco in the club. With Sylvie (Elle Fanning) hovering, he dabs his mouth, looking aggrieved. He almost whispers: "Everyone asks where the songs come from, Sylvie. But if you watch their faces, they're not asking where the songs come from. They're asking why the songs didn't come to *them*."

Although Sylvie does not look moved by this bitter observation, the remark capitalizes on the mystique of Bob Dylan's early genius. The filmmakers milk the ghost-inspiration myth. But to be clear, they aren't asking why these songs came to Robert Zimmerman of Hibbing, Minnesota, of all the people strumming and singing on Bleeker Street. As Joanie says, many people recognized Dylan – or wanted to recognize him – as "already a legend."

Chalamet's insight doesn't deny that the songs come from somewhere. In fact, seeing his friends' jealousy about the songs not coming to them, he tacitly acknowledges that they "come to him." Alas, then, *A Complete Unknown* further promulgates the fiction of *daimon*, mythologizing Dylan's genius.

In his review in these pages (*DR* 6.2), Jonathan Hodgers sums up the problem: "*A Complete Unknown* is a deft piece of propaganda," he says, "because it's a form of promotion in the service of an ideology: Dylan-as-enigma, Dylan-as-genius, Dylan-as-lightning rod,

[5] But Jonson might have had a chip on his shoulder about any sort of birthright, even poetic. His stepfather was a bricklayer and Jonson, who attended an excellent grammar school, was denied a university education. So his reversal of the ancient maxim might have sprung from a personal motivation.

Dylan-as-sexy-revolutionary." Ironically, this flaw in the film reflects the reality of uncritical opinion about Dylan's poetic production, and the division between *furor poeticus* and human agency: there is no man around who can track or chain him down. His enigmatic genius precludes investigation, as if a singer is born, not made.

This is the dilemma: Either poets, e.g. Dylan, remain in a state of unconsciousness and are mere vessels through which an otherworldly spirit speaks. Or they – while admittedly taking a measure of inspiration from the gods or Muses – use their own skills to fashion immortal verse. (There is, of course, the third option, yearned for inimitably by John Keats: "O for a beaker full of the warm South, / Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene." In other words, inspiration from wine mixed with water from the Muses' spring – "O, for a draught of vintage!" But this isn't the place to explore Dylan's and everyone else's use of the various substances standing in for the "blushful Hippocrene" in the 60s and 70s.)[6]

Apart from artificial inspiration, however, there has always been a fine line separating the *furor poeticus* and *furor divinus* from human craft. Take John Milton's dubious assertion of how he wrote *Paradise Lost*. In his introduction to Book 9 he calls on Urania, his muse, to inspire him to find suitable verse to narrate something as unspeakable as Satan's temptation of Eve:

> If answerable style I can obtain
> Of my celestial patroness, who deigns
> Her nightly visitation unimplored,
> And dictates to me slumbering; or inspires
> Easy my unpremeditated verse.

The problem with the passage is the word "or" in the penultimate line, a characteristic linguistic sleight-of-hand from Milton. A scholar once suggested that with Milton we should read "and" for "or," which makes sense in these lines and teases the question of how heavily inspiration contributes to poetic accomplishment. Like many a reader before me, I'd like to ask Mr. Milton, "Does Urania 'dictate' to you 'slumbering' so that you wake up with that morning's *unpremeditated* lines totally finished and ready to be dictated in turn to your daughters, your nephew, or some other amanuensis?" Furthermore, "Did she, on certain days, also dictate appropriate revisions?" If not, and Urania didn't impart revisions to Milton but only finished

[6] John Keats, "Ode to a Nightingale," lines 15-19.

lines, why did it take him so long to finish the work (almost ten years, when you can read through *Paradise Lost* in a matter of days or weeks)? Inspiration is one thing; editorial labor is an entirely different matter.

Keats noticed the conflict in Milton's invocation. In his all but worshipful poem "On Seeing a Lock of Milton's Hair," he calls Milton the "chief of organic numbers." "Old Scholar of the Spheres!" he enthuses, "Thy spirit never slumbers."[7] In Keats's revision, Milton's spirit never nods off. He is invoking, not magical dictation, but the age-old confrontation between inspiration and agency, between unconsciousness and wakeful skill.

In general, Milton scholars are not as revisionist as Keats. We observe a code of silence and ignore Milton's spectacularly inaccurate claim regarding Urania's part in the poem's composition. Even believers in supernatural beings and otherworldly forces are highly skeptical about the "nightly visitation[s]." From a critical perspective, it seems more sensible to sideline Urania and endorse Dylan Thomas's much less magical source for his poetry:

> In my craft or sullen art
> Exercised in the still night
> When only the moon rages
> And the lovers lie abed
> With all their griefs in their arms,
> I labour by singing light.[8]

There's no magic here, despite Thomas's references to a raging moon and "singing light." "In My Craft or Sullen Art" reduces millennia of superlunary inspiration and divine light to laborious earthly effort, to a craft or "sullen" art practiced while "lovers lie abed / With all their griefs in their arms." We can read "and" for "or" in this poem too, especially because the word "art" is derived from the Latin word *ars*, which can mean "craft." In any case, there's nothing magical here, nothing portentous (or pretentious), no Urania, and no ghosts. Thomas was notoriously – and self-destructively – fond of "the blushful Hippocrene," but alcoholic inspiration is terrestrially bound. In fact, the *terra* (earth) and *terroir* (soil and environment of vines) literally bring it all back home from astronomy to topography. Thomas's sullen art is "Exercised in the still night" by a poet laboring *wide awake*, perhaps stimulated by grape or

[7] Keats, "On Seeing a Lock of Milton's Hair," lines 1-3.

[8] Dylan Thomas, "In My Craft or Sullen Art," lines 1-6.

barleycorn, but definitely *not* "slumbering" and waiting to have his poem "dictated" to him from the stars.

Dylan Thomas honors the poet laboring through the night. The heuristic of his poem is resistance to magical thinking and to the conflation of human agency – or skill – with heaven-sent moments. Although it's still unproven if Dylan Thomas's first name supplied Bob Dylan's adopted surname, his poem "In My Craft or Sullen Art" could provide a valuable model for realigning our appreciation of Dylan as a craftsman.

Have critics and audiences paid enough attention to Dylan's craft? To his sullen art? Or have they (we) been too struck by his ever-elusive genius? Do magic, ghosts, and inspiration continue to exert too much influence?

The leap from *genius* to *ingenium* is apparently too difficult to make, even though creating a myth of genius masks Dylan's craft, his labor by the singing light. But *A Complete Unknown* is not alone among the Dylan biopics that fail to interrogate the myth of the so-called enigma. Even anti-masquers like Todd Haynes, director of *I'm Not There* (2007), never really manage to plumb the depths of Dylan's craft or articulate his methodology. Haynes is innovative, but as his film smashes apart the layers of Dylan's supposed personas, inevitably it also creates them. Martin Scorsese's faceted gem, *No Direction Home* (2005), catches Dylan in nuanced stages of development, with invaluable recollections by courtiers and co-conspirators along the way, not to mention Dylan's candid reflections. But even this film, easily the best since *Dont Look Back*, did not explore Dylan's craft, did not interrogate his poetic method. Maybe that kind of interrogation requires a different medium. Still, is it too much to ask that dramatic narratives explore the subtlety and laboriousness of craft in addition to hyping their enigmatic Dylans?

This is not to say that Dylan scholars have avoided poetic craft. On the contrary, Dylan's excavations of musical influences and songwriters' genealogical trees have proliferated brilliantly almost since the beginning of Dylan's career. His lyrics have been the subject of myriad studies exploring, variously, his politics, Biblical debts, folk influences, and recurring themes. Yet the Dylan myth of *furor poeticus* persists, interfering with the kind of analyses of craft common with other poets.

This makes Dylan an anomaly, and, not unpredictably, diminishes his reputation as a serious literary figure. Inspiration is a conventional explanation for genius among canonical poets like Milton. But Dylan isn't Milton – in fact, as a good friend of mine put it, Milton isn't Milton, at least not the myth, as Keats recognized. Scholars have avoided talking about Milton's inspiration, but they *have* analyzed his verse. Dylan Thomas' sullen art, involving

patient labor, might offer a better understanding of not just the origins of Dylan's art but also how he was able to make it into an art in the first place. Isn't it about time that we reward Dylan's skill with our full (scholarly) skill? That we treat him as we are used to treating Milton?

Virtually no myths of otherworldly genius have survived critical analysis of poetic craft. Literary analysis deflates this kind of illusion and unmasks thought foxes. This is abundantly clear in the literary criticism of Homer, Virgil, Dante (known in Florence as the man who'd been to hell), Chaucer, Milton (the slumbering versifier), and latterly, Dickinson, Whitman, Yeats (who believed in charms), and Ted Hughes. Not even Shakespeare's genius escapes the critique of craft: jealous critics started debunking the Shakespeare myth before Bardolatry got off the ground.

In contrast, the critique of craft in Dylan studies is a bit anemic. Surprisingly few analyses have tackled Dylan's poetics. No book, to my knowledge, focuses on Dylan's prosody, nor, for that matter, are there articles or individual chapters that concentrate on this crucial element of songwriting. Aspects of Dylan's diction have received almost disproportionate attention, especially his repurposing of the American idiom and deployment of the demotic. Nevertheless, despite the obvious fact that songs are metrical forms, discussion of Dylan's metrics is almost nonexistent, even though, as in the Hillburn interview, Dylan has acknowledged, "I'm just thinking 'Is this OK for the meter?'" This is a significant neglect and a lost opportunity. It undermines the contention that Dylan is a major poet of his generation and a deserving recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature. Not verse form (apart from blues), nor rhyme schemes and choices, nor Dylan's inventive deployment of iambs and trochees have received the consideration due an important poet's craft. Has anyone ever analyzed Dylan's use of, among other rhetorical devices, anaphora, metonymy, or even assonance and alliteration?

I doubt that this neglect can be laid solely at the door of the continuing over-emphasis on the *furor poeticus* or on the Dylan enigma. But our field does Dylan a disservice in avoiding detailed focus on prosody, stylistics, and rhetorical choices. A few critics have demonstrated how this could be done. But, evidently, too few to debunk the myth of Dylan's otherworldly spark. Too much of Dylan's critical, and not-so-critical, audience is like Dylan Thomas's lovers, who, "their arms / Round the griefs of the ages ... pay no praise or wages / Nor heed my craft or art."

Well, to quote Badger Clark, *I don't look much like a lover*. I'm a critic: it's up to me to take heed, take heed of Dylan's craft and sullen art.

Raphael Falco

Poems

“Don’t They”

By David Sheftman

The rhymes don’t work
They don’t. Don’t they?

The rhythms gone
It is? OK.

And here I stand
At 83
Etched lines on my face
Weak at the knees.

Voice like a jaggedy blade
Eyes hiding behind shades
Dying a little
And some days a lot
Fading, fading
From the sweet spot.

The notes are off
They are. Are they?
Reviews tear me down
They do. Do they?

I can’t play
I can’t?
Can they.

I’m limbo-ing between
Earth and sky

Staring at truths
And turning from lies
They've buried me good
I've not said my goodbyes.

Give it up they say
Step on out of the way
Still, I do my stuff
When the lights go up
They're dragging me down
But my spirit's unbound.

I once was asked
At a presser in S.F.
"How do you see yourself?
Poet?
Musician?
Friend?
Maybe a politician?
At a dead end?

Maybe a prophet,
If so, what's your plan?"
To which I said then
And I'll say it again.

I see myself
As a song and dance man.

Essays

"Thought/Dreams"

By Michael Gray (2025)

> "Time brings to his deserted cot
> No tidings of his after lot;
> But his weal or woe is still the theme
> Of ***my daily thought, and my nightly dream.***"
> Poor Alice is not proud or coy;
> But her heart is with her minstrel boy.

This is from the thirty-first stanza of "The Legend of the Haunted Tree" by the early nineteenth century Fellow of Trinity College Cambridge, MP and poet Winthrop Mackworth Praed, from his *Legends and Tales* collection, first published in 1828. But nine years earlier, the Shetland poet Dorothea Primrose Campbell (whose life was a lot tougher than her name suggests) had published these lines, from her poem "Midnight Scene":

> She sings of many a gallant tar,
> That oft had brav'd the dubious war,
> Returning home to greet once more
> His lov'd and long-lost native shore,
> And fly to her whose image dear
> In ev'ry toil had yet been near;
> Like some attending angel-pow'r
> Had sooth'd him in each fearful hour,
> When battle rag'd, or hurtling storm
> Howl'd o'er the vessel's dusky form,
> And still had cheer'd with sacred beam
> ***His daily thought and nightly dream.***

I found these two when I looked for the origin of this highlighted, memorable line after being surprised to find it in the text of Thomas Hardy's novel *The Trumpet-Major* – and the reason I was surprised to see it there, and why it leapt out at me from the page, was

because I knew it already, and well, from Richard Rabbit Brown's extraordinary voice singing it in his great 1927 track "James Alley Blues," the first track he ever recorded:

You're my daily thought and my nightly dream.

Now Bob Dylan doesn't use that line – though I'm surprised he hasn't – though he had heard of Brown while still a teenager. But he sings other "James Alley Blues" lines at Big Pink in 1967, and he offers a strong reverberation of it in his own song "Mississippi" many decades later. (Both talk of coming from the country and coping with life in town; and both cite a mule.)

Brown, "James Alley Blues," 1927:

I've been givin' you sugar for sugar, let you get salt for salt
I'll give you sugar for sugar, let you get salt for salt
And if you can't get 'long with me well it's your own fault

Dylan, "Crash on the Levee (Down In The Flood)," 1967:

Well, it's sugar for sugar
And salt for salt
If you go down in the flood
It's gonna be your own fault.

I doubt Rabbit Brown (or any of us) ever read Dorothea Primrose Campbell or Winthrop Mackworth Praed, so I'm wondering: was "daily thought and nightly dream" a common expression in early nineteenth-century England – hence the Thomas Hardy usage (1880) within what was his one historical novel? And if so, did it pass from that common usage into early twentieth-century folk parlance? Or did it arrive there from a poem/lyric containing it having been included in some anthology of nineteenth-century songs? And if so, perhaps it came from *there* to Rabbit Brown.

What suggests that perhaps he *did* read it there, having perhaps been more literate than we may have assumed, is that not only is it no commonstock line: it occurs in no other

pre-war blues track known to me or to the pre-eminent blues historian Tony Russell. And this despite its lengthy begging to be made into a line of popular song.

PS. Dylan sings the word “daily” only in the traditional song “Young But Daily Growing,” and “nightly” only in the dire “Neighborhood Bully.”

Articles

"The Drafts of 'Brownsville Girl,' Found and Lost"

By Bill Lattanzi

Bob Dylan has been surprisingly generous describing his writing method over the years. When he was young, he's said, the songs came straight from the unconscious: "the early songs ... were mostly all first drafts ... It's like a ghost [wrote them]."[1] As he came into middle-age, though, the ghosts withdrew, and Dylan had to "do other things," that is, to write from the conscious mind.[2] He became a professional working hard at his craft. In answer to the question of what comes first, words or music, his responses have varied over time. Words came first, he said in 1965.[3] "The lyrics are your dance partner," he'd later write.[4] Twenty years on, he said that most often words and music came together, a first line along with a melody.[5] And by 2004, he's saying that he gets an old song going in his head and eventually new words get attached to it.[6] He learned early from Buddy Holly that anything could be a song lyric, say, a line of movie dialogue, like "That'll be the day" (Hilburn). It had to have "resonance" though, or as he said about one early composition – the stage name "Bob Dylan" – it had to have "that extra dimension."[7] The late comic Norm McDonald claimed that Dylan told him of the vital importance of verbs: that you could "verbify anything," a trick on display at the top of *No Direction Home Part 2,* with Dylan freestyling verse out of shop signage.[8] He's said that he

[1] Hilburn, Robert. "Rock's Enigmatic Poet Opens a Long-Private Door." *Los Angeles Times*, 4 Apr. 2004, www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2004-apr-04-ca-dylan04-story.html. Accessed 5 Jan. 2025.

[2] "Bob Dylan FULL 60 Minutes Ed Bradley 2004 Interview - HD." *YouTube*, 15 Dec. 2022, www.youtube.com/watch?v=yG4sadfa-ew. Accessed 10 Jan., 2025 (2:52).

[3] "Bob Dylan San Francisco Press Conference 1965." *YouTube*, 20 Sept. 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=wPIS257tvoA, (2:15).

[4] Dylan, Bob. *Chronicles*: *Volume One.* New York, Simon & Schuster, 4 Oct. 2004, 173.

[5] Flanagan, Bill *Written in My Soul: Rock's Great Songwriters Talk about Creating Their Music*. Chicago, Contemporary Books, 1986, 92.

[6] Hilburn.

[7] Hilburn, and Brinkley, Douglas. "Inside Bob Dylan's Lost Interviews and Unseen Letters." *Rolling Stone,* S21 Oct. 2020.

[8] For McDonald's purported sleepover at Dylan's, see O'Sullivan, Dylan. "When Norm Macdonald Met Bob Dylan, a Since-Deleted Thread That I Just Love." *X.com*, 24 Dec 2024, x.com/DylanoA4/status/1865016007305068977. Accessed 6 Jan. 2025. This originally came to me via a tweet thread from Harrison Hewitt (@harryhew), currently unavailable. For the freestyle verse, see *No Direction Home*. Directed by Martin Scorsese, PBS, 27 Sept. 2005, (1:53:40-1:54:46).

aims to turn a song on its head, like Johnny Cash creating a talking train, like Robert Johnson throwing in some wisdom from Confucius at random, or Dylan himself calling failure a success.[9] That, if he can't get his thoughts to rhyme, he'll write them out in a big clump and figure out how to sing them later (Hilburn). He's said the best songs come quickly, and that the longer he works on one the more likely it is to slip away.[10] And that when an idea comes, the task is to "get in touch with the base of its power."[11] Sometimes, he's not thinking about what he wants to say at all, but, "Is this okay for the meter?"[12] He says that you can do a lot with metaphors, that it's better to be "circular" than "lateral," and that a song is "like a dream and you try to make it come true."[13] And that songs are "like strange countries that you have to enter" (165). Dylan summed it up best, perhaps, in 1985: "I write them lots of different ways."[14]

Up until recently, these words of Dylan's were our only account of the artist at work. But, with the opening of the Bob Dylan Archive in Tulsa, Oklahoma, draft after draft of song after song lie in wait for the obsessed, the scholarly, and the semi-scholarly, to pore over for clues to the unsolvable mystery: how does he do it? (It's a hopeless question in some ways, but less absurd than the buried notion beneath it: that if we could find the answer, then we, too, could write as well. It ain't gonna happen, but still we search.) In November 2024, I had the privilege of visiting the Tulsa archives, plunging down the rabbit hole of the multiple drafts and scribbled revisions that added up to the eleven-minute, seventeen verse, eleven hundred-word-plus mock-epic, "Brownsville Girl." I pored over them for days (no photography allowed), doing my Bartleby-best to make fair copies of the bard's scribbles. But Dylan's drafts of this bright spot of his mid-80s output are only half the story. On an earlier visit to the Harry Ransom Archives in Austin, Texas, I'd stumbled across "Brownsville Girl" co-writer Sam Shepard's hand-written and typed drafts of the song written during the two days he spent with Dylan in the late November of 1984. Together, these pages paint a rare, detailed portrait of Dylan at work, his methods thrown into high relief through comparison with Shepard's rejected (and accepted) lines.

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[9] Hilburn.

[10] Flanagan, *Written*, 93.

[11] *Chronicles*, 164.

[12] Hilburn.

[13] See Hilburn for circular and lateral metaphors, and for song as dream, *Chronicles*, 165.

[14] Flanagan, *Written*, 91.

One non-trivial caveat to the proceedings. Upon submitting this essay to "the Dylan people" (outside the jurisdiction of the unfailingly kind, helpful, and efficient team at the Archives), permission to quote directly from the Dylan drafts was summarily denied in every instance, perhaps for good reason, though I wasn't given one. After a short but intense journey through the seven stages of grief, the task of a careful rewrite was surmounted. I'm happy to report that, even without the specific words found in the drafts, the content of the essay, and the picture of Dylan and Shepard at work, remains intact. So while you, dear reader, may at certain moments here feel like the singer in "Tryin' to Get to Heaven," who "only saw what they let me see," I hope you'll agree that despite the couple of closed exhibits, the show is well worth the viewing.[15]

Like all of Dylan's best songs, "Brownsville Girl" feels like it is about, as Dylan once said of Woody Guthrie's songs, "everything at the same time."[16] Some of those things include the Wild West, the fall of American culture, the movies and their effect on an audience, the U.S. Southwestern desert, the price of our actions, the difficulties of freedom, maybe one specific woman, maybe Lou Reed, and maybe an appeal to a muse. All of these are threaded in and out of a hopeless yet hope-filled odyssey across a desert, both literal and metaphorical, that ends where it begins, with the frustrating, tantalizing feeling of a memory that seems important yet just out of reach. "Brownsville Girl" has been lauded by critics from Steven Scobie ("a masterpiece, a song that must rank among the five or six best that Dylan has ever written") to Clinton Heylin ("Dylan's … greatest narrative ballad. A song that could stand alongside anything in Child,") to Michael Gray ("a long *tour de force* ... the Bob Dylan of genius and generous intelligence, fully engaged.").[17] Dylan himself rates the song highly. When asked by Bill Flanagan in 2017 if any of his works deserved more attention, Dylan's immediate response was "Brownsville Girl."[18]

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[15] Dylan, Bob. "Tryin' to Get to Heaven | the Official Bob Dylan Site." *Bobdylan.com*, 2019, www.bobdylan.com/songs/trying-get-heaven/. Accessed 20 Mar. 2025.

[16] Hilburn.

[17] Gray, Michael. *Song & Dance Man III: The Art of Bob Dylan*. London ; New York,

Continuum, 2000, 579, and Heylin, Clinton. *The Double Life of Bob Dylan, Vol. 2*: *Far Away From Myself*. The Bodley Head, London, 2024, 674, and 591.

[18] He added "In the Garden" to his list of two. Flanagan, Bill. "Q&A with Bill Flanagan | the Official Bob Dylan Site." *Bobdylan.com*, 2017, www.bobdylan.com/news/qa-with-bill-flanagan/. Accessed Jan 6, 2025.

We'll deal with five basic versions of "Brownsville Girl" here. They are:

S1 Shepard first draft, hand-written, notebook and loose notebook pages, November 1984
S2 Shepard typed version of final first draft, with pen amendations
NDG New Danville Girl, as recorded December 1984
BG Brownsville Girl, as recorded in May of 1986
BD Dylan drafts that exist, but will not be quoted directly

S1 is the first day's work, hand-written by Shepard. Shepard, or his faithful typist, typed up the result to prepare for the second day's effort. There are a limited number of revisions in pen and pencil there in S2, along with the optimistic plural heading at the top, "Dylan Songs."[19] (Close by the draft lyrics in Shepard's notebook is a draft of another song, "The Girl I Left Behind," – not the 1961 Dylan song – a verse-by-verse list of old girlfriends, none of whom compare to the eponymous one. Dylan recorded one instrumental take of it, with a single line sung, and it went no further.)[20]

Dylan brought his own typed up and revised version of S2 into the studio for the first recording of "New Danville Girl," on December 6, 1984.[21] Among changes to the Shepard draft, Dylan wrote a new verse during the session in ten minutes, according to guitarist Ira Ingber.[22] Looking to the Shepard drafts for what's missing, the verse seems to be the one about "the time our engine broke down," a half-quote of Blind Willie McTell's "Broke Down Engine Blues."[23] The overall result, though, must have lacked that extra dimension for Dylan, because he left the song off 1985's *Empire Burlesque,* the album for which it was intended.

[19] Shepard, Sam. "Brownsville Girl" typescript draft of lyrics with revisions, undated. The Sam Shepard Collection, Harry Ransom Center, Austin, TX. Container 16, Folder 6.

[20] Heylin, *Double Life*, 464.

[21] Recording date from Heylin, Clinton. *Still on the Road: The Songs of Bob Dylan, 1974-2006*. Constable, 2010, 290.

[22] Taylor, Tom. "The Day Bob Dylan Blew Away a Room Full of Musicians." *Far Out Magazine*, 15 Dec. 2024, faroutmagazine.co.uk/bob-dylan-blew-away-a-room-full-of- musicians/. Accessed Jan 16, 2025.

[23] Dylan, Bob, and Sam Shepard. *"*New Danville Girl." Springtime in New York: the Bootleg Series, vol. 16 (1980-1985), Columbia Records, 2021, and McTell, Blind Willie. "Broke Down Engine Blues." *Blind Willie McTell.* The Blues, Smithsonian Collection of Recordings, 1993.

While there are those who find "New Danville Girl" superior to "Brownsville Girl, there are ample reasons to explain why "New Danville Girl" didn't make the cut. With its bare orchestration and unvarying four chord structure over eleven minutes-plus, the burden to keep the song moving falls too heavily on Dylan's vocal delivery. Dylan tries hard, maybe too hard, adding fills like, "Aw, yes, he did!," and "Oh, yes, I am!," to make up for the musical monotony and lack of momentum.[24] That might have been solved with overdubbing additional parts, but it's not the only issue. Dylan's delivery in places is uncertain, lacking conviction. It sounds to me as if he's not quite at home with the lyric as a whole, like he's performing someone else's song, and someone else's ideas. Which, to some degree, he is. Shepard's influence, as we'll see, is strong in this early version. And some of the lines fall flat, like, "Well, I keep tryin' to remember that movie, though / And it does keep comin' back," "...it starred Gregory Peck, and he was in it," and "That was a long time ago / and it was made in the shade." (Danville). Recorded early in the *Empire Burlesque* process, it also feels very different in tone to much of the rest of the album, with its emphasis on 80s synths and the big beat, another bid to stay current. An old guy's memory of a cowboy movie from his youth didn't fit the agenda, maybe. Clearly, though, Dylan knew he had something of value. Sam Shepard urged Dylan to turn the shaggy tale into a ninety-minute opera, and there was talk of making a movie out of it.[25] Clinton Heylin reports that Jay Cocks produced a script, and who knows, someday it might be realized.[26]

A full eighteen months after the first try, in May of 1986, Dylan returned to the studio to add a brassy, foregrounded, nearly parodic horn section, along with a spirited six-female-member gospel choir. With that, and a thoroughly revised, expanded set of lyrics (including, again, some in-studio writing), "Brownsville Girl" as we know it was born. [27]

The Shepard-Dylan collaboration was not without its tensions. The pair first met in 1975, when Rolling Thunder Revue director (and co-writer of much of *Desire*), Jacques Levy, suggested that Dylan hire Shepard to write the script for his can't miss self-directed blockbuster-to-be, *Renaldo and Clara*.[28]

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[24] Dylan and Shepard, "Danville."

[25] Cott, Jonathan. "The Rolling Stone Interview: Sam Shepard." *Rolling Stone*, 16 Dec. 1986

[26] Heylin, *Road, 501.*

[27] Heylin, Clinton. *Bob Dylan: Behind the Shades*. London, Faber And Faber, 2011, 391.

[28] Winters, John J. *Sam Shepard*. Catapult, 15 Mar. 2017, 180.

Shepard was already a legend of Off-Broadway, the rock 'n' roll playwright who deconstructed American myth with hallucinatory language and imagery that frequently drew on the legends of Hollywood, the Wild West, and rock. He raised horses in California and would soon be competing in steer roping contests at rodeos on weekends (222). In his plays, he often wrote of identity as changeable, provisional, constructed: "I believe in my mask," a character says in a line that could have been written for Dylan. "The man I made up is me" (xiv).

On arrival, Shepard was starstruck in the presence of flesh-and-blood Dylan, writing of his first encounter, "All I'm seeing are album covers for six minutes straight."[29] The fizz went quickly flat though when Shepard realized that not only was the movie shoot chaotic, with his attempts to shape the script almost entirely ignored, but that he was not going to be paid what he was promised.[30] Shaken by the blow to ego and pocketbook, but drawn to the unfolding spectacle around him, he opened his notebook and wrote what he saw. The result is his invaluable account of the first improvised leg of the tour, *Rolling Thunder Logbook.*

By 1984, to some degree, the tables had turned. Dylan was still Dylan, but his summer stadium tour of Europe leaned heavily on his 60s classics, showing the first bare hints of becoming an oldies act. The gospel period had dented Dylan's commercial appeal, and he had been all but supplanted by the kids on the block as the big 80s took hold: MTV was dominant, running Madonna, the material girl, and the King of Pop, Michael Jackson, in heavy rotation. Bruce Springsteen now wore Dylan's rock poet crown, and with the hit film and accompanying album *Purple Rain*, Minnesota's own Prince had succeeded wildly where Dylan had failed so miserably with *Renaldo and Clara*. Sam Shepard, meanwhile, hit the peak of his career in 1984. Not only had he won the Pulitzer Prize for his family drama *Buried Child,* he'd written the screenplay for the most celebrated indie film of the year, Wim Wenders's *Paris, Texas*. He'd also become a movie star, nominated for an Oscar for his turn as jet pilot Chuck Yeager in 1983's *The Right Stuff*.[31] Ironically, the ex-hippie Shepard's laconic screen presence provided a vision of traditional masculinity tailor-made for the conservative values of Ronald Reagan's America. Shepard even showed up in *People* magazine,[32] which covered his split from his wife

[29] Shepard, Sam. *Rolling Thunder Logbook*. Viking, 1977, 13.

[30] Sloman, Larry. *On the Road with Bob Dylan*. New York, Three Rivers Press, 2002, 117-8.

[31] Shepard's sidekick in the film, Jack Ridley, was portrayed by none other than drummer and singer Levon Helm from The Band, legendary both on their own and as erstwhile Dylan backing band.

[32] "The 25 Most Intriguing People of 1983." *People*, vol. 20, no. 26, 26 Dec. 1983, 38.

and young son the previous year for a tempestuous relationship with actress Jessica Lange, his co-star in the movie *Francis*. Shepard was so hot in 1984 that Lou Reed even wrote a song about seeing Shepard's latest play (about a tempestuous relationship), *Fool for Love*. The song was called "Doin' the Things That We Want To."[33] Dylan heard it live in concert in Los Angeles at the start of November 1984, turned to his seatmate, Lou Reed's wife Sylvie and said, "Man, that's a great song. I wish *I* had written that song."[34] And that, maybe, is where "Brownsville Girl" began. Dylan told Bill Flanagan in 1985 that the song was a response to Reed's, with the variation of opening on a narrator going to see a movie instead of a play.[35]

It's a fantastic story, but like many Dylan stories, questionable. Sam Shepard told Howard Sounes an entirely different, more workaday version of how it happened:

> We tossed around a bunch of ideas, none of which really got anywhere, and then we just sort of [started] telling stories to each other ... He says, "One day I was standing in line for this Gregory Peck film." And I said, "Why don't we just use that … as we're not getting anywhere?"[36]

"Dylan Danville Girl," "11/21/84," "Malibou" [sic].[37] That's the heading at the top of Shepard's hand-written pocket-notebook first draft, curiously in three different pens, all different from the main text, suggesting he wrote it in after the fact. Maybe Shepard remembered the financial issue from *Rolling Thunder* and wanted an exact written record of the date.

What follows is a verse-by-verse account of the song's development, drawing out some of the many allusions and references embedded in the lyrics, final and non-final.

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[33] The opening line: "The other night we went to see Sam's play." Reed, Lou. *Doin' the Things That We Want To*. RCA Records, Apr. 1984.

[34] Bockris, Victor. *Transformer*: *The Story of Lou Reed.* Simon and Schuster, 1994, 347.

[35] Flanagan, *Written*, 90.

[36] Sounes, Howard. *Down the Highway - the Life of Bob Dylan.* Transworld, 2011, 375.

[37] Shepard, Sam. Brown notebook, includes material for *A Lie of the Mind*, "Brownsville Girl," October-November 1984. The Sam Shepard Collection, Harry Ransom Center, Austin, TX. Container 14, Folder 14.

Verses 1 and 2: That movie

The first two verses of Shepard's first draft are remarkably close to the finished product, a faithful summation of the 1950 western, *The Gunfighter*, starring Gregory Peck. Peck played Jimmy Ringo, who pulls into town to retire from gunfighting and reunite with his secret wife and child, but the fastest gun in the West is a tempting target, and in the end, he is shot in the back by a hot-headed youth, "out to make a name for himself," as the song has it.[38] Ringo wants the boy turned loose, so that he'll "every moment have to face his death," challenged as Ringo has been at every turn (Brownsville). It's not surprising that Dylan was thinking about a hungry kid itching to outdraw a legend, given Springsteen and Prince's ascension at his expense. Shepard, too, had visited this territory in his play, *The Tooth of Crime,* about a future world where rock stars were gunfighters who faced off in a kind of pre-rap battle with life and death stakes.[39]

The first line remains essentially the same through every written draft: "I don't remember that movie that well," in S1, "I wish I could remember that movie just a little bit better," from the first recording.[40] It's a theatrical open, following the playwright's familiar practice of starting *in media res.* But something is wrong. There's a hesitance to it, an uncertainty, unfitting for our soon-to-be-rambling hero. Finally, in the recording of "Brownsville Girl," Dylan ditches *in media res* and comes up with something that appears nowhere in the drafts. It's a classic "once upon a time" start, crucially switching the grammar from proper English to Dylan's favored country dialect: "Well, there was this movie I seen one time, about a man riding 'cross the desert and it starred Gregory Peck."[41] The narrator goes from uncertainty and vulnerability, with his memory failing, to strength and centrality. You can practically see him in the bunkhouse, pushing his cowboy hat back, setting a toothpick in his mouth and starting his after-dinner yarn while the other ranch hands whittle or work on letters back home. It sets the perfect mood for the adventures ahead. "I go on instinct," says

[38] Dylan Bob, with Sam Shepard. "Brownsville Girl | the Official Bob Dylan Site." *Bobdylan.com*, 2018, www.bobdylan.com/songs/brownsville-girl/. Accessed 12 Dec. 2024, and *The Gunfighter*. Directed by Henry King, 20th Century Fox, 1950.

[39] Shepard, Sam. *Tooth of Crime*. 1974. Vintage, 2006.

[40] Shepard, Notebook, and Dylan, Bob, and Sam Shepard. "New Danville Girl." Springtime in New York: the Bootleg Series, vol. 16 (1980-1985), Columbia Records, 2021

[41] The film opens with Peck riding through the sands, and ends with the assassin doing the same, but the rest of it takes place in a civilized town, à la *High Noon.* Dylan with Shepard, Brownsville.

Dylan in several interviews, stating what might be his prime directive. [42] Sometimes, it takes a year and a half to feel it.

Verse 3: Chains, Trains, Automobiles

Shepard was fairly obsessed with driving long distances, "the farther the better," and he starts the next verse with vivid specificity. "I was driving in a car – just like I'm doin' now – with the rain beatin' down / Radio static buzzing / Both windshield wipers broken."[43] Dylan does not share the driving obsession, though, and the line is lost. Instead the writers focus on one of the many overlaps in their interpersonal Venn diagram, the power of movies on the imagination ("I keep seein' this stuff and it just keeps rollin' in"), along with the introduction of the lost love who will haunt the narrative.[44] In the drafts, Dylan fiddles with the wording, searching for those active verbs they told us about in creative writing class. Part of the need for the search is due to another of Dylan's favorite moves, scrambling sense in search of fresh expression. Shepard's typed draft, presumably used on their second day together, has the movie images rolling "right through me like a moving train," while the lost love's memory is "like a ball and chain" – simple, clear, sensible (Notebook). But a double-headed arrow in pen on the second day of Shepard's work indicates that *someone* decided to swap the rhymes, so now we have "rolls right through me like a ball and chain," and a memory that's "like a moving train," which … what?[45] It's a trick Dylan picked up from Beat poet models like Gregory Corso with his signature phrase, "Fried Shoes," conjoining disconnected words and phrases, sometimes a chase for new and unexpected meaning, sometimes a bid for surreal, comic or absurd effect.[46] This is not the first time Dylan has pulled this off. In 1966, in "Stuck Inside of Mobile with the

[42] Flanagan, *Written*, 104; Brinkley, "His Mind" ("It's one of those where you write it on instinct."), Dylan and Cott, 72. ("I believe that instinct is what makes a genius a genius.")

[43] For "the farther the better," and Shepard's love of driving, see "Falling Without End," from 1990, included in *Cruising Paradise*. Its conclusion reads like what might have been Shepard's solo version of "Brownsville Girl:" "I love long-distance driving. The farther the better. I love covering immense stretches in one leap: Memphis to New York City; Gallup to L.A.; Saint Paul to Richmond; Lexington to Baton Rouge; Bismarck to Cody ... Relentless driving. Driving until the body disappears, the legs fall off, the eyes bleed, the hands go numb, the mind shuts down, and then, suddenly, something new begins to appear." Shepard, Sam. *Cruising Paradise*. Random House, 30 Sept. 2010. 156. Draft lyric from Shepard, Notebook.

[44] Dylan with Shepard, Brownsville.

[45] Shepard, Typescript.

[46] "MANNERS & MORALS: Fried Shoes." *TIME*, nextgen, 9 Feb. 1959, time.com/archive/6827179/manners-morals-fried-shoes/. Accessed 28 Jan. 2025.

Memphis Blues Again," he flipped nouns so it's not the mailbox that's been stolen, but the whole post office.[47] Later in the song, a switch of verbs brings a pedestrian line alive, producing eyelids that are smoked, and a cigarette that's punched.[48]

Verse 4: The Ghost of *Paris, Texas*

Verse four, nearly intact from the start, has the Brownsville girl coming to meet our narrator on the Painted Desert, in her "busted down Ford and platform heels," only to demurely turn the car over to him to drive.[49] The old Ford calls to mind the 1959 Ford Ranchero that Harry Dean Stanton so memorably travels in, crossing the desert to meet his own lost love in *Paris, Texas*.[50] The image clearly spoke to Dylan, as he would later create at least four paintings of still frames from the film, including two of the Ranchero.[51] John Gibbens points out that cars have never figured much in Dylan's lyrics, as opposed to Bruce Springsteen's, but in real life, to hear Howard Sounes tell it, Dylan suspended one of the first cars he owned from the living room ceiling of his Malibu home.[52] In Shepard's typed draft, the busted up Ford is crossed out for "cardboard Corvette," maybe teasing Dylan about the junker hanging over his head.[53]

[47] But the post office has been stolen / And the mailbox is locked. Dylan, Bob "Stuck inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again" | the Official Bob Dylan Site." *Bobdylan.com*, 2015, www.bobdylan.com/songs/stuck-inside-mobile-memphis-blues-again/.

[48] "An' he just smoked my eyelids / An' punched my cigarette." Dylan, *Stuck.*

[49] Dylan with Shepard, Brownsville.

[50] "Ford Ranchero in "Paris, Texas."" *IMCDb.org*, 2025, www.imcdb.org/v069051.html. Accessed 25 Jan. 2025

[51] Warmuth, Scott. "Bob Dylan did several paintings and drawings based on different scenes in Paris, Texas." X.com, 06/03/2021, https://x.com/scottwarmuth1/status/1400494793311014918

[52] Gibbens, John. *The Nightingale's Code*. Touched Press, 2001, 61, and "Howard Sounes ... said of the home, 'He has a car suspended from the ceiling in the living room, which was one of his first cars.'" Roundtree, Cheyenne. "Folk Legend Bob Dylan, 77, Makes Some Youthful Updates to His Malibu Compound." *Mail Online*, Daily Mail, 12 Mar. 2019, www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6795861/Folk-legend-Bob-Dylan-77-makes-youthful-updates-Malibu-compound.html. Accessed 26 Mar. 2025.

[53] Shepard, Typescript.

Verse 5: She's Gone

"Well, I'm driving this car," Verse 5 begins. Shepard would like it to go through "Cold Springs" and "Huntersville," maybe toward his farmhouse in Kentucky.[54] But Dylan is less interested in covering every corner of the Rand McNally atlas than he is in heading toward the resonant land of myths and legends. Instead of the backwoods, the song heads straight for the Alamo, where S2 has the couple sleeping "under Jim Bowie's name."[55] A theme is developing, one of visits to iconic places in the American west. Aiden Day and Katherine Weiss see the song using these sites to tear apart myths of American exceptionalism, but this seems too easy.[56] It's true that Sam Shepard's been forever conflicted about the macho codes of the cowboy he nevertheless seemed to live by, asking in his play *True West* if a movie is a true western if "it's got grown men acting like little boys."[57] Dylan, at first blush, has no such conflict. He idolizes these films, calling them "heroic, visionary" and "inspiring."[58] Where, then, does this song fall? Michael Gray sees an admixture: "90% affection, 10% challenge."[59] Why not both/and? Dylan, Shepard, and the song all seem not just equivocal about the movies and America, but of two simultaneous, contradictory minds: 100% critique and 100% embrace.

Weiss suggests that the Brownsville Girl's disappearance in Mexico, when she "went out to find a doctor and never came back," might be a trip to an abortionist, adding a political dimension to the song.[60] While it's possible, there's slim evidence to support it. The first two Shepard drafts have her going out "for food" and, while there are several variants in the Dylan drafts, there is nothing to suggest pregnancy (Notebook). Given that the final version has the singer worried about getting his "head blown off" if he goes after her, a more likely scenario

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[54] Shepard, Notebook.

[55] Throughout the eighteen month gestation, the lyrics will shift from Shepard-centric to Dylan-centric. The Jim Bowie line is supplanted in "New Danville Girl," with "we fell out under the stars," an echo of a line from Shepard's nostalgic account of a road trip as a boy recounted in Motel Chronicles. "That night we crossed the Badlands. I rode in the shelf behind the back seat of the Plymouth and stared out at the stars." *Motel Chronicles*. San Francisco, City Lights Books, 1982, 8.

[56] Gray, 580 and Weiss, Katherine. "... Long before the Stars Were Torn Down...": Sam Shepard and Bob Dylan's "Brownsville Girl." *Studies in Popular Culture*, vol. 32, no. 1, 1 Jan.

2009, 53–65. Accessed 9 Feb. 2024.

[57] Shepard, Sam. *Seven Plays*. Bantam, 1984, 35.

[58] Brinkley, *Late Era*.

[59] Gray, 580.

[60] Dylan with Shepard, "Brownsville," and Weiss, 59.

is the classic western trope of the wounded criminal hiding out, hoping for some discreet medical assistance (Brownsville).

Verses Six and Seven: She Ain't You

The Brownsville girl is gone forever, but our hero is still on the road, now with another woman. Shepard tries to get his highway knowledge going yet again, this time steering the Ford "from Spokane to Vancouver," but that gets cut.[61] What remains is the sun coming up over the Rockies. In a set of lines that will be reworked extensively, the singer tries to delicately explain to his lost love that while he's with someone new, he's actually thinking about her. It's a tricky navigation. In the Shepard drafts and on "New Danville Girl," the new woman triggers memory by singing "Baby Let the Good Times Roll."[62] Clinton Heylin was able to quote a few of the draft lines in his 2024 book, and there he cites Dylan's rejected, "She ain't you, but she reminds me of ya when she leans toward the ledge."[63] It's unclear whether the ledge here is behavioral or a piece of reckless driving. After several variations, Dylan will arrive at the final version, the economical, evocative, "She ain't you but she's got that dark rhythm in her soul."[64] At verse's end, just the thought of the memory of the Brownsville Girl threatens to send the car off the road, lifting the song into its chorus.

The Chorus: Gina?

Shepard's original draft calls the woman the unlikely and unmelodious name of Gina:

Gina
With deep brown eyes
Shine like the moon above

[61] Shepard, Notebook.

[62] Shepard, Notebook. Dylan and Shepard, "Danville."

[63] Heylin, *Double*, 462.

[64] Trying to pin real-life names to fictional characters is a guessing game that, at best, blunts literary insight – but let's face it, it's irresistible. The song comes at a time when Dylan had recent, serious relationships with a series of African-American women, one of whom, Carolyn Dennis, he'd soon marry. Combining the suggestion in this line with "I can't believe we've lived so live and we're still so far apart," one might suggest Mavis Staples crossed his mind. Dylan had asked her father for her hand in marriage when Dylan and Staples were both in their early twenties, but he was turned down.

Gina
Still stuck on you
Gina
Honey Love[65]

Gina is likely from Shepard and his interest in the film, *Lonely are the Brave*, from 1962, referenced in *True West* as "a western that'd knock yer lights out."[66] Kirk Douglas is the untamed cowboy, running free but hemmed in by the 1962 America of fences and interstates. Still, he aims to free his civilized friend Paul from jail, and to see the woman they both love, played by then-unknown Gena Rowlands. Rowlands's first name was pronounced "Gina" in the trailer, and perhaps that stuck with a then-teenaged Sam Shepard.[67] Rowland's character, Jerry, like the Brownsville girl, is a nurturing supporter to a wandering cowboy, but she also isn't afraid to call him on his stuff. Gena/Gina/Jerry is a truthteller who blows up the hero's sentimental myth about the freedom once enjoyed in the west: "That world you ... live in doesn't exist," she tells him. "Maybe it never did."[68]

Dylan, at some point, per Clinton Heylin, switched Gina to Ruby.[69] In the December '84 session, Dylan found his way from Ruby to Danville Girl ("Danville Girl, with your Danville curl.")[70] Both girl and curl were lifted from the Woody Guthrie tune of the same name.[71] Dylan knew the song early on, and can be heard singing it at a very young age on the "The Madison Tapes 1958-61."[72] He seems to have changed Danville to Brownsville close in time to the final recording. Brownsville made better sense than Danville, it being another prominent Texas town to go with Amarillo and San Anton.' A history buff like Dylan might

[65] Shepard, Notebook.

[66] Shepard. *Seven*, 18.

[67] "Lonely Are the Brave Trailer." *YouTube*, 19 May 2010, www.youtube.com/watch?v=RDKGx3lOXkQ. Accessed 12 Dec. 2024 (1:27-8).

[68] *Lonely Are the Brave*. Directed by David Miller, Universal ,1962. https://www.amazon.com/Lonely-Are-Brave-David-Miller/dp/B002SATCO0 (11:52).

[69] Heylin, Double. 461-2.

[70] Dylan with Shepard, Brownsville.

[71] Guthrie, Woody. ""Danville Girl" ~ Woody Guthrie." *WoodyGuthrie.org*, 2024, www.woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/Danville_Girl.htm. Accessed 30 Mar. 2025.

[72]Dylan, Bob. "Danville Girl." 1960-61. Early Tapes, Minnesota, Madison, 1958-61. The Bob Dylan Archives, Series 12: Audiovisual Materials, Concert Recording. On display at The Bob Dylan Center, Accessed 14 Nov. 2024.

even know that Brownsville was the site of the first battle of the Mexican-American war and the last battle of the Civil War, taking place after Appomattox.[73] Dylan's affection for Texas goes deep: "You feel things, and you're not quite sure what you feel," Dylan told Douglas Brinkley in 2009. "Texas might have more independent-thinking people than any other state in the country."[74] That same year, the Malibu man from Hibbing, Minnesota told French President Nicolas Sarkozy, "I'm from the Lone Star State" (Late Era). Perhaps he was referring to that invented character, the one with the "extra dimension," who might be from anywhere on any given day: "Bob Dylan."

Verses Seven, Eight, Nine: On the Road to Amarillo

Another verse, another road trip, this one with the flavor of that favorite of both Shepard and Dylan: Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. The basic situation is the same in all drafts. The travelers (I'm imagining them here as two men, Dylan and Shepard as analogs for Kerouac's Sal and Dean) pull up to Henry Porter's old place. Henry is gone but Ruby (originally Lily Mae in the Shepard drafts) offers comfort and conversation.[75] She shares her disappointment with the world, commenting in the great line first added in S2 – impossible to know whose addition – "Even the swap meets around here are getting pretty corrupt."[76] Kerouac took a similar view of Amarillo's cultural decline in *On the Road:* "We bowled for Amarillo, and reached it in the morning among windy panhandle grasses that only a few years ago waved around a collection of buffalo tents. Now there were gas stations and the new 1950 jukeboxes with immense ornate snouts and awful songs."[77] It's not impossible that in those first few halting hours of working together the book came up, and Dylan pulled his tattered copy off the shelf in search of inspiration. If he did, I wonder if the pair stumbled on this passage, holding a striking and borderline eerie description of a guy closely resembling Sam Shepard named *Stan* Shepard, excited to meet his hero, ready to ride through Amarillo, heading south: "Stan Shepard ... was a rangy, bashful shock-haired Denver boy with a big con-man smile and slow, easy-going Gary

[73]In another instance of both/and, the outcome of the war brought the state its independence. It also enabled Texas to establish itself as a slave state. "About Brownsville | Brownsville, TX." *Www.brownsvilletx.gov*, www.brownsvilletx.gov/822/About-Brownsville. Accessed 25 Mar. 2025.

[74] Brinkley, "Late Era."

[75] Shepard, Notebook. Shepard, Typescript.

[76] Shepard, Typescript.

[77] Kerouac, Jack. *On the Road*. London, Penguin Book, 5 Sept. 1957, 156.

Cooper movements ... He had been waiting to meet me for years and now for the first time we were suspended together in front of a venture ... 'Is it true you're going to Mexico? Hot damn, I could go with you?'" [78]

Outside Amarillo, Shepard's draft is in the land of the real, the specific. When they pull up to Henry Porter's, they are "running out of gas, and friends."[79] There's "cornbread on the table and sweet potato pie" (Notebook). Henry had fallen from whatever hipster or criminal beginnings to a point where, "junk metal and spare parts had become his lifestyle," and he had to "hide his despair with a mask of a smile" (Notebook). The mask reference is lost somewhere along the way – too on the nose maybe for Dylan and his many masquerades. Originally, the conversation in the verse was with Henry, but of course, Henry's not there. (Even Homer nods.) One wonders if the junk metal and spare parts came from a tour Dylan might have afforded Shepard of his collection of junk that he'd soon start welding into sculptures. The wonderful line about going all the way, "til the seat covers fade and the water moccasin dies," is there nearly from the beginning, but car-freak Shepard keeps trying to sneak in more details, like "the seat chrome stripping gets soft" (Notebook). Alas, no dice.

In the drafts included in Heylin's book, Dylan flirted with the idea of making Ruby a stripper, like the lost love in "Tangled Up in Blue:" "She used to show herself off in a niteclub for so much a nite."[80] But she fell nicely into the role of the unappreciated homemaker. In a Dylan line that might have been jettisoned for its strong Eleanor Rigby flavor, Ruby was, per Heylin, "baking a pie for no one"(462).[81] Ruby, too, at one point gets a jolt of Dylan's late-70s Christian scold, complaining, per Heylin again, "it's as if the whole country needs a floggin' / And the Son of Man has no [place] to lay his head" (462).

As with the first line in the song, there is a word problem in the Ruby episode that holds back resonance. Once again, the word remains for a year and half. "She was so disillusioned with everything" is heard on "New Danville Girl," and this line will be rewritten many times.[82]

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[78] Adding to the resemblance is the mention of Gary Cooper. Film critics and journalists often compared Shepard to the older actor, calling him among things, "Gary Cooper in denim." (Winters xiii.). Excerpt, from Kerouac, 149.

[79] Shepard, Notebook.

[80] "She was working in a topless place, and I stopped in for a beer." "Tangled up in Blue | the Official Bob Dylan Site." w*ww.bobdylan.com*, www.bobdylan.com/songs/tangled-blue/, and Heylin, Double, 461.

[81] "Father McKenzie, writing the words to a sermon that no one will hear." Beatles, The. "Eleanor Rigby." Parlaphone, 1966.

[82] Dylan and Shepard, "Danville."

In the final recording session, Ruby is no longer the prosaic "disillusioned." She's now the poetic, resonating, "broken-hearted."[83]

Verse 10: Falling into the screen

One of the true delights of "Brownsville Girl" is that, just when we've forgotten it, we suddenly return to the movie that the singer can't remember. Shepard had it "slappin' my mind, like a billboard in the night,"[84] a line maybe too attention-grabbing to keep. In any event, the singer is now an actor in the film. Like Buster Keaton in *Sherlock, Jr*, he's fallen into the screen, though he has no idea what part is his. And here, we hit on what I see as the song's major theme, being lost. Divorced for seven years, Dylan was at the tail end of a series of intense relationships. Just five days before meeting with Shepard, he told a pair of radio interviewers, "I don't know where I'm going as a person."[85] Creatively, too, Dylan was struggling to write, asking not only Shepard, but Carole Bayer Sager and others for help. The notion that his talent might be lost was the worst fear of all: "That would scare me. I wouldn't know what else to do. I would be lost," he told Bill Flanagan in 1985.[86] For Shepard, the split from his wife and child only added to his constant conflict about his own identity. "Something's been coming to me lately about this whole question of being lost," he wrote to friend and collaborator Joseph Chaiken in 1983, "one's identity being shattered under severe personal circumstances."[87] This sense of personal lostness, for both Dylan and Shepard, must have lent the notion of identity-loss within the song a magnetic power. One way to look at "Brownsville Girl" is as an exploration of both the fear and reality of being lost, whether the songwriters were aware of it or not.

With identity such an unstable concept for both writers, it was natural for the movies hold a hypnotic, formative power. In Shepard's play *Angel City,* the character Miss Scoons describes it this way: "I look at the movie and I am the movie. I am the star … I hate my life

[83] Dylan with Shepard, "Brownsville."

[84] Shepard, Notebook.

[85] Dylan, Bob and Jonathan Cott. *Bob Dylan, the Essential Interviews*. New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; New Delhi, Simon & Schuster, 2017, 324.

[86] Flanagan, *Written*, 111.

[87] Shewey, Don . "Sam Shepard's Identity Dance." *Don Shewey.com*, July 1997, www.donshewey.com/theater_articles/Shepard_Signature_season.htm. Accessed 24 Nov. 2024. (Article originally published in American Theater Magazine, July/August 1997.)

not being a movie … I'm dreaming but never living."[88] Dylan enjoyed a big James Dean phase as a youth. One night he snuck out of the house and headed for his uncle's local movie theater in Hibbing to see Dean in *Giant* one more time. When he got home, his aggravated father tore up the Dean poster young Bobby had hung on his wall.[89] A few years later, Dylan wrote to his girlfriend and cultural mentor Suze Rotolo of his intense identification when at the movies: "I saw another great movie – 'The Magnificent Seven' – oh I just couldn't believe it – I hate to say it but I'm Yul Brynner – Gawd am I ever him ... I thought for a minute I coulda been Eli Wallach but after seeing Yul – I just knew I was him."[90]

Verses 11 and 12: Real (Fake) Tears

After the second chorus, Dylan and Shepard are ready to realize this fantasy of life inside the screen. We're now firmly in a new film, the singer's dream of a western, starring himself as the charming outlaw. Wearing a pompadour like Little Richard or Bobby Zimmerman in high school, the singer/actor becomes Peck's assassin, or some wholly other wanted character, "cornered in the churchyard," maybe a sly reference to the commercial failure of Dylan's Christian-era songs.[91] Once again, Dylan blurs the narrative. Shepard's (and "New Danville Girl's") "I was crossin' the street when they opened fire," becomes the more ambiguous, "when shots rang out." [92] The vagueness resonates.

At the trial, our hero is saved by the Brownsville girl herself, who provides an alibi and "cries real tears" (Brownsville). "It was the best acting I ever saw you do," appears in S1, and makes it as far as the recording of "New Danville Girl." [93] The line pegs the Brownsville girl as an actress, like Shepard's new partner, Jessica Lange. Shepard recedes as the song develops, though, and in the final, the line is switched to, "the best acting I saw *anybody* do" (emphasis

[88] Shepard, Sam. *Fool for Love and Other Plays.* New York Bantam, Nov. 1984, 77.

[89] Lee, C P. *Like a Bullet of Light*: *The Films of Bob Dylan*. London, Helter Skelter Publishing, 2000, 12.

[90] Brinkley, "Inside."

[91] Dylan with Shepard, Brownville.

[92] "opened fire," Shepard, Notebook. Dylan and Shepard, Danville. "shots rang out," Dylan with Shepard, Brownville.

[93] Shepard. Notebook, and "Danville."

added), leaving the idealized lover more mysterious, more open, keeping that extra dimension in place. [94]

Verse 13: Original Thoughts

"He's a lot of fun to work with, because he's so off the wall sometimes," Shepard told *Rolling Stone* about working with Dylan. "We'd come up with a line, and I'd think that we were heading down one trail over here, and then suddenly he'd just throw in this other line, and we'd wind up following it off in some different direction."[95] So I'm betting that it's Dylan who abandons the narrative with this line, found in the Shepard drafts: "I've always been an emotional person but this is too much."[96] It's pure speculation, but I imagine the two real/fake spiritual cowboys, now comfortable with each other, challenging each other with lines shouted out and impossible to follow. Shepard's answer? "I'm always standing in line but when I get to the window they're always sold out" (Notebook). Funny, but it doesn't make the cut.[97] Whoever called out the next line, there from the first draft, gets credit for an instant classic: "If there's an original thought out there, I could use it right now."[98] The shock of breaking the song's fourth wall is not only a hilarious surprise, it makes the songwriting process itself another of the song's losses: the loss of the girl, of the nation's integrity, even the loss of the missing Henry Porter. Lou Reed loved "Brownsville Girl" and might have been thinking of this line when he said, "I think that is one of the greatest things I ever heard in my life. I fell down laughing."[99]

The quest for an original thought is followed by a couplet that starts off on Mars, but ends right back on track, and it's there, nearly final, from the first Shepard draft: "I feel pretty good, but I could feel a whole lot better / I need you to help me put my hand to the plow."[100] The singer's "I" now includes not only the guy trying to remember the movie, and the guy on

[94] Dylan with Shepard, "Brownsville."

[95] Cott, "Rolling Stone."

[96] Shepard, Notebook.

[97] The final line: "I've always been the kind of person who doesn't like to trespass but sometimes you just find yourself over the line."

[98] Shepard, Notebook.

[99]Taylor, Tom. "Lou Reed Picked His Favourite Bob Dylan Song of All Time." *Far out Magazine*, 28 Sept. 2021, faroutmagazine.co.uk/lou-reed-favourite-bob-dylan-song/. Accessed 26 Mar. 2025.

[100] Shepard, Notebook.

trial in the fantasy movie, but also the songwriter who's having so much trouble getting work done that he's calling out for collaborators. "Hand to the plow," will morph into "if you were here by my side to show me how,"[101] but the call to the woman, to the muse, to the goddess of creativity is the same. This verse is a microcosm of the whole, wandering to space and returning to the road of the song. As Shepard said of working with Dylan, "You are going down a dark alley and, all of a sudden, you see the sunlight … It's not the usual track of thought."[102]

Verse 14: Not the one I had in mind

Back in line for the movie, our hapless hero's situation has worsened. It's raining and he's just realized that he's not going to see *The Gunfighter* at all, but some other Peck film. On Dylan's thirtieth birthday, in May of 1971, Dylan was in Jerusalem and, to celebrate, he told a reporter, "We went to see a Gregory Peck movie – I'm quite a fan of his."[103] In release at that time was *Shoot Out,* its poster showing Peck with a pistol aimed at three bad guys,[104] matching the plot and not too far off from the poster of *The Gunfighter*.[105] Could the punch line of Dylan's story about waiting in line have been that he was waiting for the wrong film, and that he only realized when he saw the older Gregory Peck? ("He just don't look the same," as "New Danville Girl" has it.) [106] Now Shepard uses this idea to turn the old notion of, "They don't make 'em like they used to" into a complaint against 1980s Hollywood: "They got a lot of silly ones out now, but ones like that are hard to find."[107] In the final, Dylan will be the one to bring things back to fandom, with "I'll see him in anything, I'll stand in line."[108]

[101] Dylan with Shepard, "Brownsville."

[102] Sounes, 375.

[103] Shelton, Robert. *No Direction Home*. Backbeat Books, 1 Apr. 2011, 414.

[104] James, Will, and Marguerite Roberts. "Shoot Out." *IMDb*, 13 Oct. 1971, www.imdb.com/title/tt0067750/. Accessed 26 Mar. 2025.

[105] Davidson, Mark, and Parker, Fishel. *Bob Dylan: Mixing up the Medicine, Vol. 9*. Blackstone Publishing, 12 Dec. 2023, 409.

[106] Dylan and Shepard, "New Danville Girl."

[107] Shepard, Notebook.

[108] Dylan with Shepard, "Brownsville."

Verses 15, 16: The only thing we knew

Shepard and Dylan's first version of this verse made it, with revisions, as far as the "New Danville Girl" recording. It continues the movies-are-bad-now idea, repeating the notion about Hollywood that "nothing [good] happens on purpose. It's an accident if it happens at all,"[109] and then opens all the way up to end with the appearance of Plato's cave: "While we talk to our shadows by an old stone wall."[110] Shepard's notebook and typed revision ends here, and this is the last of his contributions. Everything that follows in the song is pure Dylan. Left to his own devices, Dylan first abandons the verse, then the entire narrative – both road trip and movie – with another stunner of a line: "The only thing we knew for sure about Henry Porter was that his name wasn't Henry Porter."[111] What follows is a series of disconnected scraps of conversation and Dylanesque aphorisms about suffering, contentment, and repentance. It's all finished off with a sexual boast: "And I always say, hang onto me baby and let's hope the roof stays on" (Brownsville). Dylan blunts the bravado by having the back-up singers derisively sing/scream a long "Waoooohhh!" in bemused delight. As he sings in "Things Have Changed," "I hurt easy / I just don't show it."[112]

Verse 17: The stars are torn down

The blaring horns settle, the backup singers listen. Quietly at first, the singer resigns himself now to the loss of the film. He remembers even less than he started with, seventeen verses ago. "All I remember about it was Gregory Peck / He wore a gun and he was shot in the back."[113] Dylan then adds the narrator himself to this world of loss: "I don't remember who I was, or where I was bound" (Brownsville). In a Dylan draft quoted by Heylin, he's no longer even sure of the movie's existence: "that was a long time ago – maybe it was never made."[114]

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[109] The source for this is personal memory from working in the film business in New York as an assistant film editor and editor throughout the 1980s. The idea that a good film could only happen by accident was summed up in another saying then current about Hollywood: "Nobody knows anything."

[110] Dylan and Shepard, "Danville."

[111] Dylan with Shepard, "Brownsville."

[112] Dylan, Bob. "Things Have Changed | the Official Bob Dylan Site." *Www.bobdylan.com*, 2000, www.bobdylan.com/songs/things-have-changed/. Accessed 7 Feb. 2025.

[113] Dylan with Shepard, "Brownsville."

[114] Heylin, *Double*, 461.

As the song nears its end, the erasures grow to encompass the entire world. Dylan ends the last verse with, "that was long ago, long before the stars were torn down."[115] Poet and critic John Gibbens called out the connection to the Book of Revelation, quipping that, "It's probably not a good idea to let Dylan get behind the wheel, because it seems wherever you start out, you're going to end up in Apocalypse."[116] From here, there's nowhere to go. The oblivion the song has been aiming at all along is complete. If "Brownsville Girl" was written as a response to Lou Reed's celebration of "Doin' the Things That We Want To," it's a withering critique of the consequences.

To review: the nation's moral strength, *The Gunfighter*, the Brownsville Girl, all the song's various plots and road trips – along with the singer's very selfhood – are all lost. What's left? In another of Dylan's greatest songs, the visions of Johanna were "all that remained." Here, in place of those visions is the cry to the Brownsville Girl for succor, for inspiration, for connection. The call goes on forever as the song fades out.

Lost and Found

"Lostness can be profoundly rejuvenating in a way," Sam Shepard told a reporter in 1986. "It's a desperate time and full of despair and all that – but being really lost can start something that's brand-new ... I think you continually turn around that circle – finding yourself lost and then getting relatively found. To me, writing is a way of bringing things back together a little bit."[117]

Shepard would stay with Jessica Lange for thirty years. They had two children together. Dylan would marry Carolyn Dennis in June 1986, six months after the birth of their daughter Desirée and two months before the release of "Brownsville Girl" on *Knocked Out Loaded.* Dylan's creative and commercial slide would continue, with exceptions, until the early nineties, when he retrenched with a pair of traditional blues and folk records, *Good as I Been to You* and

[115] Dylan with Shepard, "Brownsville."

[116] "And his tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and did cast them to the earth." James, King. "REVELATION CHAPTER 12 KJV." *Kingjamesbibleonline.org*, 1611, www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Revelation-Chapter-12/#4. Accessed 30 Mar. 2025, Revelation 12:4, and Gibbens, John. "Through the Iron Gates, Part 1." *Touched.co.uk*, 2025, www.touched.co.uk/press/irongates.html. Accessed 26 Mar. 2025.

[117] Cott, "Rolling Stone."

World Gone Wrong. These records found Dylan circling back, covering the old songs that had first inspired him – songs that were born in the time when the stars still hung in the sky.

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Interview

Odetta on Bob Dylan

Interviewed by Griffin Ondaatje and Craig Proctor

Writer and filmmaker Griffin Ondaatje interviewed legendary folksinger Odetta in Toronto on November 18th, 2001 for an unreleased documentary he made with colleague Craig Proctor. The transcript is published in the Dylan Review *for the first time, ahead of a future collection of Ondaatje's interviews and essays.*

Generally, interviews published in the Review are conducted by our editors with contemporary subjects. In this case, however, we have made an exception because of the historical significance of Odetta's relationship to Dylan's career and because the interview has remained unpublished until now. The Dylan Review *has taken suitable steps to confirm its veracity.*

It has been edited for length and clarity.

This interview with Odetta took place one morning in November 2001. She had played a concert the night before at Hugh's Room, a small music club in Toronto. Born in 1930, in Alabama, Odetta was 70 the day of this interview, but she was up early, suggesting we meet at 8am at her motel. We were nervous, waiting in the lobby by 7:30am. A vital artist committed to social justice for over fifty years, Odetta was a groundbreaking singer who motivated the American folk music revival. She was also an intrepid civil rights activist who helped change America. In 1963 she sang two songs at the March on Washington, joined the Selma to Montgomery march in 1965, and had a deep influence on figures such as Martin Luther King Jr., Maya Angelou, and Harry Belafonte. Rosa Parks, when asked in an interview what songs she listened to during the civil rights movement, said: "All the songs Odetta sings." When she came down the hall she smiled, shook our hands, and asked for a cup of coffee.

My friends, Craig Proctor and Simon Dragland, and I were making a film on Bob Dylan. At age 18, Dylan was inspired by Odetta when he went to a Minneapolis record store and found her album *Odetta Sings Ballads and Blues.* In his memoir, *Chronicles, Volume One,* Dylan recalls: "I went into the listening booth to hear it. Odetta was great. I had never heard of

her until then. She was a deep singer, powerful strumming and a hammering-on style of playing. I learned almost every song off the record." Dylan recounts, in one interview, getting the same model of guitar as Odetta: "Right then and there, I went out and traded my electric guitar and amplifier for an acoustical guitar, a flat-top Gibson." By 1965, six years later, Odetta had recorded *Odetta Sings Dylan* – one of the first Dylan cover albums made. That same year Odetta performed at the Newport Folk Festival, the night before Dylan performed his legendary electric set. In the biopic *A Complete Unknown*, there's a glimpse of her at Newport – standing alone offstage – during the climactic scene. Yet the real Odetta, who had such a formative impact on Dylan, was actually in the audience listening that night he "went electric."

Odetta inspired numerous artists early in their careers – including Joan Baez, Eric Bibb and Tracy Chapman. Singer and multi-instrumentalist Rhiannon Giddens said of her: "She was a soulful force for good in both the folk world and the civil rights world." The day we met Odetta she was concerned about what was happening in the States, reflecting on war and conflicts overseas. It was just two months after 9/11, and events following the terrorist attacks were on her mind, including The Patriot Act which had just been enacted. Revisiting our transcript from twenty-five years ago – for a book on Dylan's music – it's clear Odetta's concerns still resonate today.

We finished our documentary film on Dylan – *Complete Unknown* – in 2002. I mailed a DVD screener of it to Dylan's manager Jeff Rosen – who kindly watched our rambling 86-minute first-movie and later assisted with various music permissions we requested. Yet as new filmmakers, with no real budget, we ultimately couldn't afford archive footage rights from a large American visual media company – and so our film wasn't distributed or released. *Complete Unknown* screened in only a few small film festivals and has remained shelved ever since. Yet the journey making it was an amazing experience as we met dozens of "known" and "unknown" musicians, writers, artists, and fans. We spoke with Kate and Anna McGarrigle, Steve Earle, Martin Carthy, Billy Bragg, Gillian Armstrong, Robert Creeley and many others, including LeRoy Hoikkala (Dylan's highschool friend and drummer from *The Golden Chords*) and Keith Butler (who claimed to have shouted "Judas!" in Manchester in 1966). Although we knew when first we set out that Dylan would remain a complete unknown, we sought to include a diverse mix of characters – even consulting an astrologist who "deciphered" Dylan's chart. We plan to give footage from our interviews to the Bob Dylan Center in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and this talk with Odetta seemed like a wonderful and essential interview to share with others.

Odetta passed away on December 2, 2008, at the age of 77. The following is a shortened version of our one-hour conversation with her that morning in 2001. Passing along Lakeshore

Boulevard in Toronto, where Odetta stayed, there's a sixty-story condo tower where that small motel used to be. I remember her warm humor and strong sense of calm. A generous person with a gentle power.

- Griffin Ondaatje

Griffin Ondaatje: Thanks for meeting us this early Odetta. We've been working on this documentary for two years, and hope to go down to New York again soon to interview more artists and musicians. Emmylou Harris is another musician we hope to speak with.

Odetta: I wonder, how about Dave Van Ronk? Of course he's just had an operation, he may not be strong enough by the time you get there. It's a terrible piece of news – cancer – [his] operation happened I guess about a week ago.[1]

GO: Is Dave Van Ronk a musician friend you've often kept in touch with?

Odetta: No, we just live in the same city. We have to be on the road or at a festival to meet up with each other. That's the way it always is. Once he and Andrea [Vucuolo, Van Ronk's wife] had me over for dinner, and that was really lovely. But generally speaking we meet on the road. Not just Dave – that whole community. When I have free time I don't want to hear about a suitcase, a plane, a train, or a bus! *[laughs]*

GO: Did you always feel that way, Odetta, when you were touring? Even in the 1960s?

Odetta: Well, I've been looking for the glamour of travel for over fifty years, yet I haven't found it. I'm ready for the transporter room as in: *"Beam me up, Scotty."* The travelling itself at times can get really tedious. But the getting there is the dessert – and the people you start working with. Within this area of music there are aware people that have gone out further than the pap that is given to them on regular radio and television programs. And you meet families – kindred kinds of spirits. That's the joyous part. The travel ain't such-a-much, unless you're in a vehicle that's going through a beautiful piece of topography. That can be a joy.

[1] Dave Van Ronk died on 10 February 2002 at the age of 65, shortly after this interview took place.

GO: You were already established and touring in the late 1950s when Bob Dylan was first being influenced, in a deep way, by your music. Were you aware of your influence on him?

Odetta: Bob never told me, but I'd heard that he had told people that he was playing the electric guitar and he heard me and my guitar. And then he went and got an acoustical guitar. Through that, I think, he discovered Woody Guthrie [who] was closer to his area – especially being a writer. But at one point I heard that his repertoire was a record that I had done [*Odetta Sings Ballads and Blues*]. He'd learned all the songs. That's a wonderful thing to hear. Whatever I did helped him on a step towards what he has developed into.

One hears a lot of stories that are filled with imagination; but I am not sure I ever met Bob until he got to New York. There were certainly encouraging words – there and then – when I met him. It was perfectly obvious the man was thinking – and brilliant – through the songs that he had written.

GO: Dylan travelled to England in 1962. I'd wondered if you had encountered him at all in England around that time?

Odetta: No, it was in Rome. Albert [Grossman] was with me in Italy. And Bob and Mary Travers were in England. I think that Bob had been doing a concert or something there. Anyway, Mary and her daughter and Bob came to Italy and we all hung out together. Golly, there was a dance that was very popular in those days. It was a group dance, everybody did the same steps, you know? I've forgotten what that dance was called. Anyway, I think many performers are basically shy people – basically introverts. Now that is just a contradiction. When they're into whatever it is they're doing, it's almost like they're another person who is more outgoing than the person they are as a civilian. And I think Bob and I – as I look back on it – are shy of each other.

Maybe one of these days we might get into the same room, when there's not a lot of people around, and we could actually sit down and talk together. It happened once. You must know about his motorcycle accident? Well, friends of mine were the Thalers. Dr. Ed Thaler is not only a doctor but he's a physician – he doesn't just have that piece of paper on the wall. He's quite wonderful. Albert [introduced] Bob [to] Eddie Thaler – to help keep track that doctors

were doing right. When Bob was recuperating, the Thalers had their attic fixed up for him to stay there. Their kids had already been trained not to talk about famous people that were coming over to their house.

So Bob was there. I had gotten back off of a tour. [The Thalers] are like my adopted family, so I went up to see them. Mom and Pop and the kids had gone to sleep. Bob and I were sitting around the kitchen table. It was after I'd done an all-Bob Dylan record [*Odetta Sings Dylan*] and Bob was wondering – it wasn't by way of complaint – but he was wondering why it was that people did his songs other than the way he wrote them. We went into the fact that, as someone hears your song, your song goes into what *their* experience has been. You cannot take your experience out of how you approach anything, including a song. And you don't do a song the same way twice – because of experiences you've had between the last time you [sang] it and this time.

GO: What was your experience of recording *Odetta Sings Dylan* in 1965?

Odetta: Bob came to RCA when we were recording that record. Recording in those days was really frightening to me. And he and his entourage were there. He had sent tapes to the publisher and someone transcribed the words. And he heard a few things that were not quite right. So he took the words and changed whatever needed to be changed or corrected. And then I said, "Okay Bob, you're gonna have to leave. I am so nervous of this microphone and the tape picking up every mistake. I don't need the composer here saying: I didn't mean it like that." He understood. And they left! *[laughs]*

GO: Interpreting those songs, were you content with how it all went?

Odetta: Yeah, I can say I was. Dylan had, up to that point, written the song and then almost "recited" it. Whatever emotion was in his early recordings, you put in there yourself. He wasn't interpreting his songs, you know? I find many music songwriters like that. There was Lynn Gold. Gorgeous voice. She had a voice in the area of a Joan Baez. High soprano, really quite warm and lovely.

She was coming to New York and wanted me to come hear her. Every song she sang that somebody else wrote was crystal clear, [but] when she got to her own songs you couldn't make

out the words. When she finished I said: "You were brave enough to expose yourself writing, but there's this last wall protecting yourself by not letting us understand what you've written."

Bob is really singing more *now* than he did in his early days. It was like precision in his early days. It is our response to him that makes us think he was emoting something. The words were. But he's more, now, an interpreter of his songs, I think. Well, he must've been a scared kid too. And with the brilliance of Albert Grossman – those were two "brilliants" together; I mean, there was no one around at that time dressing like Bob was and recording songs that went up to three and four minutes and played on the radio! [Radio] only wanted something 2:50 or under so they could get their ads in. They really crashed a wall. In many respects Bob was responsible.

GO: He changed that side of things.

Odetta: Before Dylan, as we would get together and tune our guitars doing hootenannies in somebody's living room, someone would sing a song we'd all know, and we would be singing and harmonizing together. But with the advent of Bob Dylan, we started hearing singer-songwriters where you just sat and listened – because you didn't know the song. Audience participation [in hootenannies], some felt it was hokey; I never did. I felt that that good healing stuff for me, in singing, is good healing stuff for others to sing – to get that vibration going all the way through their own bodies.

GO: We interviewed Peter Guralnick a couple of years ago, a wonderful writer and music historian. He wrote a biography of Elvis Presley and apparently Presley, with the advent of Dylan, preferred to listen to Dylan's music through your voice, through your album *Odetta Sings Dylan*. He found Dylan's own voice a bit too … gravelly.

Odetta: That's the first time I'm hearing that. Someone did introduce me to a song Presley did ["Tomorrow Is a Long Time"] and it was my arrangement exactly, which surprised me. But this is the first time that I've heard that. Isn't that something?

GO: Yeah, apparently at one point on his tour bus Elvis was listening constantly to your record *Odetta Sings Dylan.* He liked Dylan's lyrics but preferred your voice singing them. What do you think about people complaining about Dylan's voice, the gravelly aspect?

Odetta: People complain, but he's out there, isn't he? *[laughs]* There's something there that keeps [audiences] coming towards him. What do you think of his singing now?

GO: We just saw him in concert a week ago. There's a new song where he sings: "You can always come back, but you can't come back all the way"— it's kind of poignant the way he sings it. What do you think of his voice on the new album? [*"Love and Theft"*]

Odetta: I've not listened to the whole record. He sings "gravelly" yes, but he sings more now than he did before. I don't know if I can explain it. I think before he was reciting, and now he is involved with the music. He feels comfortable enough to go that next step and be that vulnerable.

GO: The Newport Folk Festival in 1965 has become sort of controversial because of Dylan's performance of "Maggie's Farm" when he played electric guitar.

Odetta: What do you mean "sort of" controversial? *[laughs]*

GO: Well I guess "sort of" in the sense that half the time I read people who said things like: "Well the *booing* wasn't as bad as it sounded," or "Yeah, the booing was as bad as it sounded." So you were there, quite close by?

Odetta: Yeah I was there.

GO: So what was your feeling at the time?

Odetta: Well to start a little before that summer festival at Newport, as I would go around doing concerts, there would be youngsters asking me all about Bob Dylan. He was a hero, he was a hero to his audience. And it seems, within the United States anyway, as one becomes a hero of an audience, it's like the audience is betrayed if the performer goes in another direction – or does something that they're not used to. I think we all feel that everything is changing around us and we can't depend on anything, including ourselves. But the performer, they're supposed to stay right there, because that's their touchstone. And then when their touchstone moves – they've been betrayed and hurt. Actually very hurt. You didn't have to wait for a

review to find out what that audience felt about this electric guitar.

Craig Proctor: Was that not only because the music had shifted to electric, but also because the nature of the songwriting was becoming less public and more –

Odetta: There was so much noise I'm not quite sure that we could hear what the nature of the writing was.

CP: But, generally, at the time when Dylan started writing *Another Side of Bob Dylan*, when he started moving away from topical songs, protest songs, traditional folk songs I'm wondering if there was a bit of resistance?

Odetta: That's quite possible. That's quite possible that he was deserting areas that people were very concerned about and going into [the] personal. Most of our music was the personal stuff anyway – maybe not written as well as he would write.

GO: Your feeling at that time in 1965 at Newport then, there was a controversy…

Odetta: Well I heard it. I heard from the audience. I didn't object to it – I had no problem with it.

GO: Were you backstage at the time?

Odetta: No, I was right in the audience. I've heard about what went on backstage but I wasn't there. Thank heavens! [laughs] Well, remember Sinead O'Connor? Remember that? She said something about the Pope or Catholicism or something and they booed her.[2] That's that same area of feeling betrayed.

GO: Do you think it's fair for an audience to expect a performer – obviously it's not – to be the same throughout?

Odetta: If they think that life goes on the "same old," "same old," "same old" … then it's fair.

[2]At Bob Dylan's 30th Anniversary Concert Celebration on October 16, 1992.

If they know that life changes and they change, then it's not fair. I've heard people say to me: "You haven't changed." That's supposed to make you feel good I suppose. "You were dumb then and you stayed dumb!" *[laughs]* I'm just poking fun – but it was said to me last night [in Toronto] and I said to the lady: "No. We haven't. We've improved." *You haven't changed.* What is that? Some kind of "Let's pretend" stuff?

GO: When you have free time to listen to music, what do you like to listen to?

Odetta: When I'm on the road I used to carry a radio. I'm a "radio baby." There were no pictures when I was growing up, except at the moving picture show. So I grew up with the radio. Nowadays in motel rooms and hotel rooms they have a clock radio. So whenever I get anywhere I turn on the radio and I look for Country Western stations. That's where occasionally you get some words very well put together. It isn't "I love you I love you I love you" on one chord, or hollering at somebody. We live in another time but I consider it a continuation of what folk music was. It's not a continuation of Tin Pan Alley or Radio City Music Hall – there's nothing wrong with any of them – it's just that they've been germinated by folk music and they're carrying on the tradition of writing something that has something to do with themselves and the world around them.

CP: Going back to *Odetta Sings Dylan,* I was wondering how that came about. Did it come about through Albert Grossman?

Odetta: No, that came about through Odetta. It was time to record. I don't know what it is like now but in those days you sort of owed two records a year. That was very difficult, especially since I would be out on the road three months at a time. You do the road and you come back in. So where do you go to find the songs? I thought: Bob Dylan. Plus, I don't have to go around looking for different writers; it's all the same writer. And also there's some songs in there that I would like to second the motion to. So that's how that one turned out.

GO: After Dylan's motorcycle accident, he did *John Wesley Harding* and the country album *Nashville Skyline.* Did you listen to those too?

Odetta: It was his earlier political [songs], "Masters of War."

GO: He sang "Masters of War" on TV at the [1991] Grammy Awards during the Gulf War. It felt like an important statement since when a war machine gets going –

Odetta: Which is what's going on now. How dare they bomb … and all this flag stuff. The stroke of a pen has just about got rid of the Bill of Rights. What the terrorists don't do in terrifying us, our government is gonna do, or those who represent the government. We're going for some dark, dark time. People being arrested because of the way they *look?* And they don't have to be *charged?* They can't see any *lawyers?* I'm afraid it's going to be like [prewar] Germany in that it's a factor that is spoiling that will spread, and spread, and spread. And we're not going to really realize it until we get to a point where that poison is coming towards us. Our government – they have spin doctors – they put a spin on it. It seems anything they say, a bulk of the U.S. people believe it. Even when they say one thing and contradict it two minutes later.

CP: When we saw Dylan last week he was singing songs like "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" which seem timeless. His concerns in 1962 seem to be the same concerns now. The music's timeless, and the struggle also seems timeless.

Odetta: I'm afraid it is timeless.

CP: There seems to be times when there's disillusionment with the presidency – President Nixon resigned, etc. – but the mass majority of people don't want to know the truth, the ugly truth, or what have you.

Odetta: Well they have enough problems on their own, you know what I mean? I mean, which of us goes right into the firefight? There are some who do – but there are most who don't. Some of us have been fortunate enough to be influenced by, or around, people who take responsibility for their concerns. And their concerns are beyond a roof over the house, and food on the table, or a car every year, or a new television set, you know?

[Pauses]

They're dumbing us down and we don't know. And we are the victims. Because as it is happening over there, it's gonna happen in our country. That net is gonna come in and in and in.

Contributors

Alessandro Carrera is Moores Professor of Italian Studies and World Cultures and Literatures at the University of Houston, Texas. He has translated the songs and prose of Bob Dylan into Italian, including *Chronicles, Volume One* and *Tarantula*, and authored *La voce di Bob Dylan*.

Britt Eisnor is a writer and researcher. Britt graduated from Emerson College in 2019 with a BA in Visual Media Arts Production, and works in museums. She has spoken about Dylan to the *Wall Street Journal* and *Definitely Dylan* podcast, and posts about Dylan on Instagram.

Michael Gray is a critic, writer and public speaker. His book *Song & Dance Man*: *The Art of Bob Dylan* (1972), was the first critical study of Dylan's work. The massive third edition *Song & Dance Man III* was first published in 1999. He has also authored *Bob Dylan Encyclopedia* (2006) and *Hand Me My Travelin' Shoes: In Search of Blind Willie McTell* (2007).

Bill Lattanzi is a playwright, video editor, and writer. His essays have appeared in *Los Angeles Review of Books* and WBUR's *Cognoscenti*, and he has presented on Bob Dylan and Sam Shepard. He is a past Hall Humanities Fellow at U. of Kansas, a Knight Fellow in Science Journalism at MIT, and holds a master's degree in creative writing from Boston University.

Griffin Ondaatje is a writer and documentary filmmaker. His essay "Highway to the Sea" was published in *BOB DYLAN: Mixing Up the Medicine.* His books include *The Mosquito Brothers* and *The Camel in the Sun*. Currently he is writing *Half Wild*, a book of essays and interviews on Dylan's music. He lives in Toronto with his family

Thomas G. Palaima is Robert M. Armstrong Professor of Classics at University of Texas, Austin and a MacArthur fellow. He has written over 500 commentaries, reviews, features, and poems. These have appeared in the *Times Higher Education*, *Michigan War Studies Review*, *Arion*, *The Texas Observer*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and commondreams.org.

Craig Proctor has been published in literary journals including *Blood & Aphorisms* and *Brick*. He co-directed the documentary film *Complete Unknown* (2003), and co-wrote *You Shoot Me in a Dream*, a monograph on Harvey Keitel.

David Sheftman is a native New Yorker whose abiding loves are his wife and daughter, the literary arts, baseball, and folk music. He teaches English composition courses full-time at Cabrillo College in Aptos, CA, and outside of teaching enjoys singing and playing "A Hard Rains A-Gonna Fall" on acoustic guitar.

Books Received

Todd Almond. *Slow Train Coming: Bob Dylan's Girl from the North Country and Broadway's Rebirth*. Bloomberg, 2025.

David Browne. *Talkin' Greenwich Village: The Heady Rise and Slow Fall of America's Bohemian Music Capital*. Hachette Books, 2024.

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