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Table of Contents

Reviews

Bob Dylan. The Bootleg Series Vol. 18: Through the Open Window 1956–1963. 8CD, Columbia Records and Legacy Recordings, 31 Oct. 2025.

Review by Gayle Wald, The George Washington University

> Through the open window the voice of the beauty of the world came murmuring, too softly to hear exactly what it said—but what mattered if the meaning were plain?
> — Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*

The 18th volume of The Bootleg Series is titled *Through the Open Window*, a phrase with mythological overtones. In Joseph Campbell's typology of the Hero's Journey, the open window is the Call to Adventure. The Hero may initially resist the Call, but its lure is strong. Leaving home, the Hero encounters obstacles as well as helpers. He is tested. But because he is the Hero, these tests will plant the seeds of his transformation. He will emerge from the tests with new knowledge, ready to take on new adventures.

The cover of the boxed set, released on October 31, gives visual form to the myth. It pictures Dylan on a New York City rooftop. The buildings behind him appear puny, reaching no further than Dylan's knees. He gazes slightly upward, looking beyond the camera's frame. His fingers are in his jeans pockets. His stance is a wide and grounded "V."[1]

The hero's narrative is borne out over the eight CDs that comprise the Deluxe Edition of this latest boxed set. (The streaming and LP versions are leaner, featuring "highlights.") It begins in 1956, in a recording booth in St. Paul, Minnesota, as Bobby Zimmerman and friends tromp through a ragged but enthusiastic version of "Let the Good Times Roll," a Shirley & Lee song then in high rotation on Black radio programs. It travels with Dylan to the college towns of Minneapolis and Madison, Wisconsin, where he first discovered folk music via Odetta and then Woody Guthrie; to the small and agreeably grungy Greenwich Village clubs where he honed his skills before a live audience; and to venues like Riverside Church and Town Hall, where he established his performing bona fides. It takes us into the studio with producers John Hammond and Tom Wilson as he records *Bob Dylan* and *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*. And it

[1] The image is from a 1963 photo shoot by Ralph Baxter, who mostly placed Dylan in more terrestrial settings: standing at a corner at Gramercy Park, posing with a cigarette on a balcony overlooking a crowded urban courtyard.

culminates with a complete recording of Dylan's career-defining October 1963 concert at Carnegie Hall, the nation's most prestigious stage.

As this itinerary suggests, *Through the Open Window* is best approached as a document of the alchemy of painstaking labor, furious determination, and creative inspiration that is the condition of possibility of every artistic breakthrough. At no point in Dylan's journey is his success guaranteed or inevitable. Indeed, I came away from my listening with a powerful sense of the *work* behind the creation of "Bob Dylan." Cumulatively, the dozens of tracks that record his efforts circa 1959-1962—to teach himself dozens of songs, refine his picking and harmonica skills, experiment with vocal stylizations, and sharpen his abilities as an interpreter of songs born in times and places beyond his own lived experience—provide a useful context for the emergence of Dylan as a composer. They bring to mind Patti Smith's notion of the musician as *worker*, reminding us that even familiar and beloved songs were *made*, not plucked from the ether.[2]

Yet although the tracks on *Through the Open Window* are the achievements of a particular person, at a particular time and place, in some quarters the boxed set has been received with a Robert-Johnson-at-the-Crossroads zeal. Reviews published less than 36 hours after the boxed set dropped reprise some of the very language that gave Dylan so much indigestion in the mid-1960s. (That said, they are dutifully reproduced on the Bob Dylan website.) *MOJO* referred to "Dylan's miraculous New York transformation" and breathlessly declared, "every damn song is a transcendence." *Uncut* described the boxed set as a document of "the dawn of a legend."[3]

Perhaps it is inevitable that *Through the Open Window* will only solidify the "genius" narrative that has long trailed Dylan.[4] Words like "miraculous" and "transcendent" express admiration, of course, but they are also deeply ahistorical, running contrary to the evidence of the boxed set itself. This air of romantic inevitability also hangs over *A Complete Unknown*,

[2] See Jacob Uitti, "Patti Smith Is Always Going to Be a Worker," *Interview*, October 20, 2020. https://www.interviewmagazine.com/music/patti-smith-is-always-going-to-be-a-worker

[3] See https://www.mojo4music.com/articles/new-music/bob-dylan-the-bootleg-series-volume-18-review-dylans-miraculous-new-york-transformation/ and https://www.uncut.co.uk/reviews/bob-dylans-through-the-open-window-the-bootleg-series-vol-18-1956-1963-reviewed-documenting-the-dawn-of-a-legend-151807/. While track-by-track discussions of "Through the Open Window" began popping up online after the stroke of midnight on October 30, 2025, I particularly benefited from Ray Padgett's detailed listening guide—sent to subscribers of his "Flagging Down the Double E's" newsletter.

[4] Here I mean to differentiate the romanticized image from the notion of Dylan's exceptionalism as a musician.

the 2024 biopic that covers much of the same period as *Through the Open Window*, and might be seen as its companion piece (in terms of content as well as marketing). But while James Mangold's movie culminates in Dylan's electric set at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival, the new boxed set, by culminating at Carnegie Hall in October 1963, shifts the frame. The difference is telling. In *A Complete Unknown*, the Hero's journey culminates in his need to symbolically slay his father (Pete Seeger) and rid himself of straightjacketing emotional encumbrances (Joan Baez, Suze Rotolo) so that he may become the Voice of a Generation. The result is an at times compelling but strangely depoliticized depiction of the folk revival. In *Through the Open Window*, in contrast, the Hero's journey ends on a heady note of arrival. At the 1963 Carnegie Hall concert, unlike at Newport in 1965, Dylan is thoroughly enjoying himself, basking in the glow of artistic validation, of which fame is one measure. It would still be a while before the glow turned into a conflagration.

After the period of 1964-65, the years chronicled in *Through the Open Window* are the most studied of Bob Dylan's career, covered exhaustively in work since Toby Thompson's 1969 *Village Voice* series on Dylan's "Main Street" origins and Anthony Scaduto's *Bob Dylan: An Intimate Biography*. Most of the tracks it collects have circulated for years: on tapes traded among collectors; via social media (the complete April 1963 Town Hall concert, posted to YouTube before it was embargoed for copyright violation); and in earlier anthologies, including *The Bootleg Series Vol. 1-3: Rare and Unreleased 1961-1991* (1991); *Live at Carnegie Hall 1963* (2005); and *The Bootleg Series Vol. 9: The Witmark Demos: 1962-1964* (2010). But as Sean Wilentz points out in the boxed set's novella-length liner notes, it "differs from other renditions because it tells the story entirely through recordings." The visual abundance of the boxed set—with its dozens of images of Dylan and reproductions of material artifacts including handbills, lyric sheets, posters, and recording-studio ephemera—somewhat belies this notion of sonic storytelling. But Wilentz is of course correct. *Through the Open Window* constitutes an unparalleled sonic chronicle of Dylan's early musical formation, up to and including its "completion" at Carnegie Hall.

To listen to *Through the Open Window* track-by-track is not necessarily to have a linear experience, however. The quality and appeal of its tracks vary widely, with some—for example, unused studio takes from sessions for *Bob Dylan* (1962) and *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* (1963)—being of interest primarily because they represent the road not taken. Home tapes—including from the living rooms of friends including Bob and Sid Gleason, Mel and Lillian Bailey, and Mac and Eve McKenzie—lack the energy of live concert recordings, in which we hear Dylan figuring out ways to put over his songs for strangers. On the other

hand, such tapes give us insight into Dylan's artistry at the moment in late 1961 when *New York Times* journalist Robert Shelton first extolled Dylan as "bright new face" and allow us the pleasure of observing Dylan trying out material in intimate settings.[5] Although his development as a guitar player and singer is most apparent, *Through the Open Window* attests to Dylan's distinction as a harmonica player within the New York folk scene, and reminds us that his earliest recording work was as a harmonica accompanist for Carolyn Hester, Harry Belafonte, and Big Joe Williams and Victoria Spivey.

There is texture and detail in recordings that were never intended for public consumption. Among these, tracks with fly-on-the-wall snippets of conversation are some of the most interesting moments on the boxed set. We hear Belafonte suavely advising the 21-year-old Dylan to "Take your time, baby" as Dylan fumbles with his harmonica during a February 1962 recording session for Belafonte's *Midnight Special*. (Did this make Dylan more or less nervous, I wonder.) Elsewhere, we eavesdrop on an impromptu November 1961 conversation in the Columbia Records studio between Dylan and producer John Hammond, after Dylan has played him an assured interpretation of the Kentucky folk ballad "Man of Constant Sorrow." Written out, it reads almost like the script of a play, in which the dialogue hints at unstated but palpable feeling:

> Hammond (nonchalantly): What was the name of that, Bob?
> Dylan (echoing the nonchalance): "Man of Constant Sorrow." Did you get that?
> H: I did.
> D (more hopefully): Oh, did you like that one?
> H (understated): Sure, it's all right. Who wrote that?
> D: (deflecting) Uh, I don't know. I don't know who wrote that.
> H: Has it been recorded?
> D: Uh, not that way.
> H: How has it been recorded?
> D: Uh, a different way I guess.
> H: Who did it?
> D (more insistently): Judy Collins did it, but not a version like that. That's a different one. Judy Collins on Elektra.

[5] Robert Shelton, "Bob Dylan: A Distinctive Folk-Song Stylist," *New York Times*, September 29, 1961.

> H (thinking ahead): Elektra. We'll find out from Elektra who wrote the damn thing.

Columbia Records did "find out," of course, slotting "Man of Constant Sorrow" on the A side of *Bob Dylan*. But what fascinates is the window this dialogue offers into the delicate relationship of producer and artist. The conversation surfaces untold emotional depths, as Hammond, clearly interested in Dylan's performance, keeps his enthusiasm in check, while Dylan, even as he solicits Hammond's approval, displays total confidence in his work.

While such outtakes place listeners in the recording studio, the live concert performance tracks on *Through the Open Window* give us a seat at some of Dylan's earliest club appearances. We hear Dylan introducing his first public performance of "Blowin' in the Wind" for a small Gerde's Folk City audience on April 16, 1962. "It ain't a protest song, or anything like that, cause I don't write protest songs," he protests, in an uncanny anticipation of the song's reception. "I wrote this song …. I didn't actually write it. I just sort of recorded it," he explains, acknowledging the composition's indebtedness to the spiritual "No More Auction Block" while echoing contemporary accounts of the feverish pace of his songwriting, including Joan Baez's recollection of him "turning out songs like ticker-tape."[6]

Other tracks afford us insight into Dylan's earliest audiences. Hearing the patrons of the Gaslight Café join Dylan in singing the title phrase to "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" in October 1962, just a month after he debuted it at a Carnegie Hall hootenanny, we understand how passionately they embraced the song and its challenging lyrics. I was particularly interested in hearing Gerde's Folk City patrons react to an April 1962 performance of "Talkin' New York"—not the G-rated version that would appear on the *Bob Dylan* album, but a more risqué one befitting the Greenwich Village counterculture. When the song's narrator, a hayseed visitor to the Big Apple, describes an encounter with a crossdressing prostitute—"Well I got on the subway, took a seat / and got off on 42nd Street / I met this fella named Dolores there / He started rubbing his hands through my hair"—the crowd laughs uproariously, presumably in response to the comical image of the yokel caught off-guard by a trans woman turning tricks at Times Square. Clearly the Gerde's audience is hip to the 42nd Street sex trade.

[6] "In the dead of the night, he would wake up, grunt, grab a cigarette, and stumble over to the typewriter … turning out songs like ticker tape." Joan Baez, *And a Voice to Sing With: A Memoir* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 86.

Dylan's knowing satire of the yokel-and-Dolores in "Talkin' New York" is only one example of the comedic and occasionally subversive early 1960s Dylan, who is well-documented on *Through the Open Window.* In this, the boxed set conveys both the ambiance of the downtown folk scene and Dylan's ingratiation of himself to audiences through humorous crowd-work. As is well known, Dylan himself credited Charlie Chaplin as an influence on his early stage persona. Picking up on his Chaplinesque mannerisms, Shelton in 1961 described him as "both comedian and tragedian," who embellished his Gerde's sets with a "variety of droll musical monologues." Hammond's pseudonymous liner notes to Dylan's 1962 debut further secured this association of Dylan with Chaplin, describing him as "nervously tapping his hat, adjusting it, using it as a prop, almost leaning on it," in the manner of the silent film icon.[7]

In his own liner notes, Wilentz picks up on these themes by characterizing Dylan as a "droll singing comedian who could turn even a story occasion into a farcical frolic."[8] His observation comes in the context of his discussion of a recording of "Talkin' Bear Mountain Picnic Massacre Blues" from a September 1961 Gaslight Café performance. But he could just as easily have referenced Bonnie Beecher's 1961 Minneapolis home recording of Dylan doing a comic shtick about East Orange, New Jersey (where his friends the Gleasons lived, not far from Woody Guthrie when he was at Greystone Park Psychiatric Hospital) or his version of "Talkin' War III Blues" from a taped show at Cambridge's Club 47 in April 1963.[9] Many eyewitnesses have described the comic Dylan of these early years. But *experiencing* Dylan's sharp humor and excellent comedic timing on this newest boxed set is still fascinating, particularly for those of us (present writer included) who grew up with Bob Dylan-the-Legend and who discovered the looser, funnier Dylan only in retrospect. *Through the Open Window* presents listeners a Dylan who is quite different from the detached, often standoffish performer of the present.[10] The humorous, joking Dylan of the boxed set arrives at a moment when

[7] Billy James, "Bob Dylan: The First Interview, October 1961, available at https://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/bob-dylan-the-first-interview; Robert Shelton, "Bob Dylan: A Distinctive Folk-Song Stylist," *New York Times*, September 29, 1961; Stacey Williams (John Hammond), liner notes, *Bob Dylan* (Columbia Records, 1962).

[8] Wilentz, p. 28.

[9] Some of this material appeared on *The Bootleg Series, Vol. 1-3: Rare & Unreleased 1961-1991* (Columbia Records, 1991) or *The Bootleg Series, Vol. 9: The Witmark Demos: 1962-1964* (Columbia Records, 2010).

[10] I am thinking of the Dylan of the fall 2025 Outlaw Music Festival, who seemed to intentionally hide from the audience. See the "'I'm Not There': Why is Bob Dylan Hiding?" (September 14, 2025)

Instagram users, in response to this seemingly gloomier, glummer Dylan of the 21st century, have seized upon the photographic trope of "Bob Dylan smiling" as a humorous meme.[11]

This raises a series of questions: What happened to the Chaplinesque Dylan? Was he a casualty of the suffocating adulation of the early 1960s? By virtue of ending in late 1963, *Through the Open Window* is silent on such issues. On the other hand, it offers much to listeners interested in Dylan's well-documented attraction to Black music and musicians, beginning with his teenage forays into Black pop. In particular, *Through the Open Window* highlights Dylan's immersion in the recordings of Robert Johnson, whose work became newly available to folk revivalists with the 1961 release of the *King of the Delta Blues Singers* compilation. Dylan drew overtly on Johnson for the melody of his version of "Corrina, Corrina" (included here in a Gerde's Folk City rendition); but Johnson's influence can also be heard in Dylan's explorations of his falsetto register. Although many of the tracks that register Dylan's relationship to blues have been heard before, it is still interesting to revisit these early years of experimentation. How did Dylan approach songs that emerged from circumstances so utterly distinct from his own? How did he insert himself into songs of the wanderer, the outcast, the impoverished Southern laborer? By what imaginative leaps—or sleights of hand—did he discover himself in the blues, and how did he bend the music of Black America toward his own expressive needs?

But the young Dylan was not only "discovering" Black music on vinyl or shellac. *Through the Open Window* documents the young performer's interactions with contemporary blues musicians including the Rev. Gary Davis, Big Joe Williams, and Victoria Spivey. As these tracks helpfully demonstrate, when Dylan arrived in New York in late 1961, blues was very much a *living* tradition, not an inert, romanticized art form. Spivey was particularly important to Dylan's formation. The New York-based Blues Queen indulged his blandishments and invited him to play harmonica on March 1962 sessions with Big Joe Williams, later released on two albums from her own imprint. (Dylan would confirm the importance of Spivey's mentorship by featuring a photograph of the two of them, from the very same 1962 sessions, on 1970's *New Morning* LP.) "Wichita" and "It's Dangerous," the Spivey Records tracks included on *Through the Open Window*, thus helpfully recall the centrality of an older generation of Black musicians to Dylan's—and other young white folk singers'—musical

episode of Laura Tenschert's Definitely Dylan.
https://www.definitelydylan.com/podcasts/2025/9/14/zu3x709n5k6gifhcha53kt3w039e8i

[11] See, for example, the Instagram account of dylan.ologist.
https://www.instagram.com/p/DA3AfODRliZ/

development. In that sense, the boxed set is a welcome rejoinder to *A Complete Unknown*'s disparaging depiction of the fictional bluesman Jesse Moffette, played by Big Bill Morganfield (Muddy Waters' son). The blues singers Dylan knew in 1962—and who are pictured in images printed along with the *Through the Open Window* liner notes—would not have arrived on the set of the TV show *Rainbow Quest* disheveled, drunk, and clutching a whiskey bottle. They were dapper professionals, struggling to make a living from their art, even as a new generation of white musicians would ultimately come to profit from it.

In light of the boxed set's reminders of the many Black people who scaffolded and supported Dylan's early career, I found it hard not to detect a reference to interracial relationships in the lyrics to "Kingsport Town," an arrangement of "Who's Gonna Shoe Your Pretty Little Feet" here captured as an outtake from the November 1962 *Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* sessions. "High sheriff on my trail boy / high sheriff on my trail," Dylan sings, "All because I'm falling for / a curly dark-eyed gal." The lyrics are traditional, recorded decades earlier by Woody Guthrie, but the phrase "a curly dark-eyed gal" evokes the African American women—including Mavis Staples and Delores Dixon—who attracted (or is rumored to have attracted) Dylan's romantic interest in the early 1960s. *Through the Open Window* makes such questions possible, even if it cannot answer them.

I cannot end this review without mentioning *Through the Open Window*'s documentation of the quantum leap in Dylan's songwriting between the period of "Talkin' New York" and "Song to Woody," the two originals on *Bob Dylan*, and his utterly self-assured Carnegie Hall performance of October 1963. The setlist of either half of that concert would have been enough to cement Dylan's reputation as a major 20th-century composer: "The Times They Are A-Changin,'" "Boots of Spanish Leather," "Blowin' in the Wind," "North Country Blues," "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" before the intermission, followed by "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right," "Only a Pawn in Their Game," "Masters of War," and "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll" in part two. It is genuinely thrilling to hear the Carnegie Hall set in its entirety, rather than through snippets stitched together from *Live at Carnegie Hall* (Columbia, 2005), earlier Bootleg Series releases (Vols. 1-3 and Vol. 7), and the ultra-rare six-LP set *The 50th Anniversary Collection 1963* (Sony Music, 2013). After listening to them for this review, I would not revisit much of the material on the first six CDs of *Through the Open Window*. But I can imagine listening to the Carnegie Hall set for its immersive pleasure.

It goes without saying that the target audience of the Bootleg Series, currently retailing at $160 (list price) or $138.36 (on Amazon), consists almost entirely of people who do not need to be convinced of its merits. (That includes readers of this review.) It is impossible to find

fault with the boxed set's thesis that in a few remarkable years between 1959 and 1963, with the assistance of New York City and a large cast of musical mentors (both living and on recordings), muses, friends, and frenemies, Bob Dylan developed into a musician of great originality, interpretive intelligence, and lyrical subtlety. The overabundance of the boxed set only cements the narrative of the Hero's journey. But that does not mean that we cannot peek through the open window to catch sight of less noticed aspects of his early career.

Steven Rings. *What Did You Hear? The Music of Bob Dylan*. University of Chicago Press, 2025. 360 pp.

Review by Jonathan Hodgers, Trinity College Dublin.

Here we have an important book about Bob Dylan: one that puts analysis of the music first. Steven Rings has antecedents in terms of monographs (which he acknowledges in his literature review), among them Starr, Hampton (at least partially), and Mellers (reluctantly),[1] but what he achieves here feels like an ambitious step forward in what remains a surprisingly spartan terrain of sustained musicological studies of Dylan. *What Did You Hear?* is not only an intervention in Dylan studies but also a persuasive demonstration of how his music can reward close, technically informed listening without sacrificing readability or critical range.

The book is split into three main sections: Dylan's voice, his musical instruments, and a multi-chapter case study of Dylan's many incarnations of "A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall." This tripartite structure works well, allowing Rings to move from foundational questions of vocal style, through instrumental practice, toward a sustained analysis of a single song that functions as a kind of culmination of the preceding chapters.

Rings takes pains to ensure that his musical analysis is accessible, supporting it with thoughtfully designed musical notation. It is often possible to grasp the analytical point visually, even before engaging with the technical language. The provision of audio-visual examples via a dedicated website is extremely useful, especially for readers who may not read notation fluently. The pre-introductory section, "How to (Not Just) Read This Book," which includes clear musical definitions, is helpful, as are the frequent micro-summaries (for example, at the end of chapter 4 when Rings sums up Dylan's "speechward delivery" (114)), which help situate the reader.

Rings's readings of songs are often *tour de force* demonstrations of his method. His discussion of Dylan's version of Dave Van Ronk's "House of the Rising Sun" is particularly insightful. Rings makes it clear that, despite the unfortunate circumstances surrounding Dylan's use of the arrangement, Dylan does not simply steal it but transforms Van Ronk's version through a more longitudinal shaping of the song's arc (76). His analysis of how Dylan

[1] Larry Starr, *Listening to Bob Dylan*, Music in American Life (University of Illinois Press, 2021); Timothy Hampton, *Bob Dylan: How the Songs Work* (Zone Books, 2020); Wilfrid Mellers, *A Darker Shade of Pale: A Backdrop to Bob Dylan* (Oxford University Press, 1985); to these, one might add Todd Harvey, *The Formative Dylan: Transmission and Stylistic Influences, 1961-1963*, American Folk Music and Musicians Series 7 (Scarecrow Press, 2001), which is cited elsewhere by Rings.

narrativizes the song's lyrics—marrying semantics to vocal delivery—is both persuasive and enriching, illuminating the techniques that make the performance so effective. Crucially, these readings never feel forced, further testifying to how well Dylan's work sustains, and even thrives under, close musicological scrutiny.

It is also intriguing to see Rings revisit the canonical moments of Dylan studies—the Manchester Free Trade Hall concert and Newport '65, among others—through a rigorous application of music theory. Looked at anew, these fabled nights can be heard with fresh ears, as Rings brings into focus Dylan's evolving vocal styles and performance strategies through a novel spectrum that tries to codify Dylan's approaches across time. His willingness to argue, somewhat bravely, that Dylan's folky strumming is musically retrograde at Newport (p. 145) exemplifies the book's commitment to clear-eyed analysis over received wisdom. And as much as we get a "greatest hits" set featuring Newport '65, etc., Rings does not neglect deep cuts; unofficially released material gets similar treatment, driving home the pervasiveness of Dylan's musical invention, and how any given night's set might yield yet more fascinating insights if only given the appropriate musicological attention (see especially his close reading of the Nara "Hard Rain" (297–300), a major Dylan performance languishing on two singles releases in 1994–95).[2]

Although Rings rightly keeps Dylan himself as the primary locus of analysis, he also writes sensitively about the role of collaborators. His discussion of Mike Bloomfield (throughout chapter six) and Donnie Herron (221–23), for instance, shows how a sideman can help integrate Dylan's playing into a broader band dynamic, smoothing over excesses or jarring harmonic clashes. Such passages underscore the importance of musicians who act as moderators of Dylan's more impulsive or idiosyncratic instincts (more on this later).

Equally important is Rings's reluctance to force interpretation. He gets considerable mileage out of Dylan's piano playing on "Time Passes Slowly," (210–15) stressing that there is nothing necessarily intentional at work, only an aptness that rewards analysis. His gentle speculation—that Dylan may have preferred the chosen take precisely because the faltering technique produces a more productive synergy between words and music—is persuasive without being overstated.

The book, however, is not just a musicological treatise; Rings is also deeply and impressively informed about Dylan in general. He paints to the corners as it were. He has a

[2] Olof Björner, 'Still On The Road: 1994 Spring Sessions', About Bob - Olof's Files, accessed 9 January 2026, https://bobserve.com/olof/DSN14790%20-%201994%20Spring%20Sessions.htm.

strong grasp of chronology and context, and the analysis is consistently grounded in a wide-ranging knowledge of Dylan's recording history, performance practice, and critical reception. And although the book delivers on its promise to be about sound, it is full of illuminating references to poetry and lyrics, always framed in relation to musical and sonic questions. Rings's discussion of the *Highway 61 Revisited* sleeve notes (52–53) is exemplary in this regard. He is also careful to interrogate and dismantle myths that accrue around the writing of certain songs. His treatment of "Hard Rain," for instance, grounds speculation in the best available evidence, so that one never senses he is reaching or straining. His discussion of the likelihood that "Hard Rain" was written to be sung (3–4), is a model of cautious, evidence-based inference.

Rings also offers thoughtful commentary on cultural and social issues. He thinks deeply about Dylan's relationship to, and indebtedness toward, Black culture, and keenly stresses that Dylan's Jewishness should be factored into discussions of appropriation. To his credit, he does not get bogged down in appropriation debates (see page 22), instead handling racial and class issues with notable deftness. Rings also revisits the vexed concept of authenticity in this light (36). Related issues of genre and its racialized dimensions are handled with similar care (43–44). His discussion of the racial politics of the electric guitar—the Black coding of the instrument—*vis-à-vis* Newport '65 is especially insightful (165–67). It is to Rings's credit that he can balance acknowledgement and recognition of the sometimes-fraught racial politics that Dylan's music represents, all the while crediting, where merited, Dylan's creativity, sincerity, and prudence in navigating racial dynamics. A good example of Rings's handling of this cluster of topics is his discussion of the gospel-era "Hard Rains" (292–94). He notes what Dylan gains from the Black musicians' presence—how their recruitment confers legitimacy on his excursion into gospel music. He also notes Dylan's affording space for the Black musicians at the beginning of the concerts and during solos, and the importance of their voices' interaction in the song's refrain. These carefully poised observations are a model of conscientious scholarship.

Such a diplomatic approach is a hallmark of the book. Rings sidesteps overt qualitative judgment, instead adopting a patient and sympathetic stance toward some of Dylan's more eccentric performance choices, and preferring careful description of sonic features over evaluative pronouncement. On page 125, for example, Rings deftly discusses what audiences might be getting from Dylan's sometimes perverse melodic detours in live performance, and how these variations affect the words. He acknowledges that these choices work for at least a portion of the audience, musing that they may create the feeling of witnessing something

bespoke—an experience that reinforces the audience's in-the-moment proximity to Dylan. This restraint serves the book well, given how contentious such judgments can be, and is evident again in his admirably measured discussion of latter-day "Hard Rains" on pages 304–05. One will not come away thinking that Rings did not give late-period performances a considered appraisal.

Another of Rings's strengths lies in isolating moments of form-content alignment: those synergies in which Dylan's vocals, music, and lyrics reinforce or mutually animate one another. He notes, for example, that Dylan's melodic invention in "Jokerman" is perfect for a song about the nightingale's tune (121). There are many such instances. One can be found in "The Girl from the North Country" discussion (157–58):

> Chord *x* yearns for chord *z*, over and over, just as the song's protagonist continually sends his thoughts northward, in worry and muted regret. It is telling that *x* yearns for *z* via an intermediary—chord *y*—just as the protagonist channels his nostalgia through his second-person interlocutor (the 'you' of the lyric).

While form-content alignment is a venerable criterion of musical quality, Rings's analyses attest to the sophistication of Dylan's vocals, showing how Dylan listens to his own language and responds intuitively, animating the words through musical choice or, at times, allowing the words to animate the music.

Although this evaluative underpinning has been addressed before—by Michael Gray and Christopher Ricks, among others—the musical terminology and sustained focus here reinforce and enrich those earlier insights, lending them greater precision and, arguably, opening them up to a new audience of musicologists. Rings does not merely describe musical features, illuminating though that would be; he goes on to explain their effects within the context of the song. We not only hear new things, but come to understand why so many ostensibly "simple" songs (a term Rings rightly treats with suspicion) work as they do, and how subtle choices embody deep artistry. An analysis of "The Times They Are a-Changin'" offers a fine example, where Rings expounds on the effects of the pauses in the chorus:

> Dylan inserts one bar of extra strumming after line 1 but expands this to two after line 3. The result is an oddly unpredictable kind of momentum, a sense that the lyric is tumbling falteringly—but inevitably—forward. The effect is apt, given the song's

> thematics of imminence ('soon,' 'rapidly') and delay, its push-pull temporality: "The slow one now will later be fast." (33).

Rings is particularly good at interrogating clichés. He carefully considers Dylan's supposed nasal singing, arguing—on "Hard Rain," at least—that the description is insufficient (31–32), despite how routinely commentators invoke it. Throughout, Rings dispels the idea that Dylan is a "bad" singer, or that he simply does not care about singing. He shows instead that Dylan deliberately employs chant- and speech-like delivery as part of a broader arsenal of vocal effects, and that discernible patterns emerge over time. Many fans will have intuited his singing's quality already and do not need further convincing, but it is quite another thing to see it articulated so forcefully, with precise terminology, musical examples, and clear illustrations.

Related observations frequently produce genuine moments of recognition. The linkage Rings draws between Dylan's harmonica playing and the accordion is especially adroit (186). He also connects insights across chapters, as when he links Dylan's fixation on a riff in both voice and harmonica (188), showing how insistent repetition registers with an audience:

> Here Dylan fixates on a four-note figure, which he plays no fewer than nineteen times, plus a few interspersed variants. Starting at about the eighth iteration, audience members cheer. This is another moment [*sic*] obstinate repetition, reminiscent of the repeated vocal ostinati discussed in chapter 5. In his harp playing, such ostinati almost always get a reaction from the audience, once they realize what is happening—that Dylan is burrowing into one figure, mining it for all it's worth.

He returns again to a similar idea ("the iterative core") on pages 243–45. Such connectivity deepens our understanding of how Dylan thinks musically across voice, harmonica, and form.

For me, one of the more striking moments in the book occurs when Rings recounts teaching Dylan's and Van Ronk's versions of "House of the Rising Sun" to students, and encountering discomfort grounded in questions of gendered and racial subject position (81). Some students, as Rings reports, struggled to engage fully with Dylan's performance on the grounds that his subject position does not align with that of the song's protagonist, who is understood as a wronged or victimized figure. One student likened Dylan and Van Ronk disputing the song to two white men pulling at the suffering lyric persona, while others expressed a preference for Joan Baez's version, which they heard as marked by dignity and restraint rather than inward shame.

I found the episode disheartening, but also revealing. Taken at face value, such responses suggest an evaluative framework in which empathetic or affectively convincing performance is judged primarily through the lens of embodied identity. This, in turn, raises the question of whether it is ethically suspect for performers to inhabit perspectives other than their own when the in-song persona is understood as a "protected" identity, or otherwise construed as a victim—whether within the narrative context of the song itself, or by virtue of how that role is retrospectively interpreted in contemporary discourse. If followed to its logical conclusion, this position would cast doubt on the entire folk tradition, which has long depended on singers imaginatively occupying other lives and voices both past and present, and would raise particularly knotty problems for women singers navigating historically male-coded narratives. The students' objections imply an intersectional power dynamic: the problem appears to lie not in the act of vocal impersonation per se, but in men singing from the perspective of a power-deprived woman, rather than the reverse. Again, we are having to reverse-engineer some tacit assumptions: that lyrical personas are victims of inappropriate inhabitants; that these concerns color evaluative judgment; and that the listener should be vigilant as to the positionality of who is singing to see how worthy they are of the role. One upshot appears to be that more proximate interpreters apparently enjoy greater performative latitude: Van Ronk's and Dylan's creativity merits less praise than Baez's version, which better empowers the persona.

At the same time, Rings's anecdote offers a valuable snapshot of how some members of Gen Z receive and assess Dylan's work, and perhaps older popular music more broadly, in tertiary education. It underscores a potential obstacle to contemporary engagement with Dylan: not musical difficulty or historical distance, but a shift in the criteria by which sincerity, legitimacy, and emotional truth are evaluated. To Rings's credit, he does not leave these objections unanswered. Rather, he responds to his students' concerns, articulating how Dylan's performance can still be understood as disclosing a kind of musical or expressive truth without collapsing questions of empathy into those of identity:

> You have to believe, that is, in a fiction. Joan Baez is not a "rake and a ramblin' boy." Bob Dylan is not a woman ruined by sexual exploitation and violence. But in the moment of aesthetic encounter, the coordinates and conditions of belief shift. We regularly speak of a "suspension of disbelief" when discussing theater, opera, or film. Is song that different? … We are very used to suspending disbelief when hearing a singer deliver a story they never could have lived. … We are never really in doubt that

> we are hearing Bob Dylan or Joan Baez sing, not the actual characters they impersonate. But their singing may carry a ring of truth. Or—to borrow another felicitous musical metaphor—their sounds may strike a chord in us. What resonates is a plausible *emotional* truth. (82–83)

The episode ultimately enriches the book, not only by foregrounding a live pedagogical challenge, but by modeling how such challenges might be addressed with patience, clarity, and critical generosity.

Rings draws on a rich and wide-ranging body of secondary literature. He lifts terminologies, concepts, and analytical frames from a host of fields and puts them to edifying use. He convincingly mobilizes thinkers such as Pierre Bourdieu (20), with sociological theory brought into dialogue with Dylan's music and art. Rings draws on musical philosophy as well, making good use of Brian Kane (42), including a vernacular adaptation of Kane's model for thinking about the voice. Roland Barthes appears (154), as does Adriana Cavarero (54), Harold Bloom (60), and more expected poststructuralist touchstones (53). Elsewhere, there are passing references to Schenkerian theory and Bach (343), signaling both depth and catholicity of musical knowledge without allowing such frameworks to divert the analysis. Footnotes are a treasure trove: Rings uses them for scholarly housekeeping but also as spaces for illuminating asides, such as his discussion of the preservation of Dylan's recorded legacy in lossless formats (327n20).

More generally, despite the breadth of his reading, Rings is modest about the limits of his expertise. He is careful not to overclaim familiarity with figures such as Deleuze (16), even while making deft and judicious use of Deleuzian ideas where helpful. Rings is equally careful in how he handles analogy and influence. His linkage of Dylan to Schoenberg (98–99), for example, is framed explicitly as an illuminating analogy rather than as a claim of direct lineage or inheritance:

> For, some of [Dylan's] vocal delivery bears more than a passing resemblance to [Schoenberg's] *Sprechstimme*, which literally means "speech song." … In ["Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again" and "Million Dollar Bash"], Dylan's voice swoops up … only to fall away again just as quickly—a parabolic lunge. These lunges are reminiscent of … *Sprechstimme* both in their contour and in their loose tethering to the music's underlying pitch structure. [Yet we] shouldn't push the comparison to *Sprechstimme* too hard. Delightful as it is to hear Dylan himself make

> the comparison in [*Theme Time Radio Hour*], there is no obvious lineage from Schoenberg to him, nor should we rush to create one, in a search for high-cultural prestige.

This intellectual restraint—knowing when and how much to draw from theory—adds considerably to the book's credibility and critical poise.

This ability to use theory in an accessible manner speaks to another strength of the book: Rings has a literary sensibility. Despite dealing with dense material, the prose is remarkably readable and full of evocative turns of phrase. He writes with a strong sense of place, helping us see and feel the environments in which Dylan worked. Take, for example, his scene-setting at the start of the book:

> We begin with a sound. It is not a musical sound per se, but it is rhythmic: the tapping of typewriter hammers against paper. It is a late-summer evening in 1962, and the tap–tap–tap emerges from a room above the Gaslight Café in Greenwich Village. Bob Dylan is at the machine, hunting and pecking. (1-2)

And on the following page:

> Let's tune our ears, then, back to that room above the Gaslight. What do we hear? A clacking typewriter and a conversation. But if we listen closer, might we also hear a faint music? To do so, we have to listen past the "music" of the typewriter, and indeed past all of the other sounds vibrating in the room's stuffy, late-summer air.

Rings also deploys figurative language—

> "topping out in a knot of tension" (79)
> "pitches are not aspirated but bored into" (79)
> "Dylan offers two quick lines […] that have the effect of a pitcher winding up" (84)
> "It is matter of fact, moving along with the meter like a train passenger commenting on the scenes passing by through the window" (96)
> "It accepts the generic resetting from folk to country like a skin graft." (272)

—that renders musical processes vivid and tactile. At times he is also funny, as in his detailed explanation of the well-behaved melodic foundations of "Make You Feel My Love," (127) capped with the dry observation that "No wonder many Dylan fans don't like the song." He uses anecdotes judiciously, inviting the reader to pause over their implications, as with the Paxton anecdote that opens the book (p. 1):

> After commenting on the text's "wild imagery," Paxton asks, "Are you gonna, you know, put music to it?"
>
> > He said, "Well, you think I should?" And I said "*Yeah*. I mean, 'cause otherwise it's just something to go in some literary quarterly or something, but this way, you know, you'll have a song out of it." So the next night . . . he got up [at the Gaslight] and he sang this new song called "It's a Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall."

Rings takes this moment as a productive jumping off point for the book:

> The asymmetry between words and music in Paxton's anecdote thus passes almost without notice. But we will begin by pausing over it, by making audible that which the anecdote mutes. For this is a book about Dylan's sounds. We cannot fully understand the origin of "Hard Rain," or indeed much else about Dylan, without taking the full measure of those sounds.

The ease by which attention to words supersedes discussion of sound speaks to the perennial difficulties in studying Dylan and popular music more generally. With the former, authoritative scores for full-band material do not exist; while some acoustic material is well-served by official publications, piano-vocal-guitar reductions are not always reliable. Engaging precisely with what Dylan and his musicians are playing often requires highly developed aural skills, sometimes supplemented by emerging technologies such as pitch-isolation tools and MIDI extraction. Rings himself has used spectrographic analysis before for another (excellent) publication analyzing "It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)."[3] These technologies remain

[3] Steven Rings, 'A Foreign Sound to Your Ear: Bob Dylan Performs "It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)," 1964–2009', *Music Theory Online*, vol 19, no. 4, 2013, pp. 1–39.

imperfect but are improving, and they might boost access for those less versed in musicological analyses. Rings's work offers ideal standards to strive for in this context.

That Rings is able to combine lyrical analysis with staff notation, musical excerpts, and visual aids at all (even from such marginalized material as *Renaldo and Clara*) is a significant achievement. It should serve as a model not only for Dylan studies but for audiovisual scholarship more broadly.

What Did You Hear? is a compelling, generous, and methodologically rigorous book. It demonstrates, again and again, that Dylan's work not only survives close musical scrutiny but actively rewards it. By placing sound at the center of analysis—without neglecting lyrics, history, or culture—Rings offers an exciting model for ways Dylan scholarship might continue to expand. It is fascinating, in this light, to hear Rings observe in chapter nine that "Hard Rain" is "a fusion of influences drawn from diverse literary and musical traditions, spanning centuries and continents, Old World and New, high and low" (240). The formulation serves not only as a succinct characterization of Dylan's song, but also, inadvertently, as an apt summation of Rings's own achievement in crafting this superlative book. Not only does it make Dylan's work more attractive to musicologists, but it also speaks across disciplinary boundaries, inviting scholars and listeners alike to hear familiar material anew. *What Did You Hear?* functions as a major contribution to Dylan scholarship and a persuasive proof of concept: that careful, technically informed listening can deepen, rather than diminish, the richness of his music.

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Review by Alessandro Carrera, University of Houston

A few years ago, Francesco Donadio, a music journalist, radio programmer, and author of four books on David Bowie, embarked on an investigation into the myths surrounding Bob Dylan's first trip to Italy. As anyone familiar with Dylan's biography knows, he visited Rome for a few days in January 1963, as part of a detour during his first trip to England. But what exactly was he doing there? Was he searching for Suze Rotolo, who was then studying at the University for Foreigners in Perugia, a town not far from Rome? Or was he simply drawn to the idea of experiencing Rome, a city that would leave an indelible mark on him?

Donadio relies heavily on Dylan's biographies and Suze Rotolo's autobiography *A Freewheelin' Time: A Memoir of Greenwich Village in the Sixties* (Crown, 2009), but he also enriches Rotolo's narrative with details about the cultural milieu she encountered in Perugia. He explores the possibility that Suze may have been aware of Folkstudio, the venue in Rome where Dylan had his first encounter with an Italian audience (not to be confused with his actual Italian tour, which took place much later, in 1984).

In the early chapters of his book, Donadio leaves no rolling stone unturned—pardon the oxymoron—as he weaves a "parallel lives" narrative of Bob and Suze. Many paragraphs include phrases like "one could imagine that … ," which, though evocative, might seem excessive, given the tight chronology of the events. Suze arrived in Perugia in July 1962, while Dylan flew from New York to London in mid-December 1962, likely accompanied by his manager, Albert Grossman. Donadio challenges the notion that Grossman was waiting for Dylan at Heathrow, alongside Odetta, who in fact was scheduled to perform in New York until the end of the year. However, Odetta was expected to be in Italy in early January 1963, for television appearances and concerts with bassist Bill Lee. So, Albert, Odetta, Bill, and Bob were all in Italy in the first days of January 1963.

But Suze was no longer in Perugia. After the Cuban Missile Crisis, she felt homesick and decided to return to New York, arriving on December 18, just as Dylan was departing for London. Their reunion would come later, and the end of their relationship was still far off. By that time, however, in Perugia, Suze had already met a quieter, more dependable man, Enzo Bartoccioli, whom she would later marry. Enzo, at the time a factory worker at Baci Perugina, would later become a film editor for the United Nations. Dylan, in turn, would vent his

frustration with a bitter and—in my opinion—very bad poem about Enzo, which appears in *Writings and Drawings* (1973).

Turning to the chronology once again, Donadio notes that Dylan flew from London Heathrow to Fiumicino, Rome's airport, on January 5, 1963. According to rumors, he and Grossman went to Folkstudio that very night, located at Via Garibaldi 58 in the historic, working-class Trastevere neighborhood. Folkstudio had been created by Harold Bradley Jr (1929–2021), an African American expatriate, former football player, and leader of a gospel group, and by producer Giancarlo Cesaroni (1933–1998), with the help of their wives, Hannelore and Noemi. Before its move to a larger space in 1967, the original Folkstudio was tiny—no more than 50 or 60 people could fit inside. It was, however, the only folk music hub in Italy at the time, a meeting place for English and American students, as well as the new generation of Italian *cantautori* (singer-songwriters).

The mystique surrounding Folkstudio has always been fueled by the persistent rumor that "Bob Dylan played here." For example, in 2012 Francesco De Gregori, one of Italy's most talented *cantautori*, who made his debut at Folkstudio, released *Amore e Furto* , a collection of Dylan covers in Italian, whose title translates *"Love and Theft."* His lifelong obsession with Dylan began on Via Garibaldi 58.

Donadio lists seven people who confirm that Dylan performed at Folkstudio, including Harold Bradley Jr., whom he interviewed. Bradley recalled that Dylan played two songs for a small audience of 15 people, but the performance left little impression. Bradley himself described Dylan as tipsy and a bit obnoxious, seemingly more interested in flirting with Hannelore and Noemi than performing. In the end, Bradley suggested to Grossman and Dylan that they find somewhere else to spend the night. Though it wasn't one of Dylan's finer moments, the encounter evolved into an urban legend. Years later, it wasn't difficult to find dozens of people who would claim to have been present at the performance (as with Dylan's early concerts in New York City).

Another urban legend, which Donadio investigated in Perugia, tells of Dylan supposedly hiring a cab that night to travel to Perugia, only to find out that Suze was no longer there. A cousin of Enzo Bartoccioli even confirmed that "two American bums" (presumably Bob and Albert) arrived at the boarding house where Suze had been staying and then knocked at Bartoccioli's house in the middle of the night, to be met by Enzo's incredulous mother. The Italian word *straccioni* means that they were poorly dressed, which is strange if one thinks that Albert Grossman used to be more formally dressed than the folk music crowd, but it is likely that Dylan's usually unkempt appearance left a more lasting impression. It's unclear how these

"bums" had gotten Enzo's address, as it's unlikely anyone at the boarding house would have given it to them. Donadio attempted to interview Enzo Bartoccioli in New York, but Mr. Bartoccioli declined, stating that he had nothing to add to what his wife, who died in 2011, had already written in her memoir.

What else was left for Dylan to do in Rome? Perhaps visit the Colosseum, which made a strong impression on him, as he later mentioned in interviews and in the song "When I Paint My Masterpiece." He might have also attended Odetta's concerts at the Teatro Parioli on January 8 and 9, and he sent a postcard to "Sue Rotolo c/o Bob Dylan, 161 West 4th Street, New York City, NY, USA," stating: "If I don't open my mouth in this town, everybody thinks I'm Italian (unbelievable but true, I swear)." Dylan also announced that he was heading to Turin (possibly to follow Odetta for another television appearance at the Rai studios?). It didn't happen. By January 10, Bob, Albert, Odetta, and Bill were back in London. Dylan attended Odetta's concert at the Prince Charles Theatre, solidified his friendship with Martin Carthy, appeared on an album by Dick Fariña and Eric Von Schmidt, and, of course, completed "Girl from the North Country" and "Boots of Spanish Leather."

But Donadio doesn't stop there. The last forty pages of his captivating book narrate Bob and Suze's reunion, the cover of *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, tensions with Carla Rotolo, the "parasite sister" in "Ballad in Plain D" (a song Dylan later regretted recording), actually a skilled folk music expert (she was assistant to Alan Lomax) who harshly disapproved of Suze's involvement with that Jewish Minnesotan drifter (their mother disapproved too). And then the love story came to an end, leaving a rift between the two sisters.

Donadio uncovers lesser-known details. Many readers will be surprised to learn that in later years Suze became almost estranged from her family, who felt she had become aloof and pretentious. Even more surprising is the revelation that when Carla Rotolo, now living in Italy, died unexpectedly in 2014, Enzo Bartoccioli traveled to her home in Sardinia to clear out her belongings. There, he discovered that Carla had obsessively kept all the newspaper clippings she had found about Dylan. The most precious item in her archive was her dedicated copy of *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*. Donadio reproduces the back cover with an inscription that reads: "To my Carla-law, Ro la sis [presumably 'To Carla Rotolo, my sister-in-law'], with luck and don [sic] forget to duck. Me, Bob." And in smaller letters: "—me, Susie, too, also."

I had the pleasure of meeting Susan Rotolo at the New York University "Casa Italiana" in 1997 or 1998, during an exhibition of her artwork. She struck me as a joyful person who didn't appear to consider herself a star. One of the small pieces on display—everything she exhibited was small, she was a miniaturist—was a tiny version of the *Freewheelin'* cover,

shrunk down to the size of a cigarette pack and placed in a minuscule display case. I remember the caption saying, “It was not all sex, drugs, and rock and roll. We were doing serious things back then.”

Bob Dylan. 3Arena, Dublin, Ireland, 25 Nov. 2025.

Review by Erin C. Callahan, San Jacinto College

In the fall of 2021, Bob Dylan ended his Covid-19 pandemic touring hiatus and began the Rough and Rowdy Ways World Wide Tour with a setlist comprised of songs from his 2020 album, *Rough and Rowdy Ways*. Early tour posters advertised a run from 2021-2024, which was an enigma even for Dylan. Unlike the Never Ending Tour, this tour had an end date. Of course, Dylanworld had to speculate: would Dylan stop touring once the Rough and Rowdy Ways World Wide Tour ended? What would come next? In 2024, I attended the final show of the spring tour in Austin, Texas, anxious that it might be the final Dylan show ever. It wasn't and, when he announced fall 2024 dates, I arranged to meet friends in Paris for two shows. Then, he announced spring 2025 shows and, after that, fall 2025 dates. This thrilled Dylan fans. Especially in the late stages of Dylan's career, we are grateful for everything he gives us.

Dylan has a special affection for Ireland. His songs are peppered with references to Irish literature, music, and mythology. He's drawn inspiration from Irish folk songs, contemporaries like the Clancy Brothers, and poets like William Butler Yeats. I'm convinced there's a clear allusion to James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* in "Murder Most Foul," but that's for another essay. Ultimately, I decided to go to the final show of the Fall 2025 European leg of the Rough and Rowdy Ways World Tour in Dublin when I read the field reports from the shows—new arrangements, encores, covers, and guitar on "Goodbye Jimmy Reed." I wasn't convinced that it would be Dylan's final show, despite the clamor in the Dylan fan community. Even so, I couldn't resist seeing Dylan in Ireland for my fifteenth Rough and Rowdy Ways show. I secured a ticket and booked my flights. Right after I decided to go, Dylan announced the Spring 2026 tour dates. More good news.

One of the most remarkable aspects of being part of this Dylan community is that every city he plays becomes a kibbutz, especially in the city center and the area surrounding the venue. When I boarded the plane from Newark to Dublin, I recognized someone from one of the online Dylan groups. Waiting in line to clear immigration, I saw more people I knew and met up with my good friend and his family at baggage claim. Later, I met another dear friend and his partner in St. Stephen's Green. Over the next day and half, nearly everywhere I went, I saw someone I knew from Dylanworld. At Christ's Church, Trinity College, The Book of Kells, or even at a café, I recognized people who were in town for the show.

Before the concert, we convened at two meet ups to share our predictions and meet other folks in the Dylan community. Two friends agreed that Dylan wouldn't play an encore. To be contrarian, I said he would. After the meet-up, we hurried over to the 3Arena, a 9,300-seat indoor amphitheater on the banks of the River Liffey. The arena lacked the charm of the classic theaters or venues in which Dylan has played Rough and Rowdy Ways shows, but I had heard the acoustics were good from some of the folks at the meet-up, so it promised to be a fantastic concert.

In this era of Dylan playing a static or stable setlist, those of us who attend multiple performances focus on molecular alterations: a different lyric, a change in phrasing, or an addition, omission, or variation in song order. In this way a setlist that looks the same online or in writing doesn't quite tell the story of the performance. "Our songs are alive in the land of the living," Dylan says at the end of his Nobel lecture, "But songs are unlike literature. They're meant to be sung, not read … I hope some of you get the chance to listen to these lyrics the way they were intended to be heard: in concert or on a record or however people are listening to songs these days."[1] Being in the audience at a Dylan show provides the opportunity to hear the songs the way Dylan wants to play them on any given night. In this setlist, the grouping of songs struck me as a plea, whether from one lover to another or as an artist to his audience. What is clear is Dylan's commitment to this audience on this evening, from the first to final note.

As an opener, "I'll Be Your Baby Tonight" sets the tone. From the first lines, Dylan's voice fills the arena with a profound spirit, as if he's giving himself over to the audience and imploring us to join him. Rather than Dylan offering himself to a lover for an evening, here, he offers himself to the audience. His playful delivery including "ha!" before the final "I'll be your baby tonight" lets the audience know that this show is going to be fun. Tony Garnier's bass and Anton Fig's drums drive the momentum of the song, meeting Dylan's playful energy.

Once Dylan invites the audience to share the evening with him, he establishes clear boundaries with the second song of the evening. "It Ain't Me, Babe," final track on 1964's *Another Side of Bob Dylan,* is another throwback to Dylan's early career. In this version, the instrumental introduction stretches for nearly two-and-a-half minutes, about a minute shorter than the entire album version. There's also an extended interlude between verses. Dylan's delivery throughout, but especially on lines like, "I'll only let you down," maintains the

[1]Dylan, Bob. "Nobel Lecture." 5 June 2017.
https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2016/dylan/lecture/ 1 December 2025.

playfulness of "I'll Be Your Baby Tonight." Through Dylan's voice and the arrangement, he and the band suggest that bringing expectations to this show or to Dylan's work more broadly will end in disappointment. However, if you can meet Dylan where he is and accept what he is willing to give, you'll have an enjoyable experience. When he sings the chorus, Dylan's voice sounds joyful, as if relieved to be so clear and candid. The music of the arrangement and the band's accompaniment strengthen this feeling.

After inviting us to join him and abandon our expectations, Dylan begins to define himself as an artist. The first song Dylan sings from the *Rough and Rowdy Ways* album, "I Contain Multitudes," collapses time while also meditating on mortality and creation. I'm always moved by how delicate this song sounds, especially after "It Ain't Me, Babe," but this arrangement also has backbone through Anton Fig's percussion and Dylan's piano. The sonics balance the complexity of the figure described through the lyrics. If Dylan was telling us who he's not in "It Ain't Me Babe," here, he tells us who he is—the refracted fragments of a kaleidoscopic identity. Even in the heavier moments, when the cadence of the music darkens and he threatens to show "only the hateful parts," a softness comes through in his phrasing. Bob Britt's guitar, especially at the bridge, beautifully punctuates the interplay of light and darkness. The audience is fully engaged, bopping their heads with the rhythm.

"False Prophet," always a rocker with a bit of a dark edge, shifts the mood, but develops the central theme of the setlist. Taken from Billy "The Kid" Emerson's "If Lovin' Is Believin'," the opening guitar riff leads us into this song with a swagger. In this performance, however, Dylan's voice doesn't have the same bravado as in other shows on the Rough and Rowdy Ways Tour, most memorably for me in Memphis in 2024. Here, his delivery of "You girls mean business / I do too" and "I'm the last of the best / You can bury the rest" come off as facts rather than boasts, especially as he elongates the vowel in the word "do." It is sung through the perspective of an artist with a clear sense of his worth, regardless of outside expectations or labels placed on him. The closing lines of the first verse have always played as a companion to the final lines in "Wicked Messenger": "And he was told but these few words which opened up his heart / If ye can't bring good news don't bring any." In "False Prophet," the singer suggests that he attempted to bring good news, but he was overwhelmed by the response. Dylan sings, "I know how it happened / I saw it begin / I opened my heart to the world / And the world came in." When coupled with the double negative "ain't no" before "false prophet," these lyrics and Dylan's fire and brimstone delivery suggest discord between art and its reception.

Dylan presses on with this theme, exploring art and its reception through the perspective of the artist. "When I Paint My Masterpiece" is a fun interlude between the weight of "False Prophet" and "Black Rider." Dylan first introduced the current arrangement, to the tune of Irving Berlin's "Puttin' on the Ritz" or "Istanbul (Not Constantinople)" by the Four Lads, in March 2024. The recycling of the tune from Berlin to Dylan parallels the cycle of Byzantium to Constantinople to Istanbul, which is reinforced by the repetition of the melody throughout the song. Dylan's staccato delivery punctuates each line to emphasize his commitment to pursuing artistic greatness. His piano playing on this song is a standout and my favorite of the show. In a setlist built on late-career meditations on mortality and artistic creation, Dylan remains hopeful for a future when he will have created his elusive masterpiece. It suggests that at this stage in his career, he feels he hasn't fully realized his artistic potential.

Dylan's phrasing on "Black Rider" in the Dublin performance is softer than others I've seen. Even so, this performance isn't as moving as the first night in Paris in October 2024, which brought me to tears. Bob Britt's guitar in Dublin mirrors the echo effect of Dylan's voice to heighten the mystical atmosphere of the song. It also increases the audience's sympathy for the singer. When he holds the vowels, elongating them, in the line, "I'll forget to be kind," it foreshadows the coming violence as the tension in the song increases. Dylan ultimately breaks the tension and the cycle of violence, vowing to sing a song for the black rider on "some enchanted evening" and ending the song with a short musical coda.

The new arrangement of "My Own Version of You," which Dylan debuted on this tour, is a rhythm-heavy swinger that focuses on identity construction and the persistence of self-creation. Dylan doesn't sing as much as he talks through the lyrics, taking fragments from art, culture, and history to create a carnivalesque figure. One of the fragments is Leon Russell, whom Dylan vows to play piano like. This reference creates a throughline from the two songs in the set produced by Russell—"When I Paint My Masterpiece" and "Watching the River Flow"—to "My Own Version of You," in which Russell is esteemed for his musical genius. The music rises and crashes behind Dylan's narration, signifying a storm to produce the lightning necessary to awaken the creature. Bob Britt's solo takes over with a sinister riff bolstered by Tony Garnier's bass line. This arrangement plays with the Prometheus myth warning of the dangers of assuming godlike creative power. The band slows to bring the song to a gradual end.

The gentle conclusion of "My Own Version of You" provides a pathway for Dylan to take us back to the 1960s and Nashville with the next song in the set, "To Be Alone with You," the final track on *Nashville Skyline.* The song has been fairly standard on the Rough and Rowdy

Ways Tour since 2021, but this version features more of a swing than previous arrangements. Dylan's vocal comes in almost like a whisper and steadily grows in confidence and volume. The shift in his phrasing and tone from "My Own Version of You" is another example of Dylan's expertise as a vocalist. On this song in particular, his voice sounds great. It's clear and any debate about whether he's singing "hound" or "pound" in the line, "I'll hound you to death," can be settled. It's definitely "hound." Dylan's baby grand is the lead instrument on this song, supported by Anton Fig's drumming and Bob Britt's guitar playing. During the jam session in the middle of the song, the audience was grooving along, many on their feet dancing. Even the security were bopping their heads and clapping with the band—the first time I'd ever seen security invested in a Dylan show.

The crowd is already up and enthusiastic after "To Be Alone with You" so when Bob Britt plays a slick blues intro riff to "Crossing the Rubicon," we're rapt. That riff changes the energy in the room and in Dylan's vocal. He modulates his phrasing as any great blues player would. And, when he takes the lead on baby grand, playing honky tonk trills, the crowd erupts. "Crossing the Rubicon" is a highlight of the evening leading into the high-energy arrangement of "Desolation Row." The version of "Desolation Row" is the same one Dylan and his band debuted during the Outlaw Music Festival tour in the summer of 2024. The momentum of this arrangement drives forward with an urgency that meets the uncertainty of our current political climate. The speed of it thrusts the listener from one lyric to the next before they have time to process any of it.

The set continues with a change in tempo and tone with "Key West (Philosopher Pirate)." This song has always seemed like a reflection on innocence and aging. It positions Key West as an ethereal place where youth, mortality, and immortality converge into one reality analogous to home. As Dylan sings of lost sanity, of finding immortality, and of a pre-adolescent wedding, we hear echoes of "today, tomorrow, and yesterday too." This stripped-down performance makes Dylan's vocal the primary focus, signaling the solitary experience of aging and dying. Again, the audience listens to Dylan attentively, holding most cheers until the end.

"Watching the River Flow" provides another bridge to Dylan's early career. As noted earlier, Leon Russell produced the original track in the same session Dylan recorded "When I Paint My Masterpiece," during a fallow period. The song ironically depicts Dylan as a singer who has lost his voice or feels uninspired, questioning what's the matter with him. He resolves to patiently sit and "watch the river flow" until he finds his voice. In this setlist, it seems like an antecedent for "Mother of Muses" in which Dylan pleads for divine inspiration.

This performance brought the audience back to its feet, dancing and clapping their hands to the extended instrumental introduction.

The sequence of "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue," "I've Made Up My Mind to Give Myself to You," and "Mother of Muses" plays off each other and seems to develop that singular idea—an artist's statement—with a bit more focus. More than an artist's statement, these three songs serve as a history lesson. "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue" was Dylan's farewell song to the folk community, most notably in his Newport 1965 set. Dylan's vocal in this performance in Dublin gives me chills. His sincerity makes this lament about moving on more impactful while his harmonica lifts the song to another level, bleeding past, present, and future in a single sound.

Leaving the folk community liberated Dylan from representing a particular movement, point of view, or agenda that might limit his artistic expression. Doing so, he committed to his artistic development and, arguably, to his audience. In "I've Made Up My Mind to Give Myself to You," Dylan affirms that commitment. His vocal on this song is always delicate, ethereal. In this performance, he combines melodic singing with sing-song speaking through this lovely waltz led by Bob Britt's guitar. Completing this triad within a setlist that seems to focus on Dylan's relationship to his art, "Mother of Muses" becomes a meditation on his creative process. The lyrics appeal to the muses to help him fulfill his commitment to a life of artistic creation. He implores the mother of muses, "sing to me" to inspire his heart and mind, and "Show me your wisdom, tell me my fate / Put me upright, make me walk straight / Forge my identity from the inside out." Then, linking this song to "Watching the River Flow," he asks the mother of muses, "Take me to the river, release your charms." I always feel sad at the end of "Mother of Muses." I love the song and look forward to hearing it, but I also know that it sits near the end of the setlist and that the show is almost over. All three songs center on movement—moving on, traveling from place to place, or traveling home.

Before "Goodbye Jimmy Reed," Dylan introduces the band and says, "These aren't easy songs to play, but this band is playing pretty good. Don't you think?" Some version of this introduction has been standard for most of the Rough and Rowdy Ways Tour, but it always makes me laugh. Perhaps it's Dylan's acknowledgement of the challenges of working with him and his songs. At most shows, Dylan introduces Tony Garnier last to allow for the audience's extended applause. At this show, he introduces him second, after Doug Lancio. The band then bursts into the penultimate song of the set with an opening lick that brings everyone to their feet. This arrangement has more swing than the album version and some of the live arrangements I've heard since 2021. In this performance, Dylan changes the lyrics in the verse,

"I'll break open your grapes and suck out the juice / I need you like my head needs a noose." He replaces "I need you like my head needs a noose" with "but what's the use?" This slight alteration changes the tenor of the lyric from rejection to resignation. This song is a companion to "False Prophet" in tone, tempo, and energy. Both songs marry religious imagery with musical history, suggesting transcendence or salvation through both.

"Every Grain of Sand," perhaps Dylan's most profound meditation on redemption and salvation, has been the closer for most of the Rough and Rowdy Ways shows since the tour began in 2021. It's a confession of human frailty in which Dylan's vocal performance is balanced, hovering between vulnerability and self-confidence as the speaker in the song chronicles and assumes responsibility for his mistakes. The melody is simple and repetitive with Dylan soloing on piano, then on harmonica to end the song. Just as he did on "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue," he leaves the audience with a sound that connects performances across time and space.

As Dylan and his band play the final notes of "Every Grain of Sand," the crowd notices that the musicians aren't leaving the stage. What happens next is transformative. For the second time ever, Dylan plays "A Rainy Night in Soho." The first time he played it was the opening performance of the Outlaw tour in Phoenix last May. This night in Dublin, arguably as a tribute to the late Shane MacGowan, the song also becomes a love letter to the city and to the Irish people. The crowd erupts as they recognize the distinctive, descending opening melody. Then, Dylan sings. His vocal is so tender and loving, all around the audience is in tears. In an emotional swell, Dylan stands up at the piano and the audience stands with him as if tapped into the same energy source. In that moment, the venue becomes something more—more intimate, more communal—and sings along. Dylan's frequent changes in arrangement and phrasing typically make a sing-along like this one nearly impossible. On this night and in this performance, however, Dylan gives the audience that experience. We sing with him and with each other. It's magical.

I'm always surprised by and grateful for Bob Dylan's generosity. At 84, he continues to create art through his live performances. Every show is its own experience in its energy, phrasing, arrangements, and sometimes in the surprise of an encore. Through his art, music, and performance, he has also created this community so full of love for Dylan and for each other that everything else seems to fade. The exchange of ideas and the shared experiences is sustaining.

This concert on this night in Dublin was a manifestation of Dylan's love for Ireland and the Irish. The energy and focus of this performance were different than anything I've witnessed at other shows. And as the audience gathered on the street outside to join an impromptu sing-along, I realized that the Irish are as eager as ever to reciprocate.

Robert Reginio. Bob Dylan Outside the Law: The Poetics of John Wesley Harding, Palgrave Macmillan, 2025, 281 pp.

Review by Nicholas Birns, New York University

Robert Reginio offers a reading of Dylan's *John Wesley Harding* (1967) that is capacious, provocative, and helps us recognize the significant place of the album, or, as Reginio calls it, the "song-series" (5) in Dylan's career and oeuvre. Reginio's book at once complements and contrasts with the reading of the album offered by Louis Renza in the final chapter of his book *Dylan's Autobiographical Vocation* (2017). Both share a theoretical awareness, prodigious learning, and a profound grasp of the many possible meanings of Dylan's lyrics. Renza is such a good literary critic that some of his treatment of the album is more pertinent to the question of literary criticism as such than as commentary on Dylan. Reginio, on the other hand, though an ingenious and resourceful reader, always keeps his focus on Dylan. His book will be of interest to admirers of the album who might have some interest in literary criticism, but who are not themselves literary critics.

Parable Versus Allegory

Both Renza and Reginio read the words of the album's songs as not self-sufficient, but pointing to other meanings, as evinced in long-attested literary forms. Whereas Renza emphasizes allegory, Reginio foregrounds parable. Reginio defines the parables as texts "promising legible analogy but torqued into labyrinthine textual paradoxes" (19). But he also suggests that whereas what allegory explains through something else is intrinsically meaningful, a parable's ability to explain something through something else is a means to an end. This might seem to be only a slight difference. Both allegory and parable, after all, read one thing in terms of something else. Reginio's focus on parable, though, emerges as superior to Renza's on allegory in several ways. Allegories often are out to convey a dogma or truth, whereas parables are out to convey a meaning. An allegory calls out for a supplementary reading precisely because its overt terms are unsatisfying. A parable, whether from the New Testament or Kafka, as both Regino and Dylan himself have adduced, can be satisfying even to a reader unaware or uninterested in any further meaning. Simpler and more supple than the more ostentatious and elaborate allegory, parables can do more with less and avoid one overall conceptual frame. Indeed, Reginio says that the album uses allegorical techniques, but that

these undo any overall attempt at allegory. The album's parables are a "response" to outward events that sculpt an explication or traceable framing of them. *John Wesley Harding*'s canny and maneuverable use of parables to extract meaning from outward circumstances places the album in the context of "wisdom literature" (67). Reginio, however, sees *John Wesley Harding* as taking an "ironic stance" (122) towards a straightforward parabolic mode. "All Along the Watchtower" and "I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine," for instance, are lyrical and laden with Biblical overtones. But there is no way to easily understand what they mean. This indicates for Reginio that there are many motives and generic styles operating in Dylan's work. What would be for Woody Guthrie a "song of protest" (17) is for Dylan "weighted with existential significance." (17)

Reginio's introductory Chapter 1, "Before the Flood," percipiently recognizes how this overdetermination of motive and meaning in Dylan's songs can be fruitfully addressed by the tools of poststructuralist theory. The impossibility of either escaping the political manifestation of social meaning or expressing a determinate truth outside the mesh of language, necessarily unfolds in the complicated unfolding of Dylan's lyrics.

Reginio demonstrates this particularly in "I Dreamed I Saw Saint Augustine," which "wavers between solitary utterance and public pronouncement" (78). Roland Barthes read Balzac's "Sarrasine" with no more ardor or attention than Reginio reads these songs. The mixture of close reading with public, archival, and social criticism is a heady one, and Reginio's reader will feel the full arsenal of possible approaches to the album has been deployed. Reginio's knowledge of modernist literature and 20th century history and politics is wide-ranging and enriches his commentary on the album. Reginio's archival explorations are particularly rewarding and subtle. He describes how the *Poughkeepsie Journal*, which Dylan, living in the Catskills, would conceivably have read, reported on the Newark riots of the 1960s. That Reginio can pivot between reading Dylan in the light of Jacques Derrida, Giorgio Agamben, and Julia Kristeva while doing this sort of hyper-minute reconstructive archival work, imagining Dylan reading a Hudson Valley newspaper covering riots in New Jersey, is testimony to his breadth as a critic. Theory and practice, speculation and hyperlocal attention, are brilliantly juxtaposed. Reginio's citation of Derrida's compelling 1992 essay "Force of Law" is especially fruitful in that the figure of the outlaw and the complicated relation of violence and justice are at the forefront of the album's narrative and ethical weave, and its relation to the tumult of the 1960s as exemplified by the Newark riots.

Theory and Politics

Yet is it gauche of me to wish that Reginio ushered Derrida off the stage a bit earlier? To feel that Derrida is invoked so often as to obtrude on the reader? Nobody believes more than I do in the total relevance of Derrida to Dylan's songs and to literature in general. And, as compared to Renza (also deeply grounded in poststructuralism), Reginio's explorations into "generative aporia" (13) end up saying, appropriately, more about Dylan than they do about theory as such. But if half of the references to Derrida had been eliminated, the book would, I think, seem crisper and more alert. In a broader sense, sometimes one wishes that when Reginio adduces 20th century European thinkers and poets as elucidators of Dylan, he would make a connection between them and Dylan as people. For instance, Reginio links Paul Celan to Dylan in that they both share an attunement to "the unreconciled voices of a traumatic past" (253). But comparing the two artists as Jews, as lyricists, as gnomic truthtellers might have fleshed this argument out a bit more. Analogously, Dylan and Derrida might—despite the very different circumstances of their upbringing—be connected by their shared Jewishness, their very offbeat ways of registering that identity. So more concrete links to personages such as Celan and Derrida would have been welcome. On the other hand, it is good that Reginio is willing to operate in the reaches of abstraction and speculation that can grapple with the ultimate meanings of the songs.

Like Renza, Reginio does read the album in moral and ethical terms, but unlike Renza he does not get into a political reading. In contrasting *John Wesley Harding* to the contemporaneous Basement Tapes, Reginio sees the Basement Tapes as absorbing all the explicit political references to the Vietnam War and the racial tensions of the era, with *John Wesley Harding* shucking off any immediate politics in favor of a broader, more essential, more theoretical politics of violence, the outsider, and justice. Reginio is not trying to say the album is not political. He distinguishes his reading of the album's relation to its 1960s milieu against one of "ahistorical nostalgia" (8). Instead, Reginio appreciates *John Wesley Harding* as an album that is "tensile, shifting and often revisionary" (9). Reginio also reads Dylan's 1992 album *Good As I Been To You* as a counterstatement of nostalgia for the 1960s. This anti-Sixties nostalgia reading intends to alter our understanding of *John Wesley Harding*, as at once an extraction from and counterstatement of the Basement Tapes. It turns the album away from any association with a "seemingly directionless" violence against the system and towards a "colloquy" (9) between insider and outsider that would be at ease "navigating" (9) around violence rather than embracing it. Reginio also rebukes the historian and Dylanologist Sean

Wilentz for assuming that the injustice decried in the album is the sort that can be squarely remedied by "incremental reform" (199) and not by identifying anything as more systemic. Reginio sees Wilentz's literal focus on determinate political events as limiting the album's fundamentally broader critique of injustice and violence.

Politics and Spirituality

Reginio, though, tends to see violence here as mainly revolutionary violence from the Left, even as, both before and after the 1960s, a greater violence, both literal and symbolic, came from the Right. But for Dylan, the left-wing violence seemed to unravel the "peace and love" consensus of the left at the time in a way that was more disturbing to those who saw themselves as movement people. In this light, the nature of Dylan's migration to this folky, rootsy material bears a second glance. Dylan's country-roots persona in *John Wesley Harding* is inevitably epigenous and ersatz. In this, he is in the tradition of folk music as both inherited and transcended. William Hogeland points out that the Almanac Singers, colleagues and collaborators of Woody Guthrie, employed fake Southern accents and concocted biographies of hard travel" (Hogeland 57). Dylan, though at this in his early career flirting with an exhibition of the genuine, is more focused on evoking the style and the feeling of the genuine without necessarily calling on it as an organic source. Reginio cites the argument of Benjamin Filene that a yearning for musical roots and source in folk ballads itself is a phenomenon of modernity, of a nostalgia excited by urban alienation and deracination. Thus, one can understand the feeling of some in 1967 who might have thought *John Wesley Harding* was an evasion of what was going on at that time in San Francisco, New York City, Detroit—and Vietnam. But this ersatz element also represents an attempt to politically broaden the implied stance of the real thing. "I Pity the Poor Immigrant," though with a different political valence today than in 1967, was an example of this. It is a song done in the style of old-time music, but with a broader, more compassionate message.

Reginio sees the album "juxtaposing two utopian visions," rather than cementing a narrative of American exceptionalism (268). Dylan creates a rural, old-time persona that presents American life as more liberal and diverse than it truly was—an important accomplishment reflected in this album and his music overall. Indeed, the idea of a conjectural space in the heartland of American music, which is more inclusive than that heartland, is fundamental to the history of rock and roll, and *John Wesley Harding* plays a pivotal role in fashioning this framework. Reginio evokes this specter without falling into the error, described

by Timothy Hampton, of seeing Dylan's work "as a parable about American identity and inclusiveness" (Hampton 11).

The songs on *John Wesley Harding* also seem more acts of spiritual seeking than do most folk ballads. Indeed, the collective nature of the ballad precludes the sense of individual quest in the songs of the album, with "I Am a Lonesome Hobo," "As I Went Out One Morning," "I Pity the Poor Immigrant," and "I Dreamed I Saw Saint Augustine" all explicitly in the first person. There might be spirituality beyond the spiritual genres (proverbs and allegories) that Reginio brings to bear on the album. "I Dreamed I Saw Saint Augustine" and "All Along the Watchtower" explicitly invoke a Christian saint and a passage from the Hebrew Bible, and the religious aspects of the album foreshadow Dylan's later work. Also, a Jewish reading of this album would have recognized that the JWH initials of John Wesley Harding come close to the four letters of the Tetragrammaton, the ineffable Hebrew name of God. Previous critics (see Curtis 98) have raised this point, but Reginio seems to deliberately avoid it.

Reginio quotes the African American writer Julius Lester's comment that his white friends would have to feel a similar sense of vulnerability to understand Black people living in the inner city. It was not enough, in other words, for there to be compassion and solidarity; there had to be real suffering, Reginio's pivotal insight about *John Wesley Harding* is that the album is trying to intervene at precisely this stage, when rational political analysis has failed, and only art attuned to a sense of emergency can inform the listener. Thus *John Wesley Harding*, precisely by avoiding a tick-the-boxes checklist of 60s radicalism, and by abjuring editorial page truisms and earnest pleas for moderation, goes very deep indeed. Reginio explores in Chapter 2, "Down in The Flood," two Dylan songs from 1967 not on the *John Wesley Harding* album: "This Wheel's On Fire" and "Too Much of Nothing." By analyzing these songs from the Basement Tapes, songs fraught with the hope, pain, and frustration of the political and temporal moment, Reginio gives a wider sense of the social background and how Dylan was and was not responding to it in his songs. Attending to these "precursor songs" (47) not only allows Reginio to explore the nature and consequences of Dylan's collaboration with Robbie Robertson and other members of the Band but also allows us to see his full response to the "violence and violent collapse accruing in American cities" (48) in the summer of 1967.

Reading The Album

In this way, *John Wesley Harding*, from the perspective of the albums to come, is indeed a fairly typical Dylan album. Reginio limns this typicality by exploring the album's

deployment of various personae, anticipating the veiled protagonists, observers, and villains of Dylan's albums of the 1970s and 1980s. Chapter 3, "Ballads Before The Law," underscores these precedents. The pairings of Frankie and Judas Priest, Tom Paine, and the damsel in "As I Went Out One Morning" promise drama but provide little resolution. The songs offer either "no message" or "elliptical proverbs in a sardonic tone" (133). The damsel, speaking from the corners of her mouth, offers "surreptitious, desperate voicing" (162). This is identified by Reginio as a surrogate for the perspective of the album itself. By remaining "not restricted to historical particulars" (182) and speaking from the corners rather than the center, the album finds an asymmetrical but insightful vantage point.

Reginio also discusses the nature of reference and discursive name-dropping in the songs. His descriptions of the figures of Tom Paine and Saint Augustine referenced in the album are best seen as "stylized sketches" rather than as "allusions held fast" (169). This is where literary critics can help listeners of the songs understand the mechanics of reference and meaning in these lyrics. Reginio discusses how Paine, positioned as a menacing figure, is more an oppressor than a liberator. But the point here is not that Dylan is venturing into the historiography of Thomas Paine, but that he is using the name as a "metonym for American self-emancipation" (144), including that self-emancipation's dark side. Similarly, the use of the name of Saint Augustine commits Dylan neither to Christian belief nor even to his own lyrics as an Augustine-style "Confession," a reading which would be inapt. Reginio ranges widely, but this book is of real help to students and appreciators of the album as it augments our sense of what it expresses and means.

The manner of Reginio's book—a close reading of a work with significant and extravagant theoretical armature—is notable as it is one, in general, less prevalent in literary studies today. Indeed, studies of long-canonical authors such as Milton or Chaucer in the 2020s would tend to be more tightly-knit. This is not a criticism a priori, as this book's ambition is its greatest virtue. It is just to say that it is not the sort of literary exegesis really being produced now. Since *John Wesley Harding,* as an album, was hardly the sort of rock album produced in 1967, perhaps this is fitting. I admire Reginio's courage in not thinking small, not just producing analysis geared to a cautiously formalist or narrowly historicist way, not sticking a label on his methodological approach. So many people are either naturally suspicious of this sort of reading or have been trained by media narratives to be so suspicious that Reginio's pursuit of this endeavor is rather brave. Yet, because the book's first half is basically devoted to theorizing and putting the album in broad historical and cultural contexts, a close reading of the songs (perhaps also limited by copyright issues with quoting words) is delayed. In Chapter

4, "Abjection," we find readings of "As I Went Out One Morning" and "I Dreamed I Saw Saint Augustine." This is the strongest chapter of the book, reading very moving and complex songs with the rigor and insight they deserve, and its designated theorist, Julia Kristeva, is used decorously in a generative and heuristic manner. Chapter 5, "Entreaties," contains readings of "Drifter's Escape," "I Am a Lonesome Hobo," and "Dear Landlord," with Giorgio Agamben filling the Kristeva role. Chapter 6, "Outside the Law," contains readings of "I Pity the Poor Immigrant" and "All Along the Watchtower." As cogent as Reginio's reading of "All Along the Watchtower" is, it seems frustrating that we have had to wait until page 243 to receive a full reading of one of *John Wesley Harding*'s strongest, best-known, and most moving songs. The effect here is somewhat of a concert where the singer spends so much time on experimental work that challenges and at times perplexes his audience, and only near the end of a three-hour concert reels off the hits in a way that gratifies our pent-up need but also feels slightly rushed. That there is a sense of the book simply running out of time is also signaled by how "Down Along the Cove" and "I'll Be Your Baby Tonight" are stashed in a sprightly but overly deferred Coda.

Reginio clearly, and commendably, is not simply writing a guide to the album, and he does not simply want to analyze *John Wesley Harding* song by song. He insightfully realizes that the album's place in Dylan's oeuvre, in the 1960s, and in the American cultural tradition solicits a far wider, more conjectural, more comprehensive reading. But there are times when Reginio is undertaking just such a reading that he seems to feel the need to swerve back to close commentary on the songs, and this to-and-fro, and the staccato series of close readings coming so late in the book, make the readings seem almost obligatory. One should not have to be obligatory in Dylan studies, and ideally, the book could have worked out a mode of exposition in which the theory was less top-heavy and the song-by-song reading more thoroughly aligned with and integrated into the overall analysis. From the beginning, Reginio has argued for not pursuing "a linear or allegorical reading that would foreground the sequences of songs on the album" (39), in the service of a broader critique which would at once respect the autonomy of every single song(39) yet on the other hand could reach the broadest possible context. That the last two songs analyzed in the Coda, "Down Along the Cove" and "I'll Be Your Baby Tonight," are also the last two songs on the album suggests that Reginio's argumentative structure ends up reoccupying precisely that which it eschewed.

Still, Reginio's book should be applauded for its ambition, its conceptual and moral vision, and its grasp of the values, urgencies, and preoccupations that Dylan brings to and expounds on in the album. *John Wesley Harding* disrupted expectations of Dylan and his

relation to rock and roll, politics, and modernity by its anchoring in (some rendition of) the American folk traditions. Its lyrics, by evading the minutiae of current political reference, enact, as Reginio shows, a far wider interrogation of unjust and violent norms. Reginio's reading takes the album from an intriguing exception in Dylan's spiral trajectory to a consummate statement of his vision and values.

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Mike Chasar (ed). *The Poetry of Bob Dylan: Thirty Essays on Thirty Songs*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2025, 240 pp.

Review by Charles O. Hartman, Connecticut College

In the Introduction to *The Poetry of Bob Dylan*, editor Mike Chasar lays out a mission. Though there is a large and ever-growing body of critical and scholarly work on Dylan, "sustained and nuanced attention to … individual songs" is rarer than we might guess or hope. Chasar recounts: "As a colleague who teaches a first-year seminar on Dylan … once explained to me, 'What my students and I really need is not another scholarly monograph or more web sites, but a book that goes song by song through Dylan's catalog explaining how the words of each one work'" (3-4). A version of that book, not confining itself to "the words," exists: *Bob Dylan All the Songs: The Story Behind Every Track* (Black Dog & Leventhal, Expanded Edition 2022) by Philippe Margotin and Jean-Michel Guesdon. Weighing in at over six pounds and 736 pages, it collects technical details, anecdotes about recording sessions, cover versions, and parts of Dylan's compositional history for every song he has recorded. Dylan's work encourages completism; *Mixing Up the Medicine*, a study of manuscript and other materials in the Bob Dylan Archive by curators at the Bob Dylan Center in Tulsa, is another tome, at 608 pages.

The Poetry of Bob Dylan is a different and handier project, as indicated by its subtitle: *Thirty Essays on Thirty Songs*. This means that the essayists discuss, all told, about 5 per cent of Dylan's known output. How these writers were selected or recruited is not mentioned. Chasar says only that he "did little more than than ask them to pick a song and explain what they see and hear that people untrained in their academic specialties might not immediately appreciate." The study of Bob Dylan and his works is by now obviously multidisciplinary, and Chasar lists the authors' disciplines. Three-quarters of the contributors are Professors of English and/or American Literature; two are Classicists; just two belong to Music departments, plus another who teaches Performance Studies. At first these proportions—ten-to-one words vs music—raise alarms. But the days are surely gone when we had to remind everyone that songs, whether we read them in the various ways we read poems or not, are impossible to respond to fully or think about coherently without attention to the lyrics' musical settings.

Well, almost gone. The Swedish Academy's 2016 announcement awarding Dylan the Nobel Prize in Literature "for having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition," as Chasar notes, "manages to skirt the old question about whether song lyrics

are poetry." As an example of what happens when we instead stumble into that morass, Chasar quotes Billy Collins saying (no source is given) that if we wanted "to test to see if a song lyric is a poem," we would remove most aspects of performance, including "the three singers in their sparkly dresses." Aristotle would not agree; in the *Poetics* he ends his list of the six "parts" of a poem (by which of course he means a drama), with *opsis*, spectacle. Most modern commentators attend, often centrally, to what Betsy Bowden in 1978 called Dylan's *Performed Literature*; this began with Michael Gray's *Song and Dance Man* (and its two sequels) and Paul Williams's *Bob Dylan: Performing Artist* (and *its* two sequels). No one involved in *The Poetry of Bob Dylan* would subscribe to Collins's implied definition of the lyric as purely its printed words.

Chasar plays with the Academy's careful phrasing: "poetic expressions" dodges the nouns "poem," "song," and "poetry." And indeed many of these thirty academic specialists are eager to cross borders. Jeremy Yudkin, a Boston University musicologist, explains the interaction of harmony and melody in "She Belongs to Me" in a way that any beginning guitarist could understand, but he starts by analyzing how "She Belongs to Me" stands against "You Belong to Me" as interpersonal discourse—and as the title of a very different song (Patti Page, Patsy Cline, Dean Martin, Ringo Starr). Steven Rings, another musicologist and the author of a highly engaging new book, *What Did You Hear? The Music of Bob Dylan*, accounts for several verbal, discursive, and narrative puzzles in "Sign on the Window," especially its bridge, as plausibly as any lit-department denizen. The Performance Studies scholar, Marit J. MacArthur, provides a graphic accounting of Dylan's vocal pauses during the epic "Highlands"; we could apply her method to many other songs of various periods.

Equally, some of the English professors supply plenty of precise musicological guidance. William J. Maxwell discusses the harmonic structure of "Hurricane" in a way that connects the chord structure (though he doesn't mention its similarity to "All Along the Watchtower") with the vicissitudes of Ruben Carter's life and Dylan's intermittent interventions in that history. Adam Bradley treats the late song "My Own Version of You" as, in effect, rap—more interested in rhythm than in melody. Angela Sorby's excellent essay on the much earlier "Subterranean Homesick Blues" does not explicitly make the same connection, though one view of this song has been as a precursor to rap. Sorby concentrates more on the song's dialogic assemblage, though she avoids those terms.

That each essayist "pick[ed] a song" implies that the book's editor exercised little control over which one-song-out-of-every-twenty would be represented in the Table of Contents. It seems unlikely that no song was proposed by two different authors, but there was presumably a simple signal for This Seat Taken. More important for the overall shape and scope of the book is the inverse question: it must have been tempting to suggest some matches, some candidate topics, if only to guarantee that essential songs would receive attention.

But which essential songs? If no one had chosen to write on "Visions of Johanna," Chasar and we his readers would wonder why. Fortunately the essay we have, by Melissa Girard, is very good, though it may worry too much about the pronouns in the "Little boy lost" stanza. But if "Johanna" is an unthinkable omission, what other songs would we all nominate to the same category? If I urged "You're Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go," the next person would counter with "Sad-Eyed Lady," or "The Times They Are a-Changin," or "Shelter from the Storm" or, of course, "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right." Probably the most glaring omissions from the book are essays on "Desolation Row" (though it gets five mentions in Chasar's Index) and "Idiot Wind" (which gets none).

To pick up Chasar's invocation of pedagogical concerns, what the book best offers is *demonstrations* of, if not thirty, at least a few different lenses through which a class in one of the academic world's growing roster of Bob Dylan courses might look at the songs. Some of these critical approaches are identifiable. "Lay, Lady, Lay" (Virginia Jackson, with the most personal essay in the book), and "Like a Rolling Stone" (Linda Kinnahan, who neatly parses what happens to the title's stereotype when it's applied to a "Miss Lonely"), and "It Ain't Me Babe" (Marsha Bryant, who misses a bet by not mentioning Trina Robbins's 1970 comic book and the women's cartoonists' collective that adopted the name), are all persuasively regarded from gender-structure angles which could equally well inform classroom discussions of "Sweetheart Like You" or "Sooner or Later (One of Us Must Know)" or many others. Similarly, while perhaps it's inevitable that "Rainy Day Women #12 and 35" should get the fullest discussion of drugs in Dylan's work and world, that essayist, Loren Glass, offers leads to "Mr. Tambourine Man," "Chimes of Freedom," and other songs from the 60s as well.

The contributors' selections bear thinking about in terms of distribution across the threescore-plus years of Dylan's output. The first three albums are each represented by one song, the next three by two each, and then *Blonde on Blonde* (1966) gets three—all of which seems reasonable. Then both *John Wesley Harding* (1967) and *Self-Portrait* (1970) are blanks; we hear nothing about "As I Went Out One Morning" or "Frankie Lee and Judas Priest." *Blood on the Tracks* (1975), which everyone thinks of as the first of Dylan's major returns to form,

picks up again with two. Many listeners will be glad to leave *Empire Burlesque* (1985) with no discussion—those 80s synthesizers—though I would differ; but I am more disconcerted by the omission of *Modern Times* (2006), an album rich in shrewd and startling musical, historical, lyrical, and intertextual decisions. Many will be surprised at the absence of essays on *"Love and Theft"* (2001), which may be as important to the story of Dylan's aesthetic and ethical development as anything else he has recorded since 1975. Others might make parallel pleas for *Street-Legal* (1978) or *Together Through Life* (2009). *Rough and Rowdy Ways* (2020) (which I reviewed here in June 2020) elicits two essays—naturally enough, since it is Dylan's last studio album so far.

One gap that may escape notice is an almost total silence about the albums of folk covers from *Down in the Groove* (1988) through *Good as I Been to You* (1992) and *World Gone Wrong* (1993). In one sense this is natural: this is a book about The Poetry of Bob Dylan, mostly meaning the lyrics and music written by Bob Dylan. But the case is complicated. While it may be best to lay aside questions about what makes a song poetry, it is harder to ignore the narrower puzzle of what makes a song a Dylan song. The one exception to this gap in coverage of the covers is Kirsten Bartholomew Ortega's essay on "Stack a Lee," a song which on bobdylan.com is credited as "written by Bob Dylan (arr)." These folk covers raise intricate questions about appropriation—a topic of multifarious interest to Dylan scholars. Ortega explores the song, and its issues, in good historical depth.

The three Christian albums, about 36 songs in total over about three years, solicit only one comment, and that on the minor, jokey game of "Man Gave Names to All the Animals," whose own commentator calls it "one of Bob Dylan's worst songs." Perhaps the religious material still doesn't appeal to secular academics. Yet it seems a shame to ignore the theological and moral complexities of "Do Right to Me Baby (Do Unto Others)," the bitter fervor of "Gotta Serve Somebody," and the pure devotion—not simple, and not evasive—of "Saving Grace," especially in Aaron Neville's gorgeous version on *Gotta Serve Somebody: The Gospel Songs of Bob Dylan* (2003). But in this book the fascinating but difficult topic of Dylan's relation to religion is delayed until David Caplan's piece on "I and I," which comes from *Infidels* (1983), the next album after the trio of *Slow Train Coming* (1979), *Saved* (1980), and *Shot of Love* (1981).

Caplan gives us a thoughtful study of Dylan's approaches to religion. "'I and I' … does not separate different religious traditions. It moves between and among them" (134). He distinguishes the verses ("middle-aged" and "rueful") from the "clipped and allusive chorus [which] flashes through religious references." In the last verse, "'an eye for an eye' alludes to

the system of justice that Exodus proposes … in which God remains essentially distant from any living person" (136). (Caplan sidesteps the fact that the song does not "propose" exacting "an eye for an eye" but speaks of *seeing* "an eye for an eye.") Earlier in the song, and in the choruses, "I and I" is the Rastafarian phrase that, as a scholar of "livity" pointed to by Caplan's footnote explains, "refers to 'the inter-dwelling of God and man'" (135). As Caplan says, "The Rastafarian and biblical references feel more juxtaposed than shaped into one coherent idea." In the end, "Dylan does not refashion these ideas into a coherent theology. In fact, the goal of consistency does not interest him. … 'I and I' is religious but restlessly so" (136). Dylan has long been mindful of the duality of Old and New Testament versions of justice, a tension that throughout his life has knotted itself into the righteous indignation of songs like "Hurricane," not to mention "Only a Pawn in Their Game," "When the Ship Comes In," and even "Blowin' in the Wind."

Many of the book's chapters make us think further into songs we may have known for twenty or sixty years. "Tomorrow Is a Long Time" is one of Dylan's most moving songs, and Stephanie Burt's essay accounts unusually seriously for its affective complexity. As Burt says, "the word 'again' lets the chorus end: that final satisfaction feels [with its full cadence in the harmony] musically complete but emotionally impossible. Without his love, this man will never sleep … Does anyone, hearing this song for a second time, believe that Dylan will find his lost love, or see her again, on this side of the grave?" (92).

Incidentally, Burt's essay's title in the Table of Contents, "'Tomorrow Is a Long Time' (1971)" presents a puzzle. In every other chapter heading, the date is that of the song's first release on a Dylan album, underscoring the book's organization, which is essentially chronological for obvious practical reasons. But as an "Editor's Note" on Burt's essay points out, this song is earlier than 1971: not only had Dylan written the song in 1962 ("probably") and recorded it informally the following year, but we encountered and began responding to it on what was almost the very first album of Dylan covers: *Odetta Sings Dylan* (1965). The song belongs with *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* (1962), not with *New Morning* (1970). Perhaps our notional course syllabus could explore questions about how the chronologies of Dylan's compositions and his recordings do and do not mesh, and therefore about how we should hear the career unfolding on the largest scale.

Chip Tucker's analysis of "Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again"—along with "Visions of Johanna" perhaps the grandest saga on that first grand album—has a density and precision that accord with the song's own. Tucker is at pains to specify both the musical structure—the "roughly palindromic symmetry" of the chords of each verse—and the

verbal structures of rhyme and prosody that reinforce each other and support the song's whole arch. "Comparable effects of interplay occur in the quite different poetic registers of diction and grammar," he says, and he speaks of the dance between "genteel and demotic discourses."

Tucker points out the song's dread of repetition. "The most important word in this song is 'again'." This can be usefully set beside Stephanie Burt's different focus on the same word. (In other songs, too, we realize, "twice" signals annoyance: in "She's Your Lover Now," the obnoxious fellow "keeps saying everything twice to me," and even "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right" notices the same wistful despair.) Tucker links this metaphysical angst with the medium by which Dylan's songs are most often conveyed to us: sound mechanically reproduced, endlessly reproducible. The "tape" which "the ladies" kindly furnish is as Tucker notes the recording medium foundational to the whole project. (By the way, we need not think of this "tape" exclusively in the context of the "Nashville studio" which Dylan on *Blonde on Blonde* was using for the first time; by 1966 home recording machines were common, and a supply of tape at a decent price was worth seeking out.) Tucker makes us realize how this aversion to repetition connects with Dylan's famous preference for a raw recorded sound, the sound of the moment, least easily repeated. Dylan has also famously spent decades on a Never Ending Tour that puts him before more or less new audiences every night. His set lists vary all the time, so concert-goers guess what familiar or unfamiliar bit of the repertoire may come up next. As bobdylan.com helpfully informs us, recurrences of a particular song in concert happen between zero and well over two thousand times.

Michael Thurston, writing on "Jokerman," contrasts the song's verses with its refrain (the lines about "the nightingale's tune"); he also astutely describes how the changing relation between lyrics and musical setting plays out this larger structural dynamic. "However 'Jokerman' might push toward musical resolution"—for example, between Dylan's "characteristic *Sprechstimme*" and the "melisma in the refrain's last line"—"its lyrics do not, as the chorus and verses stage an ongoing dynamic of solicitation and refutation wherein the refrain continually cancels whatever deep messages the verses' allusive imagery appears to promise" (128). Thurston summarizes: "If music produces a lot of the pleasure, Dylan's lyrics and vocal stylings provide the power" (131).

The book gives us examples of how a profoundly informed reading can help us be the hearers that apparently Bob Dylan has made us all want to be. While "Tin Angel" (from *Tempest* [2012]) is not among my own favorites, it would be foolish not to be grateful for Richard F. Thomas's study of the song's double origin in "Gypsy Davy" (Woody Guthrie et al) and the *Odyssey*. He sets before us a dizzyingly rich texture of textualities. In

*Dylan Review 2.*1, the same author gave us a similarly eye-opening and mind-filling glance into "And I Crossed the Rubicon" from *Rough and Rowdy Ways*. I suppose it is incidental that Thomas's Professorship at Harvard is named for the original author of what became the imperishable "One Meat Ball"; but as Dylan says, I can't be swayed by that.

Ron Rosenbaum. *Bob Dylan: Things Have Changed*. New York: Melville House, 2025, *v* + 271 pp.

Review by D. Quentin Miller, Suffolk University

Change. The final word in this book's title indicates the perfect framework for approaching Dylan midway through the sixth decade of his prominence. We could follow his early lead and say the times have changed. We could obviously say Dylan has changed, repeatedly. Those of us who study him could say *we* have changed, individually and collectively, or even that Dylan's work has changed us. "Things have changed" casts a wide net. What things? Wrong focus. Keep your eye on the word change, the only constant.

Ron Rosenbaum's study concentrates on a couple of significant changes in Dylan's career, but not the one that most critics point to, the "going electric" moment at Newport. For Rosenbaum, that moment has become an irritating cliché rather than the key to understanding the artist. Indeed, the first page of the preface advances the assumption that "many readers will come to this book only after or because of seeing the film *A Complete Unknown*" (xi), the popular 2024 biopic that reinforces the myth of the Night of Amplified Metamorphosis. Too easy, Rosenbaum suggests. Come with me on a far more complex journey. The key is Buddy Holly, not Woody Guthrie. The key is *Renaldo and Clara*, not *A Complete Unknown*. The key is magnetic fields, and theodicy, and a bayou-dwelling curiosity shop owner named Sun Pie who raised Dylan up after the low point of his born-again Christian phase.

Let me reiterate: "a far more complex journey."

I've twice called the book a "study" already, and before diving into its contents, I think it's important to attempt to classify it because the dustjacket declares it "A Kind of Biography" and the front matter revises that to "A Sort of Biography." Those attempts at definition might mislead some readers. I would submit that it's not any kind or sort of biography as I understand the genre, though incidents from Dylan's life are occasional touchpoints. I realize that the author wants to distinguish it from other biographies which, he argues, have overplayed the folk-rock transition. But even with the kinda sorta qualifiers, the ideal reader of this book might leave it on the shelves under the false assumption that it's yet another biography. It covers a lot of ground, but it doesn't tell the story of a life. If anything, it assumes the reader is already familiar with versions of that story even as Dylan has famously frustrated all attempts to tell it.

It's important to sit a minute with the question of definition. Once we get beyond the kind of / sort of biography statements that frame the book's actual content, the author shares

my curiosity about what kind of book it is. On the first page of the preface, he describes it as "a book that focuses on [Dylan] as a songwriter and focuses closely on some aspects of his songwriting themes and memes that are likely to be little known yet highly relevant" (xi). He makes it clear throughout the study that he's not a musicologist and is instead primarily interested in the lyrics as literature, supplemented by interviews, an analysis of *Chronicles: Volume One*, the Nobel acceptance address, and one particular line from *Tarantula* (more on that later). At one point he states that one aim of the book is to "offer one of the first (only?) close readings of the neglected gems of later Dylan" (38). More: "this very book is less a formal biography of Dylan than a biography of his *impact*" and "an exploration of the source of that impact" (51, emphasis original in all quotations). Much later in the book he completes the thought: "his impact on the consciousness of the culture" (96). Acknowledging that the book is about its author as well as the subject, he calls it a "memoir" (51) of sorts and dwells on some of the intersections of his own story with Dylan's, building on the notion that, as he puts it, "In a sense I feel Dylan's been writing my life—unknowingly—all his" (xi). And yet, "we already have enough formal comprehensive biographies and memoirs of Dylan" (99). This book, whatever it is, cannot be "formal" in the same way, which I take to mean it has to be unconventional, and perhaps improvisatory, in the spirit of its subject.

And improvisatory it is. But it can't be what the author states he wants it to be on the first page: "a book for all parties" (3) ranging from Dylan's superfans to his detractors. No book can. I would argue that this one is specialized, even rarified. The true party for whom the book is intended is probably a regular reader of *The Dylan Review*.

To get a keener sense of audience, I'd start with some of the author's critical opinions, and there are some definite ones. Readers who hold everything Dylan ever did in equally high esteem are going to be put off by certain pronouncements or perhaps put on the defensive. Rosenbaum spends some time rejecting the term "Dylanologist" which he describes multiple times as barely concealing a "sneer" (4, 7). He also takes issue with the term "Bobolator"—I hadn't heard that one before—related to the term "Bardolator" which smacks of Dylan worship and thus clouds critical judgement. (The author describes himself as "a *recovering* Bobolator" [12]). Dylan's early folk audience—the fans who would boo his rock performances and shout *Judas!*—do not get a lot of love in these pages, and even some of the songs that drew in that group are dismissed, such as the "sappy, Kumbaya-like 'Blowin' in the Wind'" (37). Those enamored with *Nashville Skyline* might bristle to hear "Lay Lady Lay" dismissed as "Dylan's worst" (7). If there are any vocal champions of Dylan's three born-again albums of the late 70s and early 80s—*Anyone? Anyone? Bueller?*—they would not be among the parties invited to

this party. Rosenbaum describes those years as "the uncontestably ludicrous low point of Dylan's career—his three years as a Jesus-freak scold" (62). Devotees of Allen Ginsberg might also take umbrage as the Beat icon is described as an "aesthetic con man / parasite" and "overrated" (184, 185). Woody Guthrie barely escapes a similar assessment: "Dylan's raptures over Woody are a bit of a puzzle to me. I just don't think he was *that good*" (214).

So, no: not a book for all parties, but a book for someone who has what Rosenbaum calls "the Dylan receptor" (6, initially) and a book for someone who appreciates a far-reaching, ambitious intellectual argument. (The college student who skeptically accuses a classmate or professor of "reading too much into" a text would not get very far into this study). Individual words, fashion choices, the act of staring into the middle distance, and even the way Dylan holds his cigarette are all potentially signficant. Examples: "I'm prepared to argue that no one today smokes cigarettes more *expressively* than Bob Dylan, waving the lit ember about with studied focus like a conductor's baton" and "There's more to Dylan's cigarette smoking than a stylistic accident. It was a clue to character" (45). Dylanologists, sneering or otherwise, traffic in this kind of scrutiny. Those outside the circle might be inclined to roll their eyes.

The argument, as might be gleaned from the previous quotations, is somewhat of a counterargument. Rosenbaum is an experienced cultural critic who has the distinction of conducting what may be the longest interview Dylan ever granted, in 1977, just before the "uncontestably ludicrous low point" mentioned above. Part of his argument is with the way Dylanologists and "rock critic sycophants" (10) in general deal with the born-again Christian period: "It's one of the great scandals of American cultural criticism, the way this woeful Dylan has been elided from view or wrenched into a false continuity with the Dylan of before and after" (142). Rosenbaum seeks instead to take Dylan's songs as individual works and to appreciate the ones that endure, no matter which album they come from (except, of course, the three albums comprising the "low point"). He calls this the "slush-to-gold ratio" (237). He lifts the gold nuggets out of the slush and compels the reader to appreciate their literary genius, placing Dylan in a continuum that stretches from Shakespeare to Salinger to Pynchon, Borges, and DeLillo. Certain songs from the early half of the career get recurrent attention, like "Desolation Row," "Like a Rolling Stone," and "If You See Her, Say Hello." For more recent chunks of gold, he offers a list of eleven songs we should take very seriously, leaning heavily on the one that gives the study its title, which he calls "the pivotal moment of Late Dylan" (243). Like many of the others he chooses, "Things Have Changed" was "orphaned" (237) from one of Dylan's albums: dropped from *Time Out of Mind* but later appearing on the soundtrack of the film *Wonder Boys*. The premise is that you've got to pan the whole Dylan

ocean to find the gold, and Rosenbaum convinces the reader that he's done so, and that his assessments are the result of an informed critical viewpoint, not just taste. While this move recalls old-school criticism from the era of the so-called Canon Wars, Rosenbaum implicitly insists that the role of the critic is to go beyond thumbs-up-or-down emojis or star ratings.

If part of the argument is to "seek out and take note of the jewels within the dross" (237), another part is to examine Dylan in terms of theodicy, defined here as "a subdiscipline" of theology "that focuses on evil" (xii). This is how the book opens, and it's a little esoteric, but certainly intriguing. The epigraph begins with that memorable line from "Highway 61," "God said to Abraham, 'Kill me a son.'" Through much of Rosenbaum's argument, God is much less direct and less available than He is that line. Rosenbaum raises questions about how thinkers including Dylan have wrestled with the existence of evil in a universe created by a supposedly benevolent God. The question is focused on the line from *Tarantula* I mentioned above: "Hitler didn't change history/ Hitler WAS history" (*xii,* 9, 90, and more). The author makes much out of this line, reading outward from it into other horrors of the twentieth century like racist lynchings and nuclear Armageddon, both of which also became part of what he terms "Dylan's argument with God" (79).

There are yet more dimensions to the thesis. One prominent one is to explain but definitely not apologize for the years when "Jesus freaks stole his soul" (40, 44, 51, 84, 150 … and *many* more). When Rosenbaum interviewed Dylan in 1977, he could sense a man in crisis, and at times he seems to feel responsible for intensifying the crisis with his questions. The interview itself takes on a mystical quality: "It left me with an ineradicable impression of an Oz-like wizard glimpsed through a haze of airborne ash" (45). The signature phrase that emerges from the interview as Dylan reaches for a description of what he searches for in music is "that thin, that wild mercury sound" (126 etc.), a line which Rosenbaum argues "is used in almost every single Dylan book I've ever read" and which he claims is nearly a product of their mind-meld during the interview that sounds like a joint vision quest: "I have a proprietary feeling about the phrase, almost as if *I* said it to *him* rather than him to me" (126).

The interview is not only significant because Dylan was teetering on the precipice of what Rosenbaum considered the abyss of the born-again years, but because he was working on his never-to-be-released film *Renaldo and Clara*, which Rosenbaum considers a masterpiece that should be screened immediately. At that moment, Dylan was still chasing thin wild mercury and receptive to some pretty far out visions that can be explained only through cosmic magnetism, something physical in the clouds above Minnesota's iron range and in the earth,

"filled with ore," in Dylan's words (35). Some might regard that as a throw-away line, but Rosenbaum uses it as the basis for some deep metaphysical analysis.

As might be clear from some of my citations above, for all its virtues, the book contains many repetitions, including entire anecdotes, but especially verbatim repetitions of individual phrases. I stopped counting how many variants there were of the phrase "Jesus freaks stole Dylan's soul," or of phrases Dylan used to distance his present self from earlier versions ("that's not me … I'm not there … it ain't me," etc.), or the many times the author borrows the Dylan song title "Up to Me" to define his own task: "It's up to me to set them straight" (239). Clever the first time, not so much the fifth. I could cite many other repetitions, and I'm not being pedantic so much as wishing an editor had played a stronger role in developing the book into a coherent whole as opposed to a stack of Substacks. Chapters within the book—often with witty titles like "The Gates of Sweden" about the Nobel speech—are engaging and coherent, but the overall organization too often had me writing "brilliant" in the margins the first time, but "redundant" thereafter.

There are, in fact, many bright flashes of brilliance in these pages. I sometimes felt like I was in college again. At moments I felt like I was in the middle of a weed-fueled late-night conversation with a genius friend who was fixated on an idea and prepared to elaborate into the wee hours. At others I felt like I was in a lecture hall trying to follow a professor who hadn't fully organized his lecture but who was happy to improvise, circling around the room with great enthusiasm and a passion for his subject, if not a conventional sense of structure. I picture myself at that lecture writing down great lines like "Dylan had roots, but his roots don't entirely explain him, exhaust all interest, negate innovation" (131). Or "Dylan's work…doesn't make sense; it makes senses" (236). I'd memorize those bits of wisdom for my final exam and hang onto them well beyond. In both of my analogies, though, there's a real risk that the student/reader will become disoriented.

From where I sit, *Bob Dylan: Things Have Changed* is best described not as a biography, kind of / sort of or otherwise, but as an insightful analysis that, in its author's words, lives at "the intersection of the Dylan phenomenon and some currents of cultural history" (8). Culture, history, Dylan, and approaches to Dylan are all predicated on change. Despite its occasional churlishness, this book gets that right and runs with it, if sometimes in surprising directions.

The Dylanista

"Dylan's Versions of Pastoral"

Dylan once said, memorably, "all my songs are protest songs." Common consensus is he was referring not to genre so much as to an attitude, not content so much as ethos. And, in fact, analyzing Dylan through the lens of attitude or ethos has gotten more screen time than genre studies. But what if he was indeed talking about genre? I wonder how that would affect our engagement with the songs. On one hand, does genre help us to understand Dylan better or, on the other, does Dylan shed new light on genre. Or both? Certainly at times Dylan's generic innovations can be as startling as his reinvention of "Lord Randal," which changed folk music, then rock music, then American culture.

Taking my cue from Dylan in an attempt, purely for experimental purposes, to refocus Dylan studies on genre, I want to reinvent the wheel—the Virgilian wheel, or *rota* as it was known in the past (when Latin was the lingua franca). The Virgilian wheel consists of the three major poems Virgil wrote: the *Eclogues* (pastoral), the *Georgics* (georgic/farming), and the *Aeneid* (epic). Poets in the Renaissance especially, all across Europe, tried to emulate Virgil's progression from pastoral to georgic to epic as the ideal formula for becoming a great poet.

Can we fit Dylan's songs into the old Virgilian categories? Surprisingly yes, though admittedly with some Procrustean [and Dylanesque] adjustment. Is there any critical percentage in analyzing Dylan's art through traditional genres? I think so, as this column shows briefly.

William Empson says in *Some Versions of Pastoral* (I borrowed the title) that "good proletarian art is usually Covert Pastoral."[1] This is a tricky phrase, thanks to the word "covert," but the idea of a masked pastoral form fits Dylan's art. Whether Dylan's is "proletarian art" is another question: the early albums up to *Another Side* advertised a working-class solidarity; and, much later, "Workingman's Blues #2" seems to bemoan the proletarian dilemma, not to mention "Union Sundown." Even the Nobel Committee, while raising Dylan to the world of high art and culture, paradoxically seemed to imply that the troubadours and oral poets preceding Dylan sang for the people.

In any case, amid the tsunami of books on Dylan, especially recent ones, few analyze Dylan's songs as contributions to pastoral poetry, proletarian or otherwise. But why pastoral?

[1] William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (New York: New Directions, 1935;1974), 6.

Because, Empson notwithstanding, pastoral's flexibility as a genre has been neglected. Philip Roth wrote a stunning novel called *American Pastoral* (1999), which extended and challenged the generic implications of its title brilliantly. But the genre has remained on the sideline in a kind of critical (and, apart from Roth and a few landscape poets, literary) obsolescence, dismissed as over-stylized, frivolous, staid, restrictive, and even elitist.

Some Versions of Pastoral was first published in 1935. Odd, perhaps, or amusingly belated for me to be applying Empson's idea of Covert Pastoral to Dylan's songs now, as if it were hot off the press. Max Weber believed that no academic book should last more than fifty years (of course his books belied that pronouncement). But, pace Max, maybe Empson's ideas about genre are still current. Dylan's songs have garnered scores of literary analyses, many brilliant enough to take your breath away. But curiously, despite the acknowledgment of Dylan's literariness, critics tend to approach his lyrics idiosyncratically, either in categories tied to their own reading or peculiar to Dylan and unconnected to standard genres. Maybe the time has come for a little Empsonization.

Does Dylan deliberately engage conventional genres? Or does he intuitively rewrite conventions and leave it to us to find the literary patterns? I'm not sure. But intention is a subject for another column. I will say this, however. Whether with poetic intent or not, his choices underscore Christopher Ricks's idea that "Like the great athlete, the great artist is at once highly trained and deeply instinctual. So if I am asked whether I believe that Dylan is *conscious* of all the subtle effects of wording and timing that I suggest, I am perfectly happy to say that he probably isn't…What matters is that Dylan is doing the imagining, not that he be fully deliberately conscious of the countless intimations that are in his art."[2]

Probably, in Ricks's terms, Dylan's relationship with pastoral poetry isn't "fully deliberately conscious" of the ways he engages, and upends, the traditional mode. At least not always—at some times, in certain songs, his awareness of conventions and stereotypes seems undeniable. This is particularly true of his many lyrics setting the city and its jaundiced denizens against the wide-eyed innocent from the country: in "Mississippi," for instance, the speaker complains "I was raised in the country, I been workin' in the town / I been in trouble ever since I set my suitcase down." These country-versus-city songs indicate a deliberate technique and, arguably, qualify as examples of covert (proletarian) pastoral.

[2] Christopher Ricks, *Dylan's Visions of Sin* (New York: HarperCollins Books, 2003), 8.

Dylan's identity with country-versus-city lyrics seems to have been real enough. In "Diamonds and Rust," Joan Baez's rueful speaker remembers the young Dylan as an outsider:

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

The "scene" that the "original vagabond" bursts on, though fictional in the song, is presumably Greenwich Village and the "unwashed phenomenon" has just arrived from the (iron-ore) country. The historical Dylan, as is voluminously documented, began his career singing with unplaceable Iron Range accents and acting the canny hayseed among the urban folk music crowd. He cultivated an outsider posture, both in person and in quasi-autobiographical songs:

> Ramblin' outa the wild West
> Leavin' the towns I love the best
> Thought I'd seen some ups and downs
> 'Til I come into New York town
> ("Talkin' New York")

The half-innocent rustic who'd "seen some ups and downs" arrives in "New York town" where he heads down to Greenwich Village (mispronounced "Green-Which" like a rube) and "ended up / In one of them coffee-houses on the block." Nothing could be more urban than a coffeehouse, and nothing more alien to the Manhattan audience than the unwashed phenomenon: "Man there said, 'Come back some other day / You sound like a hillbilly / We want folk singers here'" ("Talkin' New York").

This scene, adjusted to fit MacDougal Street, is a familiar one: if he hadn't read Mark Twain, Dylan probably knew a few Hollywood versions of the innocent abroad. In the formulaic tale, the rustic figure brings country humility and innocent values to the jaded cosmopolitan scene. Generically, despite its familiarity, this formula is a reversal of pastoral convention. In pastoral, the site of the action is bucolic, not urban, and—to oversimplify twenty centuries of poetic variations—the smug visitor from the city or court gets a humbling lesson from an honest rustic or a sharp rejection from a maidenly shepherdess. Sometimes pure virtue, sometimes country wit, undo the superior attitude of the unwelcome visitor.

Although "Talkin' New York" fits the pattern of the innocent abroad, and as much as Dylan might have burst on the scene "already a legend," the fiction of the humble hayseed doesn't survive beyond his earliest songs. Dylan's lyrical intuition was to problematize the myth, to challenge the facile polarities with his own version of dialectical engagement. His lyrics quickly moved away from the hick-among-high-buildings pose to a complex narrative that realigns the contours of the conventional pastoral mode.

There's an old, much-debated question in literary studies: "What is pastoral?" According to Frank Kermode, "The first condition of pastoral poetry is that there should be a sharp difference between two ways of life, the rustic and the urban. The city is an artificial product, and the pastoral poet invariably lives in it, or is the product of its schools and universities."[3] This is a crucial point: pastoral poets are city-educated and write from urban settings about an idealized countryside. The earliest pastoral poet, the Sicilian-Greek Theocritus, was a city poet writing about imaginary shepherds. Virgil, too, though raised on a farm in Mantua, wrote his *Eclogues* in Rome, as an urban poet. Paul Alpers, who wrote a book called *What is Pastoral?* (and another called *What Else is Pastoral?*) objects to what he calls Kermode's overly quick explanation that, "in the space of two pages," moves from "contrasts between the natural and the cultivated" to "the opposition of the country and city to the Golden Age to Juvenalian satire."[4] Alpers prefers a much more complicated explanation, eschewing the long history of romantic (and Romantic) definitions of pastoral that stem from Friedrich Schiller's *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* and Wordsworth's *Prelude*. His quibble with this history is that it favors landscape—e.g., Arcadia and Golden Age bucolics—as well as "a longing for the ideal, prompted by a reaction against the ways of civilization, to be at the heart of pastoral"(30). Alpers, in contrast, insists that "we will have a far truer idea of pastoral if we take its representative anecdote to be herdsmen and their lives, rather than landscape or idealized nature"(22).

But Alpers's categorical division doesn't seem to hold in practice, as "Talkin' New York" shows. The song clearly contains both categories, and stereotypes overlap. There's a landscape "anecdote" pitting the "wild West" and "towns I love the best" against Greenwich Village. But there is also another anecdote—of the "herdsmen and their lives," so to speak. The

[3] *English Pastoral Poetry: From the Beginnings to Marvell*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: W.W. Norton, 1952; 1972), 14.

[4] Paul Alpers, *What is Pastoral?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 32. Further references in the text.

song uses the speaker's country humility to satirize the city's corrupt "ways of civilization," manifest in the urban snickering, if that's what it was, of the misguided "man there" in the coffeehouse, who might have been an unsympathetic MC at a hootenanny or open mike night.

"Talkin' New York" offers a Covert Pastoral by inverting the site of the naïve poet's experience. Rather than discovering the poet in the landscape of bucolic innocence, the modern (covert) version of the pastoral myth sets the innocent poet in the heart of a cityscape replete with urban criticism and bigotry toward hillbillies. The stranger from the country appears on the scene and, in an inversion of the city-country pastoral paradigm, levels his satire at the jaundiced city folk.

Significantly, Dylan's speakers don't move from naivete to sentimentality, don't abandon the "representative anecdote" of moral experience in favor of ossified ideals—to whit, "all my songs are protest songs." But Dylan's approach to the city-country conflict soon developed beyond the simple inversion of "Talkin' New York." He tested the boundaries of this version of pastoral. For instance, one of his earliest train songs, "Bob Dylan's Dream" from the *Freewheelin'* album, gives a preview of a dialectic of pastoral values evident throughout his later work:

> While riding on a train goin' west
> I fell asleep for to take my rest
> I dreamed a dream that made me sad
> Concerning myself and the first few friends I had
>
> With half-damp eyes I stared to the room
> Where my friends and I spent many an afternoon
> Where we together weathered many a storm
> Laughin' and singin' till the early hours of the morn

The narrative here transplants innocence from the country to the city. The train is "goin' west," as if toward the open American spaces, and the speaker looks back sadly at a room probably (or plausibly) in an urban setting. There is an unmistakable naivete, reminiscent of "My Back Pages," in the lines "As easy it was to tell black from white / It was all that easy to tell wrong from right." But, unlike traditional pastoral poetry, the innocence exists in the crowded room, the stand-in for culture, and it is lost as the speaker travels west into America—which, under normal circumstances, would represent rustic innocence.

There's a strong temptation to read this song autobiographically—which complicates things, since Dylan was from mining country and "goin' west" could mean going home, unless he's going to a new kind of country. It is also irresistible—and confirmed by biography—to compare the room where the speaker and his friends "weathered many a storm" to the coffeehouse in Greenwich Village where the uncut harmonica player first encounters alien city mores. The reversal of innocent pastoral sites—the "wild West" and the room with the "Laughin' and singin'"—mirrors the reversal of the two different speakers' moral status. The expression of Covert Pastoral on full display in "Bob Dylan's Dream" enacts a dialectic of elegiac mode and satire, of pastoral naivete and urbanity.

At times, Dylan's lyrics can capture this dialectic almost too subtly. Think about a song like "Time Passes Slowly" which should be easy to categorize as elegiac pastoral romancing:

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

The repetition at the beginning and end of the stanzas of the phrase "Time passes slowly" seems to reinforce the pace of pastoral life, maybe alluding to the inevitable turning of the seasons. The speaker, "up here in the mountains," would seem to be an updated version of famous rustics like Colin Clout or Lycidas, not a herdsman but definitely enjoying the characteristic *otium* of the genre. But something is amiss in Dylan's version of pastoral (at least in this song). He builds the lyrics around the passing of Time, evidently an invasive extra-pastoral force unwelcome in the *locus amoenus*—the idyllic safe and shaded landscape of bucolic tranquility. Further, and more damning, Dylan's bucolic scene occurs "when you're lost in a dream." This is the heart of the pastoral dialectic, the struggle between reality and the unreal site of leisure, a state of mind John Donne refers to as sucking on "country pleasures / childishly" ("The Good-Morrow").

In "Time Passes Slowly," however, the valence favors reality over pastoral innocence, because Time impinges on the dream. This isn't the typical pastoral relationship in which rustic pleasures revamp city woes, and simple country values neutralize the skepticism and superciliousness of urban visitors. On the contrary, "Time Passes Slowly" is ultimately a skeptical song: unlike "Bob Dylan's Dream," in which the romance is set back east in the (urban) room, "Time Passes Slowly" romances the rustic setting of bridges and fountains (a

good rhyme for mountains, but aren't fountains the product of human architecture?). Yet the presence of Time is like a shadow over everything. It may be that Time passes slowly in a dream, but in reality Time passes, and with it the pastoral dream. This is one of Dylan's versions of "Covert Pastoral."

Here's another version. Explaining "the marriage of the myths of heroic and pastoral," Empson contends that "the double plot … is needed for a general view of pastoral because the interaction of the two plots gives a particularly clear setting for, or machine for imposing, the social and metaphysical ideas on which pastoral depends" (30). A double plot juxtaposes the two modes of pastoral and heroic, in a sense collapsing the spokes of the Virgilian wheel. This kind of juxtaposition, if Empson is right, is crucial to introducing pastoral, especially Covert Pastoral. A song like "Lily, Rosemary and the Jack of Hearts" might come to mind. Not only does the song have an active double plot—the heroic outlaw subplot of Jack's men who "by the riverbed they waited on the ground" interlaced with the erotic/jealousy main plot of Rosemary and Big Jim. But it also captures a pastoral version that valorizes the success of extra-urban qualities in the thick of town corruption ("The hangin' judge came in unnoticed and was being wined and dined"). For all his mystery, however, the Jack of Hearts is really only an enhanced copy of the misunderstood performer in the coffeehouse: if the performer arrives in New York to outwit the wits, the Jack of Hearts out-performs the performers, steals their hearts, and "heroically" steals money from the bank. This is what Empson means by "the marriage of the myths of heroic and pastoral"—served up in Dylan's Americanized version.

As is well known, "Lily, Rosemary and the Jack of Hearts" doesn't fit the contours of the typical outlaw ballad. But there's more to it than just a revision of songs like "Pretty Boy Floyd," Woody Guthrie's straightforward Depression-era tale of a ruined agrarian culture and a face-off between unfair laws and benevolent lawlessness. "Pretty Boy Floyd" is a protest song, justifying the acts of a notorious villain who was forced "to live a life of shame." But Woody, ever the political activist, heightens the contrasts between the haves and have-nots, defining the myth of the agrarian by introducing a myth of the hero:

> But a many a starvin' farmer
> The same old story told
> How the outlaw paid their mortgage
> And saved their little homes.
> Others tell you 'bout a stranger
> That come to beg a meal,

Underneath his napkin
Left a thousand-dollar bill.

This isn't a double plot, though, because the agrarian figures have no agency in the song. Like most outlaw ballads such as "Whiskey in the Jar" or "Jesse James" or "John Wesley Harding," Woody's song has a single plot. You could even say a single-minded plot: the justification of crime and villainy in an unjust society.

Dylan's song, in contrast, takes the framework of the outlaw ballad and, by introducing a double plot and giving agency to the figures in *both* plots, transforms it into a Covert Pastoral. In Empson's terms, he uses the double plot as a "machine for imposing the social and metaphysical ideas on which pastoral depends." The song has, of course, inspired many interpretations. Timothy Hampton calls it a "shaggy-dog tale," and ties it to Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and the "maps of both writers."[5] Stephen Scobie categorizes it as an outlaw narrative, highlighting its "indeterminacy" and emphasizing the jumps in time, while Michael Gray calls the song "a deft movie script." [6] But, ironically, the more critics seek up-to-date genres or subgenres ("shaggy-dog tale") with which to categorize the song, the clearer it becomes that we can hear Dylan's song as a version of an existing genre. Perhaps we can't know if, for example, Dylan is just alluding to pastoral stereotypes, or if pastoral is an organizing force here and elsewhere in his work. Nor can we be sure, finally, if he's "fully deliberately conscious" of pastoral traditions when he writes. Or if he's ever stumbled over Virgil's *rota* rolling by.

But imagine. *Some versions of georgic*: Dylan on farmers and farming ("Gospel Plow," "Hollis Brown," "Maggie's Farm"). And imagine too, though no one sings Homeric songs anymore, *Some versions of epic* (the ballads, yes, but also "Bob Dylan's 115th Dream," "Frankie Lee and Judas Priest," "Highlands," "Tangled Up in Blue," "Isis," "Hurricane"). Maybe, as we look for *new* ways to listen to Dylan, we might think about the *oldest* poetic genres, like the Virgilian *rota* of pastoral, georgic, and epic. Maybe we should go back, even if we can't go back all the way.

Raphael Falco

[5] Timothy Hampton, *Bob Dylan's Poetics: How the Songs Work* (New York: Zone Books, 2019), 124.

[6] Stephen Scobie, *Alias Bob Dylan Revisited* (Calgary, Canada: Red Deer Press, 2003), 161-62; Michael Gray, *Song and Dance Man III: The Art of Bob Dylan* (London: Continuum, 2000), 185.

Poems

"Songs of Love Sing"

By Thomas G. Palaima

Songs of love sing
fire, ice and stone
forever together
nevermore alone

hearts call out to hearts
gently, true and sweet
birds sing joyous songs
in songs, when lovers meet

arm and arm, hand and hand,
dancing at the edge of sand,
songs sing twining laughter
and happily ever after

Songs give love
their name of love
while friends arrived
disappear like smoke

become illusions
have lots of nerve
don't think twice
get what they deserve

but lovers do do
—songs tell of this, too—
what they do
and do it well

suns go down
over the seas
while lovers listen
to lovers' pleas

leave lights on
don't wonder why
love outshines
the starry sky

songs of love
make love a boat
smoke and flame
snow and rain

blinking stardust
fringes of night
heat pipes coughing
wintry light

gold that isn't
meant to shine
weeping clouds
and silhouettes

compromise
contentment
uncertainty
resentment

Russian roulette
lands of permanent bliss
tickets thrown out windows
betrayals with a kiss
songs of love
sing all of this

but true love
tends to forget
things that happen
or haven't yet

true love forgets
its own name
and all the rights
and all the wrongs
that singers sing of
in their songs

love is in
the look of you
and all the times
that are too few

love takes our lips
from words to kiss
and right now
my love is this

Essays

"The Lost Rolling Thunder Show"

By Bill Lattanzi

Trapped forever in grains of silver, thirty four year-old Bob Dylan is blasting through "Isis," his clear blue eyes fixed on a far-off vision of the song's "outrageous" snow, harmonica wrapped in an arm-pumping fist. Totem, talisman, sole surviving evidence, I've kept the photo with me since the night I took it, through myriad dorms, apartments, and houses from coast to coast. For all the extensive documentation of Dylan's career, it is, as far as I know, the only visual or aural document in existence of the third ever Rolling Thunder Revue show, November 1, 1975, at then Southeastern Massachusetts University in North Dartmouth, Massachusetts. What follows is a brief replay of the experience of that concert, a fan's "I was there," and I hope more than that, an attempt to capture the strange, chaotic vibe of the mid-70s, and what it was like to come of age inside it.

No cameras. No recordings. No booze. Mean-looking dudes, the tour's roadies and assorted help were fairly barking at us as we stood in line waiting for the doors to open. There were eight in our Dylan-head college student crew: me; Ezra, a junior, with the car; Jimmy, quiet, who would go into business down South; Chris, a tall, handsome Northwesterner who would become an eco-warrior, but here, will play the villain; Peter with the vast LP collection; Judith, a minister's daughter and religion major; the bohemian painter Arianna, always a little out in space; and my girlfriend—long black Baez-style hair, sarcastic, cigarette-smoking, guitar-playing. She had dated Jack Kerouac's nephew in high school, and that put me, I thought, one step closer to validity. Our first conversation was about Bob Dylan. Years later, we married, and are married still.

It wasn't easy getting tickets or even finding out where and when the shows would be. It had started with an on-campus rumor that Dylan's people had called our college and asked to perform on the bucolic green. They were turned down, outraging us. But could it be real? Bob Dylan with a band of legendary singers and players appearing inside our bubble of a tiny liberal arts school in the most unfashionable corner of Connecticut was about as likely as an alien spacecraft descending to offload more free booze, Columbian weed, and munchies than we could ever consume.

Dylan had released *Blood on the Tracks* in January, and we'd been listening, reading the reviews, decoding it, and learning to play it. We'd been writing rejected proposals for final papers in English Lit about it (*"Shelter From the Storm" is about ART!*). Now this "Rolling Thunder Revue" thing (What could it mean? US Air Force Bombers? An indigenous chief?) was set up to bring the music to the people, springing surprise shows in out-of-the-way places. This tour had the spirit of anarchy and freedom, a rebuke, we thought, to the growing trend of arena rock. It would rekindle the 60s flame we'd been too young to experience first-hand. Dylan and troupe were the stars of the firmament, but we'd be there shining beside them, as much a part of it as they were.

The show at our school wouldn't happen. Another one would, at a school a hundred miles away that we'd never heard of, the announcements real enough to make plans. Four of us formed a reconnaissance squad. One gray afternoon, we set out on a ticket-buying trip to the distant land of North Dartmouth in Ezra's canary yellow Toyota wagon with one million miles on it. Most campuses now have big, branded welcome signs. At SMU, the turn into the campus was marked by an abandoned drive-in movie theater. Its giant marquee greeted us with the warning, "Death Has Visited This Corner." The campus was stranger still. Regarded now as something of a Brutalist masterpiece, designed by Paul Rudolph, it looked to us like straight dystopia. We passed one radically shaped hulk of poured concrete after another, searching for the student center. Eventually, we found it.

We needed eight seats. Only students could buy tickets, so we searched out non-Dylan fans, and then asked to borrow their IDs for purchase. We were able to get seven without too much trouble, but then we hit a dry spell, and remained one short. The box office would close at four and it was now ten of. I noticed a conservatively dressed and adult-beyond-her-years looking female student, checking her mail at the nearby student post office. I approached with caution. Would she be going to the show? "No," she said. "Certainly not." She said she wouldn't want to put me in danger and politely declined my request for her ID. She explained that if Jesus chose the moment of the concert to return, because I would be, in that moment, part of the sinful world of rock, I would be condemned to Hell. As a Christian, she cared for everyone, and wouldn't want to contribute to the possible loss of my soul. She was both charming and serious. I acknowledged her kindness. efforts, and I absolved her of all responsibility. I said that I would take my chances on Jesus being otherwise occupied. She was hesitant, but finally agreed to loan me the ID, an act of kindness I have always remembered. I quickly bought the ticket, and returned her ID with a minute to spare. We had our eight. We were going to see Dylan.

The road was dusky on the way back. Pot smoke wafted through the car, tunes blasting on Ezra's eight track. (Steely Dan would be about right, but I don't remember exactly. Ezra was an Allman Brothers guy. *Live at Fillmore East*, maybe?) Out on the horizon, there was a pretty line of gold in the violet sunset. *Purple clover, Queen Anne's lace*. Like it's been since I was fourteen (and still today), Dylan lyrics flitted through my brain, lighting up the world. *Sundown, yellow moon*.

We flew through an open, flat zone of nothing. To the right was untended rocky land, a ditch beside us climbing up the far side to a ten-foot berm of dirt that ran for a mile or more ahead and behind. A silhouette appeared atop the berm. A four-legged thing with horns, hairy. Maybe the canary yellow caught his crazed eye. Suicidal or badly miscalculating, he leapt high, appeared for a moment like a cloaked wraith above us, and smashed directly into the center of Ezra's windshield, his horned goat face wide-eyed. The car swerved badly. The goat bounced off and spun in the air before us. His heavy body swung around, leading his badly broken neck, a grotesque outtake from the *Wizard of Oz* tornado scene. Ezra battled for control as the car veered wildly. "It's okay, it's okay, it's okay, it's okay," I kept saying, head in hands in the back seat, certain we would die. Somehow Ezra tamed the car and slowed to a stop. Everyone intact, we stumbled out to see the goat splayed out behind us on the highway.

A van roared up behind us and parked. Two men got out, opened the back, and heaved the dead goat into the vehicle.

"Don't worry," one of them said. "We've got him." They were from animal control, chasing down an escaped goat from parts unknown. Backing him up against the highway, they thought, they'd either get him, or he'd jump and get got. We were the lucky getters.

All of us stunned, Jimmy managed to get out, "What about us? What about the car?"

"You can find some help at the next exit, probably."

The goat hunters got back in the van and left as fast as they'd arrived. Dazed, we assessed the damage. The windshield was mostly smashed, but the car was drivable. After a stop at the police station to report the incident, Ezra managed to peer through the spider-webbed glass to get us home in one piece. It felt right, fighting off a creature from the wilderness to get to Dylanland.

Our crew of eight arrived early on the night of the show, so we were close to the front of the line when the doors opened. We moved past the mean security guys toward the entrance, where more mean security guys frisked anybody they chose. This was a choke point, because in defiance of the no photography rules, I had brought along not one, but two bulky 35 millimeter cameras. (These were those ubiquitous single lens reflex types you see in all the old

movies, from *Blow-Up* to the parody of it at the end of the first *Austin Powers* movie. Think of a half-width brick with a glass and metal lens protruding from the center.) I brought two so that, with thirty-six shots to a roll, I could get seventy-two pictures without having to re-load.

Today, there's a lot of talk about respecting the artist's wishes, especially Dylan's, given the recent contretemps over his company booting Daniel Hildebrand, the owner of the Daily Dylan website out of a show in Glasgow. But at the time banning cameras was unheard of. I'd strolled up the aisle and snapped pics of Joni Mitchell, the Grateful Dead, Patti Smith, The Band, Tom Waits and more. We didn't consider ourselves mere audience members at these events. you see. We were participants. Contrary to the woman's worry about my soul, a concert was a congregation of the faithful, a summoning of a certain spirit, one that would bring a better world into existence, if only for a night. Capturing that on film was part of the process. Beyond that, I think that if my rebellious teenage self was reflective enough, he would have said: Didn't Kerouac, Rimbaud, and Dylan himself all glorify rules-breaking, especially in pursuit of art? I'm not following leaders, he'd smirk, I'm photographing parking meters. If I was a thief, well, I dug it. As we approached the goons, I gave one camera to Jimmy and we both stuffed them into our jean fronts, the lenses bulging—ambitious packages for a couple of scrawny college boys. *Billy, they don't like you to be so free.*

In his Rolling Thunder chronicle*, On the Road with Bob Dylan*, Larry "Ratso" Sloman describes that night's venue as "the first large hall" of the tour, making it sound like a proper theater. It was actually the college gym, with the stage at the far end like an old grammar school. We rushed toward the stage. Some long-haired dude with dilated pupils had reserved the front row for his friends, but I talked him out of it: "You can't see the drummer!"

"Oh yeah," he said, his eyes growing wider. "You're right!"

When he moved behind us, the eight of us scored the best seats in the house.

As the hall filled up, we caught peeks of various Revue folk looking out from the wings, even strolling the aisles. Most were unknown to us. But was that Ramblin' Jack Elliott? Yeah, that was him. Members of the production crew wandered by. We heard them passing the word there would be no filming tonight from the Dylan team. Who even knew there were film cameras? Maybe the lone authorized photographer, Ken Regan, had the night off too, as he was nowhere in evidence. I stood up to take in the crowd only to see Allen Ginsberg wrapped in an extra-large cloak.

"Mr. Ginsberg!" I blurted, walking up to him. He smiled, a gleam in his eye, and engulfed me in a deep, long bear hug. He smelled like warm wool with a hint of patchouli, not

unpleasant. When he finally let me go, he held me at arm's length, looked deeply into my eyes, and without a word, walked away.

At the time, this felt like a Buddy-Holly-stares-at-young-Dylan-and-passes-the-torch moment. Only later did I realize that Allen Ginsberg hugged a whole lot of long-haired, skinny young men, or at least would have liked to. (For instance, In Martin Scorsese's trickster faux-documentary of the tour, fulsomely titled *Rolling Thunder Revue: A Bob Dylan Story by Martin Scorsese*, strings player David Mansfield recalls of Ginsberg: "I wasn't a bad-looking, you know, little 19-year-old at the time. He had a thing for straight, talented teenage boys.") For the moment, though, I had arrived only one degree away from greatness. That last degree—making yourself great—was the tough one. If there was a magic sextant that could guide you from proximity to the promised land itself, I never found it.

Lost in the many recaps of the Rolling Thunder Revue, even in most of Ray Padgett's thorough-going online series[1], is the fact that the experience was much more than the best Bob Dylan show you'd ever see. It was also a revelatory parade of greater or lesser known folk and rock luminaries, each with their own aura, whose music took up more than half the show. Riveted through their sets, you'd almost forget about Dylan. And while it's hard, fifty years after the fact, to accurately recall, even with the help of online setlists, everything that occurred on stage that night, and in what order, I'm going to try to reconstruct the full evening's experience here. If there's some haziness around the edges, that was part of the time, too.

The warm-up band took the stage, strapping on their instruments in nonchalant 70s style. They eventually kicked off with a long, indifferent instrumental. Heading them up with a frontman's swagger, wielding a big electric bass, was the self-described "Rockin'" Rob Stoner, who told us they were Guam, a name that sounded made up on the spot, and somehow a joke on us. The group shared the *de rigueur* style of long hair, jeans, and ragged shirts. Except that, way in the back, unaccountably, in a body-hugging Kelly green pantsuit and blonde shag, writhed English guitar hero Mick Ronson from David Bowie's Spiders From Mars band, and Mott the Hoople. Through the night, he'd beam out searing alien solos from a distant planet. I recognized, too, the aforementioned, angelic-looking David Mansfield, familiar from a picture in *Rolling Stone* or somewhere, playing all manner of acoustic stringed instruments. Guam traded off lead singers. After a few Stoner tunes, we were introduced to a tall, frightened-looking guy in shades named T-Bone Burnett, who sang something distinctive and a little eccentric. My girlfriend and I gave each other a look. This T-Bone guy had potential.

[1]www.flaggingdown.com/t/rolling-thunder

(I can't be sure, but the song may well have been Warren Zevon's "Werewolves of London," which Burnett played often on the fall tour, according to Mansfield in the Ray Padgett interview. Yes, the unrecorded song was around that early.) Stoner came up with the highlight, a slow bluesy rocker about the famous Yankees pitcher Jim "Catfish" Hunter, who had recently signed baseball's first million-dollar contract as an early free agent. *Catfish . . . million dollar man.* There was something about the lyrics, and the cadence, and the song's implicit praise of freeing oneself that lifted it above everything else they played. The language was oddly familiar: "*Used to work on Mr. Finley's farm…"* Later, we'd learn that, of course, Dylan wrote it. (Dylan was a baseball fan? We were beside ourselves. He lives in the same world as us?) I pulled out the camera and sneaked a few good shots here, one of them that classic rock photograph angle—low, looking up at the singer, all crotch and thick Fender bass. But with only the two rolls in hand, and shooting guerilla style, I bided my time, waiting for bigger game.

Guam took their bows, and Ramblin' Jack strolled out alone with his guitar to tell half-finished stories ("They don't call me Ramblin' cuz I travel") and sing three songs, including a beautiful "Dark as a Dungeon." (*Where the rain never falls and the sun never shines/ It's dark as a dungeon way down in the mines*.) It sounded like it was written by a coal miner in the distant past instead of by Merle Travis in 1968. Later in the tour, Dylan and Baez would take over the song, but their version wouldn't touch Elliott's delicacy.

Bob Neuwirth appeared to sing "Mercedes Benz," the short Janis Joplin ditty, funny and cynical, that some of us knew he'd written. He looked beefy and bloated, a big change from the speedy days of *Don't Look Back*. Of course he, like the others, was entirely a myth until he stood in front of us, more or less emceeing the show. In my memory, Dylan now drifted on quietly *(Is that him? That's him!*) in his '65 Newport leather jacket and flowered hat, to join his old pal for "When I Paint My Masterpiece." Dylan was the most dangerous photographic prey. I sensed security on the lookout, and I had visions of them grabbing me by the shirt and roughing me up behind the gym. I worked quickly, the camera bobbing up for a shot and quickly down to escape attention. I was thrilled to see Dylan there in the viewfinder, to know a few bits of him were captured with every click in crystals of silver halide, waiting to be transformed in the darkroom. The real Dylan vanished after the one song, as quickly as he'd arrived. *Was that really him? That was really him*.

Joan Baez came out solo and, in some order, sang "Diamonds and Rust" (pretty ballsy considering Dylan was right there); "Joe Hill," which I found interminable on the Woodstock album, but here was very moving; and an a cappella version of the spiritual, "Swing Low,

Sweet Chariot." The song, starting with the same self-dramatization that Monica Barbaro's a cappella bit had in 2024's *A Complete Unknown*, drained the punk attitude right out of me. For a moment, my soul seemed salvageable. I wished my religious friend from the ticket line was here to share the moment. She might have felt the spirit in the house and changed her mind about Jesus's judgement.

Roger McGuinn was next, his eyes nearly as crazed as the goat's, to kick off "Eight Miles High," complete with that twelve-string mad-genius opening. The band galvanized. It was a dream, a rock 'n' roll journey, alive, fantastically well played and sung, a new level of professionalism to go with the band's ragged charm. I couldn't take a bad shot. McGuinn retired and somebody else came out (maybe a Ramblin' Jack return?), before McGuinn returned came back a few songs later for "Chestnut Mare." The performance was even better than "Eight Miles High." It is possible this was the highlight of the night. The gym levitated. Later Dylan, in his minimal half-sentence stage patter, would say, "How 'bout that Roger McGuinn?," to an appreciative roar.

Ronee Blakely had been a sensation that summer in Robert Altman's film *Nashville*, playing a doomed country singer. She now stepped forward for one song, something upbeat. She was small and hard to see beneath a hat. We all wondered if she and Dylan were having an affair, as if that could be the only explanation for her presence. The same for the tall, snaky violin player, bewitching us with her dissonant, compelling solos and fills. Mysterious and dark, in spider's web makeup, long raven hair and gypsy-drag gown; we had no idea who she was. Her presence, like Ronson's, was unexpected, another antipodal point to add to this wide world of weird. Dylan introduced her as Scarlett Rivera, and a mini-cult was born, to be later burnished by the half-true story that Dylan had picked her up on the street when he saw her walking with a violin case in Greenwich Village.

Dylan's set now began in earnest, with "It Ain't Me, Babe" and "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall." The night now really felt like the Fellini-esque *commedia dell'arte* family circus Dylan told Sloman he was after (you can hear the clip in the Scorsese doc or read it in Sloman). It was all so heartfelt. By the following spring, the tour's spirit would fray. Dylan would be shouting his lungs out, the music harsh, the concerts the kind of big arena shows the fall tour stood, at least for us, in opposition to. But that night, November 1, 1975, the Day of the Dead, at Southeastern Mass U., we all lived the dream. Dylan was warm, engaged, honest, in good voice. In short, he was brilliant.

Desire wouldn't come out for another couple of months. With no notice, we were about to hear most of it. "This is a song for Mr. Sam Peckinpah," Dylan said, the name bitten off, a

tribute to the hard-living director of Dylan's major motion picture debut, *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*. I don't think I knew it was shot in Durango, Mexico, and I definitely did not know that the song was called "Romance in Durango." After a pause, a drum crack, and a full-throated cry that went right through us: *Hot chili peppers in the blistering sun!*

Between songs, frat boys in the back had been chanting slowly, loudly, clearly, "Everybody must get stoned!" Bob Dylan finally responded. "Yeah . . . Go get stoned," then launched into "Isis." Okay, did I say McGuinn was the highlight? This was the highlight, a fantastic new Dylan song, like nothing he'd ever done, in that moment topping the unstoppable past, and in a completely new style. "Isis" was a movie, "Isis" was a myth. "Isis" was a mystery. "Isis" rocked. "*If you want me to, YES!"* The roof opened, the sky cracked. Maybe the world *was* about to end. Dylan left the stage.

Intermission? We were at a show? We collected ourselves, vibrating after two hours, not knowing we had much more to go. Even in the intermission, theater was happening. An elaborately painted muslin stage curtain unfurled in silence. You can see it in the Scorsese film, filled with carnival figures from the past. Rock concerts in those days—David Bowie and Alice Cooper excepted—had close to zero stagecraft beyond maybe smoke, and a spotlight on the soloist, if the spotter could figure out which longhair was playing and knew the difference between the pedal steel and the guitar. This was high-end stuff.

From behind the curtain came the sound we'd heard about but never dreamed we'd hear in person—Baez and Dylan together, singing the anthem, turning back the clock to the time we were too young to be a part of— "The Times They Are A-Changin'." The banner rose to reveal them, mid-tune. They used to say about the classic Hollywood dancers Fred Astaire and Ginger Rodgers that he gave her class, and she gave him sex appeal. This was Rogers and Astaire in reverse. Baez was made ten times cooler and sexier standing next to Dylan, and scruffy Dylan looked like a class act standing next to her. In the applause, Baez looked down at the front row, directly at my buddy Peter, a fellow sophomore. "My god, you're all so young," she said. She was only thirty-four, but I thought, "And you're so old." They played one we didn't know, called "Never Let Me Go." It was beautiful. We were ecstatic. "Mama, You've Been on My Mind" and "I Shall Be Released" followed. The latter would become something of an anthem, the traditional sing-along show ender, for all manner of group shows. Here it was still its natural self, Dylan's recurring theme of freedom just out of reach clear in duet form. Then the best of all: Baez left the stage, Dylan came down even closer to us, sat on a chair and sang "I Don't Believe You (She Acts Like We Never Have Met)." It's the lament of a rejected lover, with a bitter ending: "*Is it easy to forget? I'll say, It's easily done / You just pick anyone / An' pretend*

that you never have met!" As there's no recording of this particular performance, only the one pic I snapped and later lost, there's no one who can provide evidence to deny what I'm about to say. This was the greatest single moment of Bob Dylan's career. Hyperbolic? Unprovable? Subjective? Ridiculous? Sure. But everyone has their own Bob Dylan, their own treasured moment, and this is mine. God, it was beautiful, the emphasis not on meanness but on heartache, Dylan inhabiting the song's emotions like a method actor living his part. I hear it still.

The band reassembled. The *Desire* songs came one after the other in a rush, each one a revelation. "Hurricane," "Oh, Sister," "One More Cup of Coffee," and "Sara." Oh, my god, "Sara." Then, an unforgettable "Just Like a Woman." Halfway through this run, I think during "Hurricane," Dylan, guitar around his neck, singing at the mic, looked down and saw me and my camera. He couldn't leave the mic because he had to sing, but immediately, he leaned back, jerked his head out of frame, and danced around like he was dodging a wasp. I got the message and put the camera away, at least for a while. The next night, in Lowell, Dylan started the practice of appearing in whiteface on the tour. An homage to *Les Enfants Du Paradis?* A rebuke to the minstrel tradition? Simply a way for his face to be visible to those in the back? Of all these options, it's just as plausible that it could've been me. Nope, it was me.

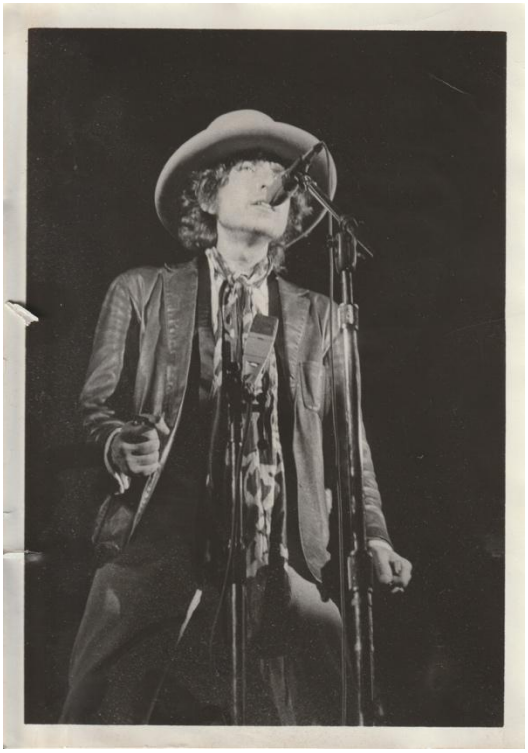
A ludicrous claim, and one that I don't seriously believe. Still, is it really any less credible than any other explanation? I might have wondered about it at the time. And maybe I still do. My delusion, though, maybe reveals something about our desire, as fans, as listeners, to attach ourselves to the artist's story, to matter in the grand design. Again, we are more than consumers, we are *participants*. Or are we just thieves?

The cast assembled for the finish, "This Land Is Your Land." Then they left, and the house lights came on. There's a moment in the Scorsese film showing the crowd at end of one of the shows. They look dazed, happy, bewildered, shaken. In one shot, a woman cries uncontrollably. Maybe we didn't sob, but that was us, too. We staggered out to lay on a small, goatless berm by the parking lot, and we stared up at the stars. A friend later gave me the phrase for the moment, "ecstatic togetherness," capturing that feeling of being as one, uplifted, alive to the world and ourselves.

In the spring, Chris, the future eco-warrior, and I moved to an off-campus apartment together. This did not go well, due to the fact that I was an absent-minded, wannabe intellectual who drank to excess. I was heavily involved in various art and theater projects, and struggling page-by-page through a dense philosophy text for a class far out of my ken. Petty details like vacuuming, washing dishes, and taking out the garbage were bourgeois wastes of time. Chris

took exception. One day toward the end of semester, I noticed the pile of Rolling Thunder pics were no longer on the top of the bedroom bureau where I had "stored" them. There were a lot of piles in the room, so it took a while before I concluded they'd gone missing. I asked Chris if he'd seen them. He smiled like a killer from a horror film. "I wanted to do something that would really hurt you," he said. The fucker had destroyed them. I ran to my book of negatives. He'd found those too and removed them to God knows where, preventing me from ever reprinting them. The bits of soul I'd stolen and frozen onto photo paper had escaped. All but one, the best of all, Dylan singing "Isis." I'd kept in the inside flap of a loose leaf notebook, so I could show it at a moment's notice. All the rest—Stoner's swagger, McGuinn's crazed look, Ronson's pantsuit, Baez dancing, Ginsberg in the aisle, Dylan in flight—all of them were gone.

Maybe dignity's never been photographed, but the lost show was, even if all but one of the pictures have returned into sand. I write this in place of them.



Bob Dylan, North Dartmouth Massachusetts, November 1, 1975.

Photo courtesy of Bill Lattanzi.

Articles

"Too 'Tangled Up in Blues': A Look Inside Bob Dylan's 1974 Notebooks"

By W. Jason Miller, North Carolina State University

Over twenty pages of Dylan's handwritten lyrics to "Tangled Up in Blue" (1974) are now available for study at the Bob Dylan Center in Tulsa, Oklahoma.[1] These lyrics are located in two small 5 in. x 3 in. spiral notebooks from 1974.[2] All forty-five pages of each notebook are filled, and one contains personal notes commingled with revised song lyrics to what would become the iconic 1975 album *Blood on the Tracks*. The album chronicles Dylan working through a painful separation on the way to being divorced, and references to his family are central throughout one of these notebooks.

The cover of one of Dylan's two notebooks advertises its cost: "19 ¢ ." Opening it up reveals the most minuscule letters I have ever encountered in over twenty years of conducting archival research.[3] I needed a magnifying glass to read Dylan's handwriting. Dylan's practice of writing out a full stanza on the left, using the right side across from the spiral wire for revisions, meant I had to scan left to right (rather than up and down) to track his complex process. It was no small challenge to untangle the lyrics in notebooks now finally available to scholars.

Before they were officially made available for research at the Bob Dylan Center, the notebooks passed before Anne Margaret Daniel in 2019, who previewed them for *Hot Press*.[4] Where Daniel scanned parts of every written song that eventually became *Blood on the Tracks*, my article here zeros in on only "Tangled Up in Blue." As such, I newly identify such details as exactly how Dylan arrived at his final title for the song. The other moments I examine in the

[1] I thank Mark Davidson and Stephanie Stewart at the Bob Dylan Center for so kindly and expertly guiding me through these (and other) materials at the Bob Dylan Center in June of 2024.

[2] These two notebooks from 1974 are held at the Bob Dylan Center (Series IV: Notebooks, Box 99, Folders 05 and 06). In terms of chronological sequence, they are followed by *The Red Cover Notebook* filled with song drafts for *Blood on the Tracks* held at the Morgan Library and Museum.

[3] This includes (but is not limited to) reading the handwriting of Martin Luther King, Jr. in several archives (in Boston and Atlanta) as well as hundreds of letters of correspondence both written and addressed to poet Langston Hughes held at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University.

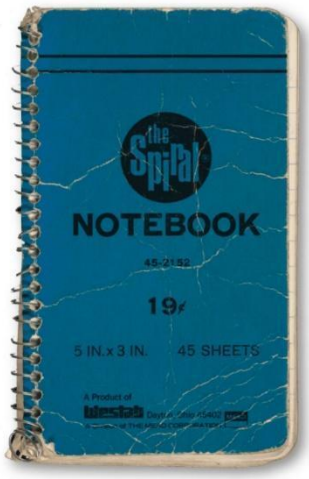
[4] For more, see Anne Margaret Daniel's 2019 article: https://www.hotpress.com/music/full-bob-dylan-cover-story-hot-press-annual-2019-22771539

drafts further reveal that the theme of "change" is present in the earliest iterations of the song. Moreover, the now famous pronoun shifts also surface in Dylan's early drafts. These final two ideas, communicating change through shifting pronouns, rest latently for us now as visual reminders of what Dylan eventually reinscribed back into the song over decades of endless revisions for his live performances. As such, this article grounds the innovations that eventually emerge in the long history of "Tangled Up in Blue" as items permanently archived in Dylan's earliest handwritten versions.

The moment that shook me most while studying these pages was encountering three previous titles of the song that eventually became known as "Tangled Up in Blue." Dylan cycled through various iterations of the three titles—"Dusty Country Blues," "Blue Carnation," and "Tangled Up in Blues"—before dropping this final "s" and settling on the now familiar "Tangled Up in Blue." These two notebooks make it clear that "Tangled Up in Blue" is at least Dylan's fourth title for the song. That each of the three earlier titles dawns in the moments Dylan is composing intricate passages about his own life with his invented characters offers new insight into how dispersed his own biography eventually becomes in the many varied verses he delivers across decades of alternative performances.

Because the third (and most significant) of these titles brings the role of the artist into sharp relief, this article also provides a new entry point for interpreting what it means to be "Tangled Up in Blue*s*." This exploration begins by noting exactly where in the process Dylan discovers his fully considered title. Dylan moves away from the title "Blue Carnation," something that gestures toward marriage, to instead index his own persona as a bluesman. Hence, the final song title captures this once lost originary emphasis on both marriage and the "blue*s*." By instead presenting the final ambiguity of merely "blue," this color in the final title of "Tangled Up in Blue" simultaneously unites (and veils) the two foundational impulses for mixing music and marriage.

The 19¢ Notebooks



Dylan's "Blue Notebook #2" (circa 1974).
Photo courtesy of the Bob Dylan Archive.

In terms of sequencing, Dylan used at least three notebooks contemporaneously. The two notebooks at the Bob Dylan Center are identical, produced by the Mead Corporation of Dayton, Ohio. One cover is missing. The other complete front piece reads "45-2152." I will use the names *Notebook #1* and *Blue Notebook #2* for clarity.[5] *Notebook #1* is missing its front red cover, but the back red cover is still intact. At one time, a "red-orange edge" (presumably left over from the torn cover) was also identified, caught in the spiral spine, further confirming that the original cover was in fact red.[6] In addition to the first versions of Dylan's songs, *Notebook #1* includes later personal entries and random notes that are themselves sometimes dated October 1974.

Blue Notebook #2 does not include any dates; however, as it includes only rewrites of Dylan's songs, it speaks back and forth with entries from his two other notebooks. Absent any personal journaling, it may very well either be contemporaneous or immediately succeeding *Notebook #1*. Dylan here alternates writing in black and blue ink.

The third notebook is *The Red Cover Notebook.* It contains various near-finalized drafts Dylan prepared with clear intentionality for his recording sessions at Columbia studios in New York on September 16-19, 1974. Unlike the other two notebooks, where random ideas are

[5] When not on display in the main museum, *Notebook #1* is located in Series IV: Notebooks, Box 99, Folder 05; *Blue Notebook #2* is located in Series IV: Notebooks, Box 99, Folder 06.

[6] Anne Margaret Daniel notes seeing this in her 2019 article: https://www.hotpress.com/music/full-bob-dylan-cover-story-hot-press-annual-2019-22771539

recorded, explored, and wholly rewritten, the lyrics here are remarkably clear and direct. It is as deliberate a version of the songs as Dylan performed them during the New York sessions as one could expect to encounter. It is held at New York's Morgan Library and Museum, and all but three of its pages appeared in 2018 inside the *More Blood, More Tracks, Bootleg Series vol. 14, Deluxe Edition*. The missing pages include one page containing the full lyrics to the song "You're a Big Girl Now" and the final two pages of "Tangled Up in Blue" (featuring verses four through seven).[7] As with the other two, this notebook would seem to date to sometime between summer and fall of 1974.

Random personal notes are interspersed only throughout the first of Dylan's two notebooks held at the Bob Dylan Center. Here, in *Notebook #1*, Dylan writes out everything from the profound to the absurd. Clearly the most "used" of the three notebooks, it appears to have lost its red cover simply from being revisited on so many different occasions by Dylan himself. Though not in journal form, Dylan makes playful notes about a squeeze play[8] where the runner scores from third and even records new Italian words he seems to have learned. He includes "*plusvlta*" and defines it as "the highest point capable of being attained (entranced)," and also "*nephbitis*: kidney disease." In one place, Dylan even muses about getting an updated Polaroid camera image of himself.

This notebook captures Dylan reflecting on lines from Allen Ginsberg's poem "Howl" (1955) as he writes out the line: "I've seen the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness." Unmistakable reminders of Dylan's fame include references to people he meets at an undisclosed October 30 party. He lists film stars Natalie Wood, Jack Nickolson, Ryan O'Neil, and filmmaker Roman Polanski. Original lines to songs drafted for *Blood on the Tracks* offer new ways of re-hearing the familiar. In his drafts to "Idiot Wind," for instance, Dylan writes: "From the Grand Coulee Dam to Omaha."[9]

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[7] The Morgan Library and Museum has presented the three missing pages of both "You're a Big Girl Now" and "Tangled Up in Blue" from *The Red Cover Notebook*. They can be located online: https://www.bobdylan.com/news/missing-notebook-pages/. I thank Dale Stinchcomb, the Drue Heinz Curator of Literary and Historical Manuscripts at The Morgan Library & Museum, for directly sharing these remaining three pages with me.

[8] Though the timeline synchs perfectly, it is ultimately unclear if this is in any way connected to Game 1 of the 1974 World Series played on October 12, 1974, between the Oakland A's and the Los Angeles Dodgers. After he hit a double in the fifth inning of Game 1, A's pitcher Ken Holtzman eventually scored from third on Bert Campaneris's suicide squeeze bunt to trim the Dodgers lead to 2-1.

[9] *Notebook #1*.

"Tangled Up in Blues"

Before the Bob Dylan Center made research access available to its two notebooks, various images of Dylan's drafts to "Tangled Up in Blue" were made available to the public.[10] Two fine articles by those with special preliminary access also appeared, written by Jeff Slate and, as mentioned, Anne Margaret Daniel. Because the song was composed during Dylan's changing relationship with his wife, I wondered: "What information about their relationship gets invoked, altered, or dispersed on the way to recording the original album version of 'Tangled Up in Blue?'"[11] First, one of Dylan's drafts reads: "There were many books up in a box, I opened up to see."[12] Perhaps thinking of Suze Rotolo on McDougal Street more than his current wife, by his final revision this image is switched entirely from voyeuristic snooping to voluntary sharing about being shown a book of poems. Equally interesting, Sam Sussman suggests these lines refer to his own mother and Dylan reading the poems of Plutarch together.[13] Yes, as Dylan tells us himself in the published version, this is a song about "all the people we used to know." Second, the 1974 recording's odd reference to "slaves" has a very different beginning. In its place, Dylan first wrote: "We listened to a lot of Coltrane / tried to find happiness." Other variations for this stanza include: "Some are digging Coltrane" and "Coltrane came up" and "They stopped listening to Coltrane." On this topic, Anne Margaret Daniel has suggested that "anything by Coltrane intimates revolution."[14]

Despite these noteworthy ideas and lines, the most remarkable discovery from studying these newly available notebooks concerns how Dylan arrived at his final title. In *Notebook #1*,

[10] In addition to the wonderful color image in *Bob Dylan*: *Mixing Up the Medicine* (Davidson and Fishel, 300-01), the first page of "Tangled Up in Blue" from *The Red Cover Notebook* was included inside the 2018 *More Blood, More Tracks - Bootleg Series Vol. 14 Deluxe Edition*. Finally, the *New York Times* also shared another image in 2016 from one of the two notebooks held by the Bob Dylan Center (Sisario).

[11] As Christopher Ricks wisely notes in *Dylan's Visions of Sin*, as "a work of art," a song "is always going to be larger than and other than what precipitated it" (344).

[12] This may have some significance to those who have tried to identify who the song references as the "poet from the thirteenth century." For more, both Elizabeth Randall Upton and Mattew Collins explore the possibility of this being either Dante or Plutarch in their respective articles "Bob Dylan's ballade" and "Bob Dylan and that 'Italian Poet from the Thirteenth Century.'" Quite simply, Dylan may have mistakenly thought the 1300s are called the 13th century.

[13] For more, see the opening section of Sam Sussman's "The Silent Type": On (Possibly) Being Bob Dylan's Son": https://harpers.org/archive/2021/05/the-silent-type-on-possibly-being-bob-dylans-son/

[14] Daniel also lists several songs by John Coltrane from 1958-66 to support her thought: https://www.hotpress.com/music/full-bob-dylan-cover-story-hot-press-annual-2019-22771539

Dylan considers titles to the song. He writes the two words, "Blue Carnation," at the top of a page, underlined so that it stands alone as a title. Because we engage in an inquiry and not an autopsy, we might thoughtfully ask: Does this image gesture toward a flower one might wear at a wedding? Is this what Dylan was likely alluding to when he said this song "took ten years to live, and two years to write?"[15] What else might that symbol represent to Dylan or his invented characters? The possibilities are limitless. To be clear, there is not one single reference to a "blue carnation" in any extant draft of the lyrics in either of these two notebooks. As with so many of Dylan's compositions, this is a title he creates regardless of the actual words never appearing anywhere within the song.

After writing out the title "Blue Carnation" and placing it at the top left of one page, Dylan is still in the mode of thinking how to title this work.[16] It is at this point that Dylan returns to a single line he has drafted within one of the verses in *Notebook #1*. Underneath "Blue Carnation," he writes a second title and again underlines it. It reads: "Tangled up in Blues." The words first appear from Dylan's pen to end a full verse of the song, arriving at a moment in drafting what would become the fourth verse on the album version. Here, he suddenly falls into a reflective biographical mode of thought that is very revealing. Writing out the line, "I wish we'd tied the knot just like I tied the laces of my shoes," Dylan completes this line by adding further insight into this marriage knot coming undone in what can be read as a personal reckoning: "The circle has come to an end / Guess I always been too tangled up in blues." This precise moment (and rhyme with "shoes") is how Dylan arrived at the song's title. It is stunning to see Dylan's life as a musician so directly linked to the knot of his marriage being broken. In no uncertain terms, Dylan's marriage and career are each linked in this single rhyming verse. As such, these lines embody the personal pain and reckoning Dylan first explored before concealing it by dropping the final "s" in "Blues" for the final title, "Tangled Up in Blue."

In this same drafted verse, Dylan goes further into self-confession. His next lines read: "When you needed me most I was always off by myself / Always too busy or too stoned." The implications appear when he concludes: "And everything that we had planned / Had to be postponed."[17] Not only is the title found in this verse, but Dylan is also writing with the personal "I" that will soon become dispersed in the pronoun "he." The key dispersive shift, one that

[15] Quoted in Margotin & Guesdon, p. 416.

[16] This title appears in *Notebook #1*, page 15 (recto).

[17] *Notebook #1*, page 15 (recto).

moves from "I" to "he," also begins in the same critical verse. As such, this is the most decisive moment in the history of one of Dylan's most iconic songs. That history cannot be found in interviews: it's here in the notebooks.

The artist's need for isolation and drugs to perhaps both create and escape culminate in what it means to be tangled up in blues. While scholars such as Elizabeth Randall Upton have wisely reflected on "what it might mean to be entangled with a color," here we finally have some insight.[18] Dylan's early drafts suggest being tangled up in blues means to be saddled with the blues, stoned, and perhaps even on the verge of divorce. It is both why and how the blue carnation of marriage wilts.

This title also points, however, to the profession of being an artist who performs blues music. In the first released version of the song on *Blood on the Tracks*, this traveler goes from "west to east and back in the first two stanzas" and then north and south in the third.[19] In some ways, this movement is reminiscent of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, linking Dylan's song with the Beat writer he knew so well. All these directional movements in the song point as much to touring as they do to experiencing alternative points of view over the course of one's life. It is noteworthy that a focus on Dylan's profession has informed so many discussions of this song already. For Tim Riley, the leading figure in the song "has become a slave to the road."[20] For Greil Marcus, the blues informs so many of Dylan's songs. Hence, Marcus suggests that even more than Woody Gutherie, it is "the bluesman" Robert Johnson who represents a "mythic emblem for a central strain of Dylan's musical experience."[21] The notebook drafts of this song make this direct comment finely explicit.

Throughout this draft that references to being stoned, having the clap, and writing in solitude, Dylan eventually revises out of the song anything that hints at music's most overworn cliche: sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll. By subsequently dropping the "s" in "Blue*s*," the song disperses most elements of his personal life and leaves listeners with the pleasure of confronting art in all its mysteries. Moving from the personal to the obscure—along with the choosing to disperse one's experience—is part of what makes Dylan's artistic process so captivating and elusive. Nonetheless, two key aspects of Dylan's life remain in his final title,

[18] Upton, p. 457.

[19] Ibid, p. 456.

[20] Riley, p. 236.

[21] Marcus, *Mystery Train*, pp. 39-40; Zak, pp. 623-24.

"Tangled Up in Blue": his dissolving marriage and the idea of being a bluesman.[22] The color "blue" coalesces both the image of the wedding carnation and Dylan's persona of being a "*blue*sman." To be clear, this color animates both marriage *and* music. At the moment of composition, with no one watching, does Dylan consider blaming the inevitable trappings of life on the road for dissolving his marriage? Or perhaps even his own willingness to embrace the persona of a bluesman who must be rambling on? If the petals of the carnation die and fade to obscurity in further iterations of the song, the figure of the "blues musician" nonetheless remains. It is indeed diluted, but it also lingers as a substantive trace in the final stanza where Dylan asserts: "I'm still on the road / Heading for another joint."[23] Not a concert or an arena: a juke "joint."

A Living Poem

As is well-known, beyond these notebooks, Dylan relentlessly revised and altered "Tangled Up in Blue," so that the song models change itself when performed. As Jeff Slate has wisely noted, "'Tangled Up in Blue' is the one song in Dylan's vast catalogue that he has never seemed to be finished with."[24] According to a surprisingly accurate and honest insight from Dylan, the key moment in this long string of changes occurred with purpose and intent in the summer of 1984: "I rewrote it in a hotel room somewhere. I think it was in Amsterdam . . . When I sang it the next night, I knew it was right." [25] On what does indeed appear to be the first night of this new version, Dylan includes this line in the last stanza: "So now I'm going

[22] While various styles of musicians make use of open tuning, it is sometimes directly identified with blues guitarists. Also, as Paul Metsa and Rick Shefchik note in *Blood in the Tracks* (U of Minnesota Press, 2023), Dylan wrote almost all the songs for *Blood on the Tracks* on a Martin 00-18 acoustic guitar set in open D tuning. With fascinating implications for the color used throughout this discussion of "Tangled Up in Blue," Metsa and Shefchik also suggest that Dylan had a concurrent obsession with Joni Mitchell's 1971 album *Blue,* which also used open tuning exclusively (7-8).

[23] Gray notes that another element of blues quietly conceals itself in Dylan's song as "keep on keeping on / Like a bird that flew" alludes to a line in the song "Road Runner" by bluesman Junior Wells & The All-Stars (356).

[24] Slate notes some of the most recent changes and additions to the song (as of 2018) that "recasts the song in the spirit of our times, in the same way the original was so much a product of the Vietnam and Watergate era." https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/bob-dylans-first-day-with-tangled-up-in-blue

[25] Quoted in Heylin, p. 566. Dylan did not play a show in Amsterdam, but he did play two in Rotterdam on June 4 and 6, 1984. Dylan's timing (if not city) seems correct: a new version emerged on June 4, 1984. To hear a version of the song, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=if8lWlmIwSM

on back again / To that forbidden zone." He continues: "Me, I'm still walking towards the sun / Trying to stay out of the joint."

In subsequent versions (captured on 1984's *Real Live*), the shifting perspectives on the lovers in the song results in the implication that the speaker can "no longer even speak of *them* as *we*."[26] This may owe something to Dylan's desire to make this song resemble a painting, in its ability to present multiple representations of time, as Dylan was taking painting classes with Norman Raeben at the time of composition in 1974.[27] In Kat Peddie's discussion of how "I is somebody else," for both Arthur Rimbaud and Dylan, any attempt at representations of the self are further undermined:

> This instability is also a facet of musical performance. Actually, the way in which indeterminacy in Dylan is most frequently experienced, the way in which he defies audiences' desires for stable interpretation, is through variation in musical performance, most particularly his famous refusal to settle on any one variant of any song, and certainly not to regard the first version as any kind of ur-text.[28]

Indeterminacy of both a fixed self and static song is something Timothy Hampton has extended through his own reading of the prose poems of *Illuminations* (1896) by Arthur Rimbaud: "there are two moments of the different 'lives' that Rimbaud posits for all creatures; 'To each being it seemed to me that several other lives were due.'"[29] As Hampton further delineates, "the question of the 'I' poses interesting problems when we consider Dylan's own location in his songs" as his presence may indeed be "felt most clearly in songs that cannot be linked in any narrative way to 'Bob Dylan.'"[30] In this way, the Dylan who drafts about his personal memories in first person can bend his lived experience into something easily ascribed to another. Dylan's artistry blurs these other selves by beginning in the notebooks with his own distant, other self; concealing that identity behind the vague pronouns of "he" and "she"; and blending these identifiers into a wholly new "I" and "we."

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[26] Epstein, p. 323.

[27] Mai, p. 31.

[28] Peddie, p. 178.

[29] Surprisingly, Hampton connects this shift in selves within the context of his astute discussion of "All Along the Watchtower" rather than "Tangled Up in Blue." For more, see Hampton, p. 116.

[30] Hampton, p. 18.

In fact, *Notebook #1* documents what seems to be Dylan's first reckoning with this shift. In permanent ink, this notebook records the most complex and powerful theme Dylan is circling when he writes: "And now we're changing again." Though this remarkably illuminating line never makes its way into any actualized version of the song, its logic is absolutely central to the core theme at work in "Tangled Up in Blue." Acting like a poet, Dylan removes the overt nature of this thought as an immature or expository overview all too easily defined, like the moral that summarizes a fable. Instead, he eventually activates the remarkable pronoun shifts in the song to communicate this change and starts looking back on the speaker as a distant "he" rather than just a younger "I." Hence, *The Red Cover Notebook* at the Morgan Library shows Dylan making five intentional pronoun shifts that depersonalizes the song. Taking his black pen to the second verse of "Tangled Up in Blue," he turns "you" in line one to "They'; "You" becomes "He" to start the second line; and two other iterations of "you" become "he" to end the same second line. Both times "you" appears in line three, Dylan inks over them with "they." The overall effect is that the lives of the speaker's past selves and acquaintances all feel like they were lived by different people.

Moreover, as can now be heard, Dylan even confuses himself on two occasions during the first recording sessions in New York. Take 2, Remake 2 (September 18, 1974 | Disc 5) ends at the 1:31 mark when Dylan sings line one of the second verse as "he was married." After an audible, "Oh," Dylan mumbles the correction: "*she* was married." Take 2, Remake 3 (September 19, 1974 | Disc 6) ends abruptly as well when Dylan mixes up these pronouns at the end of verse one. The "And *she* was" he sings is supposed to be "And *he* was standing on the side of the road." Hence Dylan's own performative errors when singing highlight the actual written changes of these pronouns in his notebooks. It lets us hear what we cannot see: neither "he" nor "she" was ever firmly fixed in these ever-changing, handwritten lyrics.

Over the decades after its initial release, the changing nature of "Tangled Up in Blue" has only expanded as Dylan both refined and amplified the song's key artistic trait of change.[31] On December 10, 1978, the audience in Charlotte, NC, did not hear Dylan sing about reading 13th century poetry, but rather having a women quote to him a section of the Bible from

[31] And this study of the lyrical changes does not even scratch the surface of the various instrumental alterations. Percussionist Gary Burke recounted Dylan running the band through two hours of rehearsing only "Tangled Up in Blue" before their 1976 show in Fort Collins, Colorado, only to hear how Dylan then "takes off in a whole other direction" when they actually took the stage. Burke said: "It was like we didn't even spend any time on it the night before. I'm just hanging on for my life." To actually hear leaked versions of that epic two-hour rehearsal, see Ray Padgett's "Now it Goes like This: 'Tangled Up in Blue'" https://www.flaggingdown.com/p/now-it-goes-like-this-tangled-up

"Jeremiah, chapter 17, / From verses 21 and 33." By the final verse, the list of people he had to get back to included "bricklayers," "bank robbers," and "burglars."[32] To this idea of change, one "Mondo Scripto" iteration of Dylan's lyrics blends the original draft with elements of the new. His passage about living on "Montague Street" and listening to Coltrane indexes the idea of transformation again as he writes of his unnamed hosts: "Suddenly they changed on me."[33]

Remarkably, when Dylan performs the song on tour (over 1,725 times through 2018), he has continued to further alter and revise new verses. None of this is coincidental: actual lyrical change itself is more central to this song than any other in Dylan's entire discography. Not only do the changes capture the spirit of evolving relationships, they summon the expected spontaneity of a blues musician. At a March 20, 2004, show in Toronto, Dylan pushed his pronoun shifts to new gender-bending extremes when he sang: "Some are Mathematicians / I'm a truck driver's wife." On October 14, 2016, the Las Vegas crowd heard him sing: "He helped her out of a jam I guess / Then he let the law take its course."[34] Such changes can be heard across the full spectrum of his live performances. The last known live performance of the song dates to August 24, 2018, in Brisbane, Australia. Even here, Dylan can still be heard inserting new ideas all throughout the song. In the last verse alone, new lines about "yesterday" and "tomorrow" replace references to people who are merely illusionary now.[35] The effect is plain: both descriptions and connections to the people we love (both others *and* our past selves) are fluid rather than fixed. In this way, "Tangled Up in Blue" is a living poem as it expresses the constant change we each experience over time in our relationships with both others and the memory of ourselves. Moreover, *Notebook #1* & *Blue Notebook #2* make it clear these eventual performative changes are present in the song, in one form or another, from its earliest written inception to delivery. Making art initiates the change, and performing it allows it to evolve. In this way, the song is a remarkable example of what rhetoricians call *iconicity*: it models the very topic it addresses. As such, "Tangled Up in Blue" is a poem where memory breathes. Dylan shows us exactly what the idea of change sounds like: it is a song that never codifies.

[32] These alterations can be found at https://glyphobet.net/strthrwr/bob/18-01.html

[33] For the full page of this draft, see Daniel.

[34] Muziekcentrum Frits Philips notes these two alterations. For this, and many more, see: https://www.flaggingdown.com/p/listening-to-every-tangled-up-in

[35] Dylan's mumbled lines of this version can be heard at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2870z57nVQY&t=200s

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"Apollo and the Sad-Eyed Lady: Nietzsche Listening to Dylan"

By Stephen Rive

> We do not always keep our eyes . . . from finishing off the poem; and then it is no longer eternal imperfection that we carry across the river of becoming—we then feel that we are carrying a goddess, and are proud and childlike in performing this service.
> —Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

> And your flesh like silk, and your face like glass,
> Who could they get to carry you?
> —Bob Dylan, "Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands"

"Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands" (*Blonde on Blonde*, 1966) is widely regarded as an anomaly in Dylan's work, with some critics even deeming it a failure—famously, Michael Gray initially dismissed it as "sexy, fur-lined wallpaper" (158).[1] The critics are right: "something is happening here," there's something that sets the song apart, though, with some exceptions, most notably Christopher Ricks (97-108), who interprets the song as a meditation on the sin of covetousness, the relative lack of commentary suggests that "[they] don't know what it is." They seem to be defeated by the song's dizzying array of images and allusions, such that almost none venture—beyond the observation that the song is an anomaly—to say what the song might be about, even hinting that it might be about nothing at all, or that it is simply a strange kind of love song. But the generally observed differences in tone (musical, vocal) and figurative language that distinguish "Sad-Eyed Lady" from what came before and what came after add up to more than mere oddity; collectively, they contribute to an important statement about a topic that has to be acknowledged as important to Dylan: art. Identifying that topic does not, of course, suddenly dispel the mystery. What the song has to say about art, a statement made at a critical juncture in Dylan's early career, does, however, come into focus when we look at the song through the intertext of Friedrich Nietzsche's aesthetic theory of the Dionysian. My claim in this essay is twofold: (i) in its form, "Sad-Eyed Lady" is an Apollonian work as that term is understood in Nietzsche's aesthetics; and (ii) the song is an expression of

[1] Gray later revised his opinion, arguing for the power of Dylan's performance to redeem the "shortcomings" of the song's lyrics (see Christopher Ricks, 101). The idea that the song's vocal performance and/or its music rescue its weak lyrics is a recurring theme in discussions of "Sad-Eyed Lady": see Lee Marshall (102-103), Clinton Heylin (*Revolution*, 294), and Andrew Muir (151). For a rebuttal to this idea, see Ricks (102).

two essentially Apollonian themes: first, it draws attention to the *fragility* of art in the face of the mission that Nietzsche sees for it when he declares, several times in *The Birth of Tragedy*, that "only as an aesthetic phenomenon do existence and the world appear justified" (*BT* 113.[2] See also 33 and 114.); second, the song tells us that the only cure for the fragility of art is *more art*. I also claim for "Sad-Eyed Lady" an important role as pivot, or turning point, in Dylan's development as an artist at a critical juncture in his early career, a role that becomes clear in the light of the Nietzschean intertext.

It must be stressed that I am not arguing that Nietzsche is a *source* or influence for Dylan; in fact, it seems highly unlikely that this is the case. (See Appendix, "Nietzsche as a Source for Dylan"). My approach, instead, is to use Nietzsche's Dionysian aesthetic as an *intertext* with which to "read," or—to give Dylan's artform, song, the respect it deserves—"listen to" "Sad-Eyed Lady." B. J. Leggett, in *Early Stevens: The Nietzschean Intertext*, draws attention to "the multiplicity of conceptions and practices that operate under the name *intertextual*" (20, emphasis in original), and he catalogues no fewer than six ways of looking at Nietzsche as an intertext for Wallace Stevens (18-19). Within Dylan studies itself, and largely due to Dylan's borrowings from other sources in recent decades, one very important such "conception" of intertextuality has been, in Richard Thomas's term, "creative reuse."[3] Since I am not concerned in this essay with Nietzsche as an influence or source for Dylan, I am also not concerned with intertextuality as borrowing or "reuse." Rather, I will use the Nietzschean intertext as, in Leggett's term, an "interpretive strategy" for listening to Dylan. I will remain firmly in "the realm of parallel ideas, instructive analogies, of similar motives and values" (Leggett 12, 15) that tie Dylan to Nietzsche, the elucidation of which enhances our appreciation of "Sad-Eyed Lady" and its meaning.[4] Ricks paves the way for this approach when he offers Swinburne's "Dolores" as an intertext (not his word) for interpreting "Sad-Eyed Lady," noting, correctly in my view, that the poem "would not have to be a source for

[2] In citations I use the following abbreviations for Nietzsche's works: *Beyond Good and Evil* (*BGE*), *The Birth of Tragedy* (*BT*), *Ecce Homo* (*EH*), *The Gay Science* (*GS*), *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (*Z), Twilight of the Idols* (*TI*). Numbers refer to pages in *BT* and to sections in all the other works. Nietzsche was a great lover of emphasis; in quotations, unless indicated otherwise, all emphasis is in the original.

[3] Kevin Dettmar, in his discussion of Dylan's borrowing, equates "intertextuality" with "textual influence" (212), suggesting, like Thomas, that it involves an explicit and traceable, causal relationship between one text and another.

[4] In the only other extended discussion of Nietzsche and Dylan that I have found, David Goldblatt and Edward Necarsulmer's "Language on the Lam(b): Tarantula in Dylan and Nietzsche," the authors remain in a similar realm, making no claim for influence. Further, they do not address the question of Dylan and Nietzsche's Dionysian aesthetic. In fact, they make an explicit point of *eschewing* aesthetic theory, on the grounds that an "intuitive" and "spontaneous" artist like Dylan "evades theory in a certain way" (157).

Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands (leave alone an act of allusion by Dylan) for it to illuminate the song's art" (100). To put it another way, if Nietzsche is truly "onto something" with his Dionysian aesthetic, then it should not surprise us that we find artists like Dylan whose work exhibits, quite independent of any influence, the characteristics Nietzsche so admiringly described.

In this essay I will not consider "Sad-Eyed Lady" from a biographical perspective. In support of this approach, I note that in their quite different interpretations of "Sad-Eyed Lady" Ricks, mentioned above, and Gray (158-160) ignore biography altogether, and Stephen Scobie (144-146) relegates it to a footnote (324n15). It must be acknowledged, nevertheless, for those who hear biographical resonances in the song, that "Sad-Eyed Lady" is generally understood to be a love song about Dylan's first wife, Sara. The seal on this view is, of course, Dylan's famous revelation in "Sara" (*Desire*, 1976) that he had written the song for her. Biographical references encoded in the song include the sad-eyed lady's "magazine husband," who is taken to be Sara's first husband, Hans Lownds, a fashion photographer ("lowlands" is no doubt a reference to the similar-sounding "Lownds," the name that Sara bore when Dylan met her); the "hoodlum" in the line, "And with the child of the hoodlum, wrapped up in your arms," which points, again, to Lownds, with whom Sara had one child (Varesi 98-99); and the mentions of "sheet-metal" and "sheets like metal" tied to Sara being the daughter of a scrap metal dealer (Sounes 204-205). I don't deny these connections; my concern in this essay simply lies elsewhere, with the meaning of "Sad-Eyed Lady," and not with what it tells us about Dylan's life.

Apollo and the Sad-Eyed Lady

Dylan's *Blonde on Blonde*, which, with "Rainy Day Women #12 & 35," opens on a Dionysian note in the crude, "bacchanalian" sense of the word, ends with a view of a magnificent temple to Apollo: "Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands." In what sense is "Sad-Eyed Lady" an Apollonian work as Nietzsche understands that term?

All art for Nietzsche is a means of addressing suffering in the face of our insight—the destructive power of which he associates with the Greek god Dionysus, who also gives Nietzsche's aesthetic its name—into the terrible truth that confronts us after the death of God: the meaninglessness and absurdity of life, the unfathomable enigma that anything exists at all, our vulnerability to suffering, and our mortality. Only art, in Nietzsche's view, by achieving what he calls "artistic distance" (*GS* 107), can save us from the abyss of the Dionysian insight

in a healthy and life-affirming manner: art is "the great stimulus to life" (*TI*, "Expeditions," 24) and the "saving sorceress . . . [who] can re-direct those repulsive thoughts about the terrible or absurd nature of existence into representations with which man can live" (*BT* 40). The Apollonian work for Nietzsche fulfills art's role of providing a "stimulus to life" by overriding the terrible Dionysian insight with beautiful forms and surfaces designed to delight the eye. The Apollonian is characterized by balance, order, artifice, and illusion—features that Nietzsche associates with painting, sculpture, and epic poetry, represented ideally, for him, by the Greek myths of the Olympians and the epics of Homer (*BT* 24-25). Under the rubric of Nietzsche's Dionysian aesthetic there is a counterpart to the Apollonian work, the somewhat confusingly named *Dionysian* work, in which the pessimistic Dionysian insight into the terrible truth of our existence is *recognized*, or acknowledged—hence the label "Dionysian" for such works—but at the same time *mediated* (not *overridden*, as it is in the Apollonian work) by the selecting, ordering, surface beauty, and illusions of Apollonian artifice. For Nietzsche, art of this kind—"the Apolline embodiment of Dionysiac insights and effects" (*BT* 44)—reached its apotheosis in fifth-century Greek tragedy, in which the terrible Dionysian insight, in its "pure" form, represented by the music and singing of the chorus, is tempered by Apollonian stagecraft, masks, and speeches. Within Nietzsche's two-part aesthetic, it is the features of the *Apollonian* work—the balance, order, beautiful surfaces, and emphasis on vision—that we recognize in "Sad-Eyed Lady."

"Sad-Eyed Lady" derives much of its Apollonian nature from the literary genre in which it participates, the courtly love song, usually understood to have originated with the troubadours of southern France in the Middle Ages, which represents an important part of the Western songwriting tradition that Dylan inherited.[5] Typical features of the courtly love song that appear in "Sad-Eyed Lady" are the otherworldly, unattainable, and exalted woman; the male singer/narrator who worships her and defers to her, as her devotee and servant; and the sublimation of the physical aspects of love into beautiful surfaces, woven out of two kinds of thread: refined, elaborate literary artifice, on the one hand, and, on the other, restrained, measured, and graceful music. It is the beautiful surface that gives the courtly love song, and, by extension, "Sad-Eyed Lady," their Apollonian character. Nietzsche was, in fact, an admirer of the troubadours and their poetic art, their term for which was "la gaya scienza," a term that Nietzsche took up as the subtitle, and, in German translation (*Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*), the

[5] Michael Coyle and Debra Rae Cohen, who interpret the song in biographical terms as a "celebration of [Dylan's] new wife," recognize "Sad-Eyed Lady"'s debt to the courtly love genre when they refer to the song's "Petrarchan catalogue of [Sara's] qualities" (149).

title, of one of his most important books, *The Gay Science*. The term summarized for him "that unity of *singer*, *knight*, and *free spirit* that is distinctive of the wonderful early culture of Provence" (*EH*, "The Gay Science").[6]

Another mark of the Apollonian in "Sad-Eyed Lady" is the primary sense to which it appeals—vision. With the exception of "prayers like rhymes," "voice like chimes," "matchbox songs," "gypsy hymns," and "phony false alarm," all the figurative language in the song refers to things seen, not heard; and the singer's "warehouse eyes," referenced at the end of each chorus, are a trope for the singer's prodigious ability to collect and store visual imagery, an ability to which the song itself, with its long list of visual attributes of the sad-eyed lady, lovingly laid out on view, gives ample testimony.[7] Vision is the paramount Apollonian sense for Nietzsche. The Apollonian, he tells us, "alerts above all the eye, so that it acquires power of vision. The painter, the sculptor, the epic poet are visionaries *par excellence*" (*TI* "Expeditions" 10). As I will argue below, the cumulative effect of "Sad-Eyed Lady"'s exhaustive "layering" of image upon image of the sad-eyed lady reflects an Apollonian "power of vision" on a monumental scale. Each of the song's repeated "with your"s, followed by a descriptor, is like a brush stroke added to a vast canvas that slowly takes shape before the mind's eye. And of course, in the chorus, the singer's "warehouse eyes" are joined by the sad eyes of the sad-eyed lady herself and of the "sad-eyed prophets," reflecting vision of a very different sort: the sad eyes of the lady and the prophets express the suffering, but also the tragic wisdom, associated with our insight into the terrible, Dionysian truth of our existence.

As an Apollonian work based on the courtly love song genre, "Sad-Eyed Lady," I will argue, makes two distinct claims, which, together, constitute its theme: first, in exploring the elusive, mysterious meaning of art—represented by the eponymous sad-eyed lady, the song's "love interest," but also Nietzsche's "saving sorceress" referred to above—as a response to the human yearning for stability and perfection in the face of suffering and endless flux, it draws attention to the *fragility* of art in playing the justificatory role that Nietzsche sees for it; second, it tells us that the only cure for the fragility of art is *more art*. If, as I hope to convince the reader in the discussion that follows, the theme of "Sad-Eyed Lady" is as I have claimed, then

[6] I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer who raised the importance of the courtly love song to "Sad-Eyed Lady"'s Apollonian nature and who reminded me of the link between Nietzsche's *Gay Science* and the art of the troubadours.

[7] The "warehouse eyes" are something of a two-edged sword, suggesting capaciousness and appreciation, but also, more negatively, acquisitiveness and a desire to possess. The latter feeling is ever-present in "Sad-Eyed Lady," associated as it is with the theme of art's fragility, as we shall see below. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer who opened *my* eyes to the "two-sidedness" in "warehouse eyes."

its *treatment* of its theme, particularly the second part, is thoroughly and fittingly Apollonian—the Nietzschean artform that emphasizes artifice above all. Like all Apollonian art, "Sad-Eyed Lady" confronts a terrible mystery that it seeks to transform into beautiful surfaces to delight the eye and, in so doing, achieve Nietzsche's Apollonian aesthetic ideal of expressing gratitude and love for its subject by immortalizing it. (I will have more to say about that ideal below). I will argue that the specific mystery that "Sad-Eyed Lady" confronts is the mystery of art, and what the song immortalizes and celebrates, through a monumental accumulation of images, is art, or artifice, itself.

Fragility

What I mean by the "fragility" of art is the elusiveness of its consolations, or its capacity to fail as a response to suffering. Sometimes the work fails us: however well intended, some art fails to capture our imagination or to bring us under its spell. Conversely, sometimes we fail the work: even works that we know and admire may not achieve their effects at certain times—when we are tired, overwhelmed, or distracted, for example. But there is a far more important kind of failure and disappointment associated with art and its fragility that arises from the fact that its consolations rely on a bubble—Apollo's illusions and artifice—that can burst at any time. It is this last point of failure that looms large in "Sad-Eyed Lady."

The singer in "Sad-Eyed Lady" tells us several things about the eponymous lady and his relationship to her that are critical to her as a symbol for art, and to the theme of art's fragility. Consider the first verse:

> With your mercury mouth in *The Missionary Times*,
> And your eyes like smoke, and your prayers like rhymes,
> And your silver cross, and your voice like chimes,
> Oh who, do they think, could bury you?
> With your pockets well protected at last,
> And your streetcar visions, which you place on the grass,
> And your flesh like silk, and your face like glass,
> Who could they get to carry you?[8]

[8] *Blonde on Blonde*. All quotations of song lyrics, including the choice of line breaks and punctuation, are, unless indicated otherwise, my transcriptions from the recording referenced. In assigning line breaks, I have

Most obviously, the verse tells us that the singer finds the sad-eyed lady beautiful, and, in some respects, strangely so: while "flesh like silk" reads like a straightforward, even cliched, description of feminine beauty, "eyes like smoke," and "face like glass" are more ambiguous, suggesting, from the outset, both the evanescence and the brittleness of the sad-eyed lady's capacity to enchant. Overall, the singer is fascinated by the sad-eyed lady's physical attributes, initiating in this first verse what will, in the course of the song, grow into a long list of descriptors.

The sad-eyed lady also represents something of great value to the singer, something which inspires awe (she is powerful, irrepressible, no one could "bury" her), but also devotion (no one is worthy of carrying her), suggesting a quasi-religious feeling of reverence. In connection with these notions of reverence and devotion, there are the references in the first verse to the "*Missionary Times*," the sad-eyed lady's "silver cross," and her "prayers like rhymes." More generally, "Sad-Eyed Lady" abounds, across all its verses and its chorus, with biblical and religious imagery ("the sad-eyed prophets"; "the kings of Tyrus";[9] "the dead angels"; and "Gypsy hymns") and, more specifically, *Catholic* imagery (the sad-eyed lady's "holy medallion" and "saintlike face"), related either to the sad-eyed lady herself or to her world. Further, the singer's question, "Who could they get to carry you?" evokes the icons, paintings, and statues carried in processions on Christian holy days. All this imagery emphasizes the sad-eyed lady's spirituality and otherworldliness and the feelings of awe and devotion that she inspires.

Another way that the song expresses awe and devotion is through its music and Dylan's vocal performance. The melody and rhythm of "Sad-Eyed Lady" set a calm, serious, restrained, elegiac tone that is characteristic of what Nietzsche calls "the music of Apollo," which he describes as having "a wave-like rhythm with an image-making power" that "keeps at a distance . . . the very element which defines the character of Dionysiac music," that being "the power of its sound to shake us to our very foundations" (*BT* 21). This is the tone that Andy Gill hears when he comments on the song's "measured grace and stately pace" and "depth of devotion," which he contrasts with the "jokey nihilism" that characterizes the other songs on *Blonde on Blonde* and on the album that preceded it, *Highway 61 Revisited* (1965) (131),

been guided by rhyme scheme and by the musical measures within which a line falls, and not by word or syllable count.

[9] "Tyrus" is the name in the King James Version of the Bible for the Lebanese port city Tyre. Ezekiel 28 denounces the king, or prince, of Tyrus for mistaking the accumulation of wealth for godliness and for hubristically declaring himself a god; the chapter prophesies the ultimate destruction of Tyrus at the hands of foreign armies carrying out God's will (Berlin and Brettler).

and that Tim Riley notes when he refers to the song's "withheld intensity" (141). The intro consists of the whisper of Dylan's harmonica playing the melody of the first line. When Dylan begins singing, his voice is solemn and reverent: there is not a trace of a sneer or blame, or bitterness, or the sarcastic glee of parody or satire—all hallmarks of Dylan's voice in the Dionysian songs of *Blonde on Blonde*. In addition, the song is counted in 6/8 time, which has the steady, "one-two" feel of the heartbeat of a healthy body at rest, suitable to a mood that is contemplative and adoring. The overall effect of voice and music in "Sad-Eyed Lady," consistent with the song's use of religious imagery, is to impress upon the listener a "depth of devotion," in Gill's words, toward its subject, the sad-eyed lady.

Finally, notwithstanding her other-worldly attributes that inspire devotion, the first verse tells us that the sad-eyed lady is very much *of this world*. Like art, the transcendence she offers is grounded in the mundane. She has "street car visions," her pockets are "well protected at last," suggesting she was once vulnerable to the very worldly harm of theft, and we learn in the second verse that she wears "basement clothes."

Further, the sad-eyed lady is not worldly in the sense that, Mary-like, she shares in the world's sufferings and perhaps even offers comfort from them (whatever it is that the singer wants—redemption, salvation—from his deity, it remains "unrequited"; she offers nothing and remains silent throughout); rather, she is a spiritual figure who is herself tainted and corrupted by the world. In the third verse, for example, the singer reminds her that the other-worldly devotion she inspires can degenerate into this-worldly sexual attraction:

> The kings of Tyrus, with their convict list,
> Are waiting in line for that geranium kiss.
> And you wouldn't know it would happen like this,
> But who among them really wants just to kiss you?

Note that, for the singer, the sad-eyed lady appears not to have anticipated this sexual turn, though, he seems to chide her, she probably should have.

Another example of the sad-eyed lady appearing tainted in the singer's eyes occurs in the fifth and final verse, where the singer mentions the sad-eyed lady's "magazine husband, who one day just had to go." If, for a moment, we use Dylan himself as an intertext to read Dylan, then, given the broadly anti-commercial, anti-mass culture tenor of many of his earlier songs, we can hear in the epithet "magazine husband," a strong suggestion of a failed marriage to someone who—in the singer's eyes at least—had more "gloss" than substance and

who projected an idealized form of masculinity created for mass consumption, raising questions about the sad-eyed lady's judgement.

The sad-eyed lady seems oblivious to the faults the singer finds in her relationships with the kings of Tyrus and the magazine husband, and her obliviousness, as much as the faults themselves, clearly hurts him: there is, for example, a strong tone of reproach in Dylan's voice when he sings the line, "But who among them really wants just to kiss you?" That tone, and, more generally, the disappointment aroused in the singer by the men who loom on the sad-eyed lady's horizons, provide the song with some conflict and dramatic tension. It is important, nevertheless, to stress that disappointment never completely overwhelms the expression of awe and reverence for someone who is powerfully attractive and endlessly fascinating (the song, of extraordinary length, is entirely concerned with the sad-eyed lady's appearance, accoutrements, and doings), but the actual possession of whom—by the singer, by the other men—is never even a question. When, in the chorus, the singer asks,

> Sad-eyed lady of the lowlands,
> Where the sad-eyed prophet says that no man comes,
> My warehouse eyes, my Arabian drums,
> Should I put them by your gate,
> Or, sad-eyed lady, should I wait?

his repeated acknowledgement that she resides where "no man comes," (not just the *singer*, but *no man*) and the recurring reference to the "gate," through which the singer never passes, and which seems to serve as a kind of shrine where offerings (the "warehouse eyes," the "Arabian drums") are left, show that he clearly believes that the sad-eyed lady, consistent with the conventions of the courtly love song discussed above, is ultimately beyond both *his* reach, *and the reach of anyone else*.

While the sad-eyed lady could be understood as an essentialized "eternal feminine" or female deity, she is, as we have seen, also one for whom the sacred always appears to be at risk of veering into the profane. On one level, the elusive sad-eyed lady is like life itself, with its pleasures and pains, its beauty and ugliness, and, counter to all of our yearnings, its refusal to "stay put" or "make sense." At the same time, the song emphasizes features of the sad-eyed lady that make her, with her capacity to enchant and disappoint, an apt symbol for both art and the fragility of the spell art casts—especially the art of Nietzsche's Dionysian aesthetic, which, while holding out the possibility of the non-supernatural "transcendence we can believe in"

(the sacred), does not shy away from what is ugly, terrifying, or mysterious in life (the worldly, the profane). Both the sad-eyed lady and the Apollonian and Dionysian works are beautiful; both hold the spectator in a kind of devotional spell; both are "worldly" in important respects; as a consequence of their worldliness, however, both have the capacity to fail and to disappoint. Therein lies their fragility.

The fragility of art is underscored by the song's figurative language. The features of the sad-eyed lady are rendered impressionistically, and the singer struggles to pin them down: over the song's five verses there are two descriptions of the sad-eyed lady's mouth ("mercury"; "cowboy"), three descriptions of her eyes ("like smoke"; "where the moonlight swims"; and, of course, "sad"), and three descriptions of her face ("like glass"; "hollow"; "saintlike"). Further, many of the descriptive words importantly suggest something elusive, fleeting, or hard to grasp: "mercury," "smoke," "moonlight." Much of the figurative language is surreal—often wildly, incongruously so ("warehouse eyes"; "geranium kiss"; "curfew plugs")—and reminiscent of Nietzsche's idea of language in the Dionysian work "straining to its limits *to imitate music*" (*BT* 34), in the sense that it evokes feelings or intuitions, but defies straightforward paraphrase. Both the impressionistic language, which struggles to realize its elusive subject, and the wild surrealism reflect how Nietzsche's "artistic distance" depends on a fragile balance that is always at risk of collapse.

More Art

Having addressed the first of my claims regarding "Sad-Eyed Lady"'s theme—art is fragile—I will now turn to the second: the answer to the fragility of art is *more art*. What I mean by "more art" is "Sad-Eyed Lady"'s lavish, multi-faceted use of literary and musical artifice to create a monumental, enduring bulwark against the terrible Dionysian forces that rule our lives. In a critical passage of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche grounds the order and beautiful illusions of the Apollonian work—"spreading a Homeric light and splendor over all things"—in a desire on the part of the "Dionysian man" and artist for "fixing, for immortalizing, for *being*," prompted by "gratitude and love" (*GS* 370).[10] Together, the desire to immortalize and the gratitude and love that prompt that desire form Nietzsche's ideal for the

[10] Nietzsche does not use the term "Apollonian" in this passage. But it is clearly Apollo who appears before us in the form of the Dionysian man under the influence of the desire to immortalize—with his "Homeric light and splendor"—who so strongly resembles the Apollonian artist, typified by Homer, whom Nietzsche extols in *The Birth of Tragedy*.

Apollonian work, and "Sad-Eyed Lady" brings both to bear on the theme of "more art." Gratitude and love express the theme through the song's awe-struck celebration, noted above, of the sad-eyed lady/art/artifice. It is the Apollonian drive to *immortalize*, however, that is most emphatic in "Sad-Eyed Lady." "Sad-Eyed Lady" achieves its immortalizing effect by two means: its sense of "stopped time," and its monumentalism.

The primary conceit of the Apollonian "immortalizing" and "fixing" impulse is that time and its ravages can be stopped. There are two elements of "Sad-Eyed Lady" that convey the sense of "stopped" time: its music and its treatment of narrative. It is the musical sense of stopped time—"Sad-Eyed Lady"'s dreamy, mesmerizing rhythm and melody—that most immediately strikes the listener and has also caught the attention of critics. Wilfrid Mellers, for example, aptly states that "Sad-Eyed Lady"'s music "effaces Time" and "enters a mythological once-upon-a-time where the clock doesn't tick" (403); Sean Latham cites "Sad-Eyed Lady" as an example, like "Tempest" (*Tempest*, 2012) and "Highlands" (*Time Out of Mind*, 1997), of one of Dylan's "sprawling epics," to which, in words that echo Mellers's, he attributes a "looping musical structure that could seemingly go on forever" (7); and Ricks observes that "Sad-Eyed Lady," like Swinburne's "Dolores," "moves in time to that of which it speaks, 'To a tune that enthralls and entices'" (98, internal quotation from "Dolores"). The sense of stopped time evoked by the music in "Sad-Eyed Lady" comes into sharp focus when we contrast it with the relentless forward momentum of the music that drives Miss Lonely headlong into the abyss in Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone" (*Highway 61 Revisited*).

A very different kind of stopped time, one that Latham also takes note of when he says of "Sad-Eyed Lady," that, like "Highlands," its "length fills time as the singer waits for something to happen" (7), stems from "Sad-Eyed Lady"'s almost entire lack of event or narrative. The song is made up, for the most part, either of static descriptions, or of equally static *hypothetical* actions: "*Should* I leave"; "*should* I wait?"; "Who *could* they get to carry you?"; "Who among them *would* try to impress you?" (emphasis added). The song offers just two passages in which event and conflict intrude on the otherwise sovereign, seamless flow of imagery. Although things "happen" in these passages, the ultimate effect of both is to reinforce the Apollonian value of immortalization and stopping time. One narrative passage involves the "kings of Tyrus," which I quoted above; the other involves the sad-eyed lady's resistance to the blandishments of the oddly feckless "farmers" and "businessmen":

> Oh, the farmers and the businessmen, they all did decide
> To show you where the dead angels are that they used to hide.
> But why did they pick you to sympathize with their side?
> How could they ever mistake you?
> They wished you'd accepted the blame for the farm,
> But with the sea at your feet, and the phony false alarm,
> And with the child of the hoodlum, wrapped up in your arms,
> How could they ever have persuaded you?

Both passages are set in what Mikhail Bakhtin calls the "absolute past" of the epic[11]—one of the ideal types of Apollonian art for Nietzsche—which, in its "epic completeness," is sealed off from the "spontaneity of the inconclusive present" (13, 27).[12] A key consequence of the "epic" qualities of these two narrative passages in "Sad-Eyed Lady" is that they project an atmosphere of stasis, but also, importantly, of distance, such that neither, ultimately, disturbs the overall beauty and calm of the surface imagery.

True to epic form, both narrative intrusions begin *in medias res*: we are not told how the kings of Tyrus came to be "waiting in line," nor do we know what went wrong with "the farm," or why the sad-eyed lady should take the blame for it. Importantly, we do not learn how either story ends. Both narratives are moments of larger stories, frozen and sealed off in the distance of Bakhtin's "absolute past." First, there is distance between the listener and the events related. The kings of Tyrus are biblical figures (see note 9 above), but even for the listener who lacks the background to make this connection, the kings—neither contemporary, nor historical—*sound* epic and distant. Second, there is distance between the sad-eyed lady and calamity: the song portrays the kings passively "waiting in line"—as hapless as the singer, who, in the chorus, repeatedly offers to wait before he makes his offering. There is nothing in this waiting to suggest the rush of transformative events in Bakhtin's "inconclusive present." As for the farmers and the businessmen, they are faceless, generic characters without a past or

[11] The "kings of Tyrus" passage is written in the present tense. Given, however, the many features that it shares with Bakhtin's epic, as I will set out below, it is reasonable to hear the *historical* present tense in these lines.

[12] Bakhtin:

> [o]ne may begin the [epic] story at almost any moment, and finish at almost any moment. *The Iliad* is a random excerpt from the Trojan cycle. . . . But epic completeness suffers not the slightest as a result. The specific "impulse to end"—How does the war end? Who wins? What will happen to Achilles? and so forth—is absolutely excluded from the epic. (31-32)

future, and the song presents the sad-eyed lady's misadventure with them, whatever it involved exactly, as something safely behind her now.

The sad-eyed lady's present position of safety, just noted, and the overall sense the song gives us that, whatever her past, the sad-eyed lady, "With [her] pockets well protected at last," has attained a certain degree of autonomy, stability, and even invulnerability ("Who among them could ever think he could destroy you?"), provide another touchpoint, relevant to the idea of immortalization, with Bakhtin's understanding of the epic. For Bakhtin, the stasis and distance that are true of epic plot are also true of epic *characters*: whatever happens to the epic hero, Bakhtin tells us, he remains the same "fully finished and completed being" (34). (In support of Bakhtin's view, we can contrast, for example, the fixity of Achilles or Odysseus as characters with a tragic, Dionysian character like Oedipus, who is transformed by his ordeal.) "Sad-Eyed Lady" provides a beautiful illustration of Bakhtin's static, epic character when the singer admires the sad-eyed lady: "With your silhouette, when the sunlight dims / Into your eyes, where the moonlight swims." In classic Apollonian form, the description presents the sad-eyed lady as a statue or a monument, around which the light changes during the day, revealing new surfaces to be admired and revered, but who herself remains, like Bakhtin's epic hero, the same "fully finished and completed being."

In the light of the foregoing discussion, it is instructive, once again, to contrast "Sad-Eyed Lady" with "Like a Rolling Stone." While the Apollonian sad-eyed lady appears before us like sculpture, "fully finished and completed," "Like a Rolling Stone" presents the Dionysian Miss Lonely at a tragic, threshold moment of crisis and flux—as a character she remains "in play," in Bakhtin's "spontaneity of the inconclusive present." (The two characters may, in fact, be related. The sad-eyed lady could be a sadder, wiser version of Miss Lonely—a later self who has gained tragic wisdom *after* her downfall.)

Many listeners are struck by "Sad-Eyed Lady"'s monumentalism, yet another key feature of the song's immortalizing effect. There is of course something monumental in the sheer length of the song—at just over eleven minutes, only "Desolation Row" (*Highway 61 Revisited*) matches "Sad-Eyed Lady" in length among the songs that came before it. More importantly, however, the images of the sad-eyed lady, though individually impressionistic and elusive, *collectively* form a monumental structure. Dylan's strategy in "Sad-Eyed Lady" is to *exhaust* the suffering and the mystery that his song confronts by *multiplying* and *layering* before the listener image upon image of the song's principal subject. Scobie: "[the sad-eyed lady] almost disappears in the haze of images that surround her" (144). The first verse, quoted above, is typical in this respect: every line involves a description of some aspect of the woman

around whom the song revolves. The song's solution to the problem of the fragility of art, then, is more art, or more artifice, in the form of a monumental accumulation of images of the sad-eyed lady. In this sense "Sad-Eyed Lady" is its own answer to the problem that it sets for itself. It transforms the pain of artistic failure and art's fragility, represented both by the mystery and elusiveness of the sad-eyed lady, and by her worldliness, into a monumental set of beautiful images, to be contemplated with gratitude and serenity. To achieve Apollonian immortalization by building a monument out of that which is ephemeral, impressionistic, and fleeting, is to provide reassurance, in symbolic form, of the power of Apollonian artifice, or art more generally, to enchant.

"Sad-Eyed Lady"'s structural elements—the repeated "With your"s and "your"s and its rhyme scheme—while imposing order on the profusion of imagery, also contribute to the song's monumentalism. "Sad-Eyed Lady"'s verses are comprised of a pair of tetrameter quatrains, with an *a a a b c c c b* rhyme scheme. The "laying on" of the thrice-repeated *a* and *c* rhymes echoes the "laying on" of images discussed above, and contributes to the feeling of the monumental in the same way. But note also how far apart the *b* rhymes are set from one another. In the way that they anticipate and call back to each other across a great distance, they appear as sturdy, stone pillars supporting a temple. Note further the ingenious, "ambidextrous" rhyme scheme of the chorus, in which the line "Where the sad-eyed prophets say that no man comes," manages to achieve both a slant, polysyllabic rhyme with the end of the line that precedes it ("lady of the lowlands"; "say that no man"),[13] *and* a different, masculine end rhyme with the line that follows it ("comes" and "drums"). The result is a kind of monumental "double reinforcement" of the lines of the chorus.

The final dimension of the monumental in "Sad-Eyed Lady" is its melody. In a *New Yorker* article, Alex Ross draws attention to the "grand" rising and descending scale of the song's chorus and to how, in the final chorus that follows the fifth verse,

> as the band keeps playing the [descending] scale, [Dylan] skates back up to the top D with each syllable. He sings on one note as the rest of the harmony moves around him: it's as if he's surveying the music from a summit. (n. pag.)

[13] This rhyme is more evident when Dylan sings it than it is when spoken—highlighting the importance of performance to Dylan's work.

To this lovely, apt image, we can add two other features of the melody of "Sad-Eyed Lady" that are important to the role that it plays in the song. First, with respect to the melody of the chorus, in addition to noting the ascending and descending pattern that Ross highlights, it is important to note that the melody ascends *sharply*—more than an octave—from the word "comes" to the syllable "ware" of "warehouse," and then, with the exception of the fifth and final chorus, in which Dylan holds the high D as Ross says, it descends *gradually*—one note short of a full octave, without missing any "steps" in the scale as it does so—between the syllable "ware" of "warehouse" and the word "drums." Second, the melody of the *verses* of "Sad-Eyed Lady" also features a rising and descending pattern that peaks on the high D (on the syllable "sil" of "silver" and the word "flesh," if we take the first verse as an example), although the interval of the ascent to the high D is smaller in the verses than it is in the chorus, and the downward movement is much shorter, and it "meanders" a bit (again, taking the first verse as an example, touching bottom on the words "chimes" and "glass").

The rising and descending melodic feature that is mirrored in the verses and in the chorus of "Sad-Eyed Lady" has several consequences. First, the mirroring helps bind the song together and adds to the sense of monumentalism; at the same time, it is subtle: the ascent and descent in the verses is an attenuated version of the "big" ascent and descent of the chorus, and, as a result, the braces holding the song together are partially hidden. Second, the bigger ascent and descent in the chorus, compared with the verses, contributes to the feeling of building to the "summit" that Ross observes. Third, however, the melodic ascent takes the singer to the summit on the word "warehouse," which, as an adjective to describe the singer's eyes, is a symbol for the singer's Apollonian power of vision. Ross's "summit" is one from which singer and listener alike can survey the music, but it is also one from which they can survey the beautiful, monumental Apollonian surfaces that the singer's words have spread before our mind's eye. (This effect is amplified when, after the fifth verse, as Ross notes, Dylan's voice holds the D on each syllable, while the band follows the scale down.) The sharp ascent of the melody in the chorus contrasts powerfully with its gradual, stepwise descent. Here, the melody seems to acknowledge the law—common to gravity, music, and life—that what goes up must come down. But with its measured descent, it wears that law lightly. To cite what was said about another famous ascent and descent, "One must imagine Sisyphus happy" (Camus, 91).

The Place of "Sad-Eyed Lady" in Dylan's Early Career

If we can fruitfully understand "Sad-Eyed Lady" as an Apollonian work from the perspective of Nietzsche's Dionysian aesthetic, then we can also say that it is Dylan's *first* song of this kind and that it marks a turning point in his early career. Critics have noted that "Sad-Eyed Lady" stands out vis-à-vis the songs that precede it on *Blonde on Blonde* and on Dylan's two prior albums, *Bringing It All Back Home* (1965) and *Highway 61 Revisited*. Ricks tells us that "Sad-Eyed Lady" is "unmistakably [Dylan's] and yet nothing like any other achievement of his" (101). Neil Corcoran hears in "Sad-Eyed Lady" an attempt at "self-abandonment," which is "perhaps actually realized in the weird (even for Dylan) and in some ways hilarious, and never repeated, vocal styling of ['Sad-Eyed Lady']" (169). As noted above, Gill comments on the lack in "Sad-Eyed Lady" of the "jokey nihilism" that characterizes many of Dylan's earlier songs.

"Sad-Eyed Lady" stands out as an Apollonian work because it appears against an immediate backdrop of so many songs that have the characteristics of the counterpart to the Apollonian work in Nietzsche's Dionysian aesthetic: the darker and more fragile *Dionysian* work, in which, as discussed above, the terrible Dionysian insight into the truth of our existence is mediated, but not overridden, by Apollonian artifice. Nietzsche grounds the Dionysian work in a desire on the part of the Dionysian man or artist "for destruction, for change, for novelty, for future, for *becoming*," which is "the expression of an overflowing energy pregnant with the future" (*GS* 370). The Dionysian man's desire for destruction is not nihilistic; rather, it is ultimately a *creative* desire—one "pregnant with the future," as Nietzsche says—to replace what *is* with something new, in order to taste and experience all the possibilities that life has to offer.

Tragedy is the archetypical destructive Dionysian artform for Nietzsche, of which "Like a Rolling Stone," in which the singer plays the role of chorus to Miss Lonely's downfall, is the classic example in Dylan's work. But for Nietzsche the destructive Dionysian impulse finds creative outlet in other ways as well, including parody, satire, and farce—highly corrosive examples of which we find in Dylan songs like "Subterranean Homesick Blues" and "Bob Dylan's 115th Dream" (*Bringing It All Back Home*), "Highway 61 Revisited" (*Highway 61 Revisited*), and "Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again" (*Blonde on Blonde*). All of these songs feature a carnivalesque overturning of social norms and a picaresque singer, who lives by his wits, and who is buffeted about by, and disrupts, established authority and hierarchies. Many of them are also notable for their combination of raucous, rock backing and

Dylan's accusatory, mocking, and sarcastic vocal performance, which is all of a piece with their destructive nature. But "Mr. Tambourine Man" (*Bringing It All Back Home*), which features an acoustic folk musical arrangement, is equally Dionysian, albeit concerned with destruction of a different kind. Here Dionysus himself, Nietzsche's "tempter god and born pied piper of consciences" (*BGE* 295), appears in the guise of the eponymous Tambourine Man, who holds out the promise of "jingle-jangle morning" and new beginnings, a promise built on the destruction of "evening's empire," which, Ozymandias-like, has "returned into sand."

The contrast between these Dionysian songs and the Apollonian "Sad-Eyed Lady" is stark, helping to make the case for "Sad-Eyed Lady" as an Apollonian "first" for Dylan. But there is another song on *Blonde on Blonde*, "Visions of Johanna," that appears to challenge "Sad-Eyed Lady"'s claim to "first place."[14] The point is not merely that "Johanna" exhibits elements of Apollonian artifice—that is true of all Dionysian works—but rather that certain of these elements loom large enough to give the impression, superficially at least, that "Johanna," like "Sad-Eyed Lady," is a purely Apollonian work.

The Apollonian characteristics that figure prominently in "Johanna" include a sense of the monumental,[15] the *dramatis personae* of the courtly love song (the exalted, elusive, unattainable woman and the male singer who is devoted to her), and a subdued, solemn, "serious" musical treatment.

At the same time, "Johanna" departs from the Apollonian aesthetic ideal in a number of important ways. For example, "Johanna" is *multi-voiced*—both with respect to Dylan's vocal performance, and with respect to the language that he uses—such that the singer's overall tone is by turns awe-struck and reverent, as in "Sad-Eyed Lady" (when referring to Johanna); sneering and sarcastic (as Scobie observes, vis-à-vis the "jelly-faced women" and "Little Boy Lost" [268]); anguished and self-pitying ("Oh, how can I explain? It's so hard to get on."); ironic, but also somewhat didactic (the museums/Mona Lisa episode); and world-wearily cynical (the peddler and countess episode). In addition to speaking in different voices of his own, reflecting different moods or attitudes, the singer channels the voices of others ("Voices echo"; "Hear the one with the mustache say"; "The peddler now speaks . . ., saying"; "like Louise always says"), each with their own intonation and vocabulary. In "Sad-Eyed Lady," however, a single awe-struck and reverent voice and language prevail, contributing to both

[14] All references to "Visions of Johanna" in the discussion that follows are to the version on *Blonde on Blonde*.

[15] Although "Johanna" is shorter than "Sad-Eyed Lady," it is among the longer songs on *Blonde on Blonde*, and the relatively long lines that open and close each of its verses contribute to a feeling of grandeur.

the sense of gratitude and love, and the uniformity of surface, so important to the Apollonian aesthetic. "Johanna" also exhibits, in contrast with the epic Apollonian ethos of *distance* on display in "Sad-Eyed Lady," an "up-close," novelistic concern with the idiosyncrasies of place and person. We have no sense at all of where or when "Sad-Eyed Lady" takes place—the very question seems wrong; but the famous first verse of "Johanna" transports us to what is unmistakably a mid-60s, New York bohemia at a very recognizable hour of the night. Further, the characters in "Sad-Eyed Lady" are few and distant, whereas in "Johanna" there are many characters, some of whom recur across verses, like Louise, but all of whom are rendered in telling details of speech, action, and appearance. "Visions of Johanna" is also full of dialogue and open-ended conflict. The conflicts are both interpersonal in nature (the singer and Little Boy Lost, for example), and philosophical (an abstract idea—"Infinity"—is tested, literally, when it "goes up on trial"; and the peddler's dialogue with the countess raises a question about what it means to "say a prayer" for someone "that's not a parasite"[16]). In other words, and notwithstanding its themes of being "stranded" and stuck, "Johanna" as a work brims with *movement* of one kind or another—the shifting scenes and characters, the clash of argument—which, as we have seen, is almost entirely absent from the "time-stopping," immortalizing "Sad-Eyed Lady." Indeed, when the question of immortalization comes up in the "museums/Mona Lisa" episode, "Johanna" treats it ironically and with suspicion, as simply mind-numbing "Infinity," about which "Voices echo, 'This is what salvation [i.e., immortalization in a religious sense] must be like after a while.'"[17] Finally, "Visions of Johanna" confronts us with a *failure* of Apollonian "power of vision," not its triumph: remarkably, and despite all the singer's talk about his "visions" of the titular woman, we never actually *see* anything of her. We only *hear*, repeatedly, at the end of each verse, about the various effects that the visions have on him. He can only *tell*, not *show*.[18] In contrast, the singer in "Sad-Eyed Lady" parades before the mind's eye of the listener, and presumably the sad eyes of the sad-eyed lady, who is his second-person audience, the fluid and fluent Niagara of imagery discussed above.

[16] For some insightful observations on the ambiguity in the peddler's offer to "say a prayer," see Scobie (270).

[17] John Herdman argues that the song implicitly associates Johanna herself with "the monotony and the lifelessness of the fixed and permanent" (30), a point that is relevant to my discussion below of the *singer's* lifelessness.

[18] There is one (very famous) moment in which the light of creativity blazes—one moment *for the singer* I stress, and not for Dylan as the creator of the song, who triumphs throughout—when the singer says, "The ghost of electricity howls in the bones of her face." So he *can* do it. But this brief breakthrough of Apollonian vision only makes what he is *not* able to do "all too concise and too clear."

It is beyond my scope here to provide a full analysis of "Johanna." But the failure of vision just noted points to at least one way of interpreting the song that also explains why, while it may look and sound in some respects like the purely Apollonian "Sad-Eyed Lady," it remains solidly Dionysian.[19] "Johanna" presents a first-person self-portrait of a character whose tragedy is his failed ambition to be an artist, a failure that can be understood to represent, more broadly, the sin of "lifelessness," the sin of failing to find meaningful engagement, of some kind, with life. (Under this interpretation, the literary soulmate of "Visions of Johanna" is Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*—another vivid masterpiece, told in the first person, about a resentful, life-denying man.) The singer/artist in "Visions of Johanna" wants to create a work of pure praise that will live up to his exalted visions of the woman who is the focus of the song. It is from this desire that the song derives its form of the courtly love song, which also gives it the characteristics of the Apollonian work. In a sense, Dylan the artist allows his character, the singer, to dictate form. But that character is incapable of filling his form with content. His error, and what sets him apart from the singer in "Sad-Eyed Lady," is that he believes that the material for art lies in some ineffable "beyond" and not with what is at hand. He says of the very "this-worldly" Louise, for example, "she's *just* near" (emphasis added)—i.e., *merely* near, which means that "near" is never adequate for him. On this last point, Pamela Thurschwell quite astutely says of Louise that she is "too fleshly to fulfil the . . . muse function" for the singer and "too accessible" (268).

If we apply to "Visions of Johanna" Timothy Hampton's very useful historical framework for understanding visionary literature, we can see the singer, far behind his rightful time, taking, or trying and failing to take, an *earlier* and outmoded approach to the visionary work, epitomized by Blake, under which the visionary experience—through God, or through "Romantic notions of 'imagination' and 'fancy'"—"overtakes" the visionary from outside. In contrast, Dylan's visionary aesthetic is "modernist," Hampton argues, taking a this-worldly cue from Rimbaud, "the first great nonmetaphysical visionary" (*Bob Dylan*, 88). The result for Dylan is a "poetry of the everyday," with which, Hampton observes, he "teach[es] us that beauty is all around us" ("'Nothing, Really Nothing'"). Dylan the artist appreciates how rich the singer's "here and now" is in settings, people, conversation, and ideas, all of which he transforms into a work of extraordinary beauty. It is precisely this richness that the singer, in his obsession with the other-worldly Johanna, treats with contempt or indifference. To cite just

[19] Many interpretations are, of course, possible. For a particularly luminous and close reading of "Johanna" and its themes, see Scobie (254-275).

one example of the singer's blindness to the beauty around him, consider his reaction when Louise "holds a handful of rain, tempting you to defy it." Louise's lovely, fragile, dexterous piece of performance art, which in a somewhat scrambled fashion seems to enact Cummings's line "nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands," crackles with intertextual electricity, yet does nothing to move or to enchant the singer; rather, the challenge in Louise's performance (while *she* defies physics, she tempts her *audience*, the singer, to defy that she is doing so), which is the defiant challenge of all genuine art, is one that the singer would prefer to ignore. For the singer, Louise's gesture is just one more annoying distraction on the dreary list that immediately follows the "handful of rain" line, one more of the "tricks" that the night plays, along with the coughing heat pipes, "when you're trying to be so quiet" (presumably the better to attend to the absent Johanna). Notwithstanding its Apollonian features, "Visions of Johanna" is ultimately a cautionary tale that showcases a form of Dionysian destruction that is too dark to be anything but tragic. The singer is ultimately undone by the visions that he is incapable of realizing as art: "And these visions of Johanna are now all that remain."

If we accept "Sad-Eyed Lady" as an Apollonian "first" for Dylan, the story of its place in his early career is still not straightforward. First, as we have seen, "Visions of Johanna," which Dylan wrote before "Sad-Eyed Lady," and which appears before that song on *Blonde on Blonde*, already marks a noticeable move, within the bounds of what remains nevertheless a Dionysian work, toward a greater emphasis on Apollonian effects. Second, although things would never be the same again, "Sad-Eyed Lady" did not immediately usher in a period of *Apollonian* songs for Dylan. Instead, with the turn toward Apollo in "Sad-Eyed Lady," Dylan made a break with the past that opened the door to the radically new *Dionysian* songs that appear on *John Wesley Harding* (1967), the album with which he followed *Blonde on Blonde*. Like all Dionysian artworks, these songs temper the destructive Dionysian insight with the beauty of Apollonian artifice; but unlike their pre-"Sad-Eyed Lady" predecessors, including "Johanna," they foreground Apollonian balance, restraint, and order as a means of achieving "artistic distance" from the profoundly tragic, Dionysian worldview that underlies them. They inherit from the Apollonian "Sad-Eyed Lady" its more subdued music and Dylan's new "chastened," elegiac vocal tone (the sneer, the sarcasm, which still figure in "Visions of Johanna," are gone), but they replace its lush orchestration with one that is radically simplified, and its surreal, impressionistic language with a spare, unadorned lyrical form. To borrow words Nietzsche uses to describe the "deeper secrets" of the tragedies of Aeschylus, what we find in the songs of *John Wesley Harding* is "something incommensurable in every feature and every line, a certain deceiving definiteness, and at the same time a puzzling depth, indeed infinity, in

the background" (*BT* 58). It is precisely this "puzzling depth" that "Sad-Eyed Lady" is lacking and that both distinguishes it, as an Apollonian song, from the Dionysian songs of *John Wesley Harding*, and marks it as a turning point—different from what came before, but different as well, in different ways (most notably in its continued use of highly surreal language), from what followed.

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Appendix: Nietzsche as a Source for Dylan

Over the years, Dylan has made a handful of references to Nietzsche and at least one reference to the Dionysian:

- Dylan's liner notes for *Highway 61 Revisited* (1965) feature a vignette in which a character named Paul Sargent "comes by . . . in an umpire's suit & some college kid who's read all about Nietzsche comes by & says 'Nietzsche never wore an umpire's suit' & Paul says 'You wanna buy some clothes, kid?'"

- In "Joey" (*Desire*, 1976), Joey Gallo does "ten years in Attica, / Reading Nietzsche and Wilhelm Reich."

- Dylan mentions Nietzsche in a talk at a concert in Toronto in 1980, during his Christian period, in which he describes speaking to a hostile audience at a concert he had given the year before in Tempe, Arizona:

> It says things in the Bible that I didn't really learn until recently, and I really mentioned these [at the concert the year before] because there are higher learning people there, preaching their philosophy. So people can study all the different philosophies . . . Well, I definitely recall reading Nietzsche and those people like that. (quoted in Heylin, *Shades* 353)

- In his notes on "Stack A Lee," from *World Gone Wrong* (1993), Dylan says of the eponymous murderer, "Stack's in a cell, no wall phone. he is not some egotistical degraded existentialist dionysian idiot, neither does he represent any alternative lifestyle scam . . . ."

- In *Chronicles: Volume One* (2004) Dylan makes two mentions of Nietzsche. The first: "In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche talks about feeling old at the beginning of his life . . . I felt like that, too" (73, ellipsis in original). The second:

> [Dave] Van Ronk's wife, Terri, . . . was just as outspoken and opinionated as Dave was, especially about politics—not so much the political issues but rather the highfalutin' theological ideas behind political systems. Nietzschean politics. Politics with a hanging heaviness. (263)

- In *The Philosophy of Modern Song* (2022), in his discussion of "Where or When," performed by Dion and the Belmonts, Dylan notes that one of the characters in the 1937 Rodgers and Hart musical, *Babes in Arms*, from which the song originated, is a "Nietzsche-spouting communist" (331). Further, the lyrics of "Where or When" echo, in a loose way, Nietzsche's idea of the "eternal return": "Some things that happen for the first time / Seems [sic] to be happening again," (Belmonts); and Dylan, in his commentary, describes the song as "one repetitious drone through space, plugging the same old theme, nonstop over and over again . . . ," in which "[h]istory keeps repeating itself" (327).

What are we to make of all this?

Based solely on Dylan's reference to Nietzsche in the liner notes to *Highway 61 Revisited*, Clinton Heylin suggests that Nietzsche influenced the writing of "Desolation Row," a song on the same album (*Revolution*, 248), but Heylin's inference relies on the slimmest of circumstantial evidence. Heylin also suggests that the title of Dylan's book *Tarantula* is a reference to the chapter "On the Tarantulas" from Part II of Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and that Nietzsche's book may have "served as some kind of model" for Dylan's (*Shades*, 124), but he provides no support for these suggestions.[20] It is clear, nevertheless, that by the time Dylan released *Highway 61 Revisited* in 1965 he had at least *heard* of Nietzsche and had some idea of how college students might bandy his name about and invoke it as a kind of "trump card" in arguments. Perhaps as well, given his comments on "Where or When," Dylan is aware of Nietzsche's eternal return, but it is just as possible that he is simply responding to the themes of the *song*, which, although it does not explicitly mention Nietzsche or the eternal return, may bear an actual Nietzschean influence, since Nietzsche is in fact discussed in *Babes in Arms* (See *Wikipedia* entry). It's telling, however, that Dylan's "college kid" has "read all about" Nietzsche, but hasn't necessarily r*ead* Nietzsche. In fact, the same may be true of Dylan himself. All of Dylan's references to Nietzsche above have a superficial feel to them ("Nietzsche and those people like that"), as if Nietzsche is little more than a name that Dylan can recognize in a line-up of philosophers. Even Dylan's quotation, or paraphrase, from *Beyond Good and Evil* is suspect: I have not been able to find anything even remotely resembling it in that book. But even if Dylan *has* read Nietzsche, as he implies with his paraphrase from *Beyond Good and Evil*, and as he claimed to have to the audience in Toronto, there is nothing of Nietzsche that comes through in these references and "Nietzsche sightings" that would suggest a serious influence.

[20] Goldblatt and Necarsulmer also point to the similarity in the titles of the two works, but, as noted above, they make no claims of influence.

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Commentary

Boy from the North Country: Sam Sussman's Overly Cautious Autofiction

By Paul Haney

If you write a novel, readers will want to know which parts of your story are true; a memoir, which parts are made up. Sam Sussman's *Boy from the North Country*—an "auto-fictional novel," according to its publisher, Penguin finds itself with a foot in both camps. What's real? What's made up? What are readers to believe?

Based on an essay-length "memoir" titled "The Silent Type: On (possibly) being Bob Dylan's son" published in *Harper's Magazine*,[1] this book-length expansion raises questions about fiction's ability to tell a story that is purportedly true. That "true" story involves a critically ill mother sharing profound philosophies of healing and love, an absent father who may or may not be Bob Dylan, and an aspiring novelist protagonist ever wondering what portion of his literary ambition, along with his uncanny resemblance to the hyper-literate rockstar, comes from Dylan's own genes.

Quite a dream for a young writer to embrace, and not without reason. Between the *Harper's* "memoir," the novel itself, and Sussman's own comments after the book's publication in September 2025, the prospect of his being Dylan's son seems entirely plausible. That plausibility comes without DNA evidence, or any statement from the Dylan camp, or verification from his mother, Fran Sussman, who died in 2017 without, it seems, ever confirming or denying her son's suspicions. His claims are all we have, yet Dylan's child or not, Sussman isn't stumping for restitution. He's been made whole, he claims, by his mother's lessons of healing through love. Rather than a forensic account of Sussman's parentage, then, *Boy from the North Country* stands as a tender depiction of a mother-son relationship as he comes home to care for her through cancer treatments.

It's a moving book, melding complex family dynamics with contemplations of art and creativity. By writing his story as fiction yet telling everyone it's true, however, Sussman in effect blurs the lines between imagination and reality. For that reason, I can't help but wonder if Sussman's choice to write autofiction may have done a disservice to his story, his readers, and his claims of "(possibly) being Bob Dylan's son."

[1] Sussman, Sam. "The Silent Type: On (possible) being Bob Dylan's son." *Harper's Magazine*, May 2021. https://harpers.org/archive/2021/05/the-silent-type-on-possibly-being-bob-dylans-son/

Autofiction

"You have to find the form that fits the mess," Sussman told David Segal, paraphrasing Samuel Beckett[2] in a September 2025 *New York Times* profile titled "Is That Bob Dylan in the Mirror?" The form Sussman landed on for *Boy from the North Country*, apparently, lay rooted in autofiction. A "Summary" embedded in the book's copyright page reads, "An auto-fictional novel about the courage and resilience of motherhood as well as a window into the life of Bob Dylan at a peak moment of his creative output." Interestingly, "auto-fictional" here is both hyphenated and adjectival, doubly downplayed as an appendage to "novel." It's a conspicuous choice of genre, twice removed, it seems, from the reality it seeks to portray.

Part autobiography, part fiction, according to Stephen Carlick on Penguin's "What Is Autofiction?" webpage, the autofiction subgenre "was coined in the late 1970s by French novelist Serge Doubrovsky, to describe his novel *Fils*." Doubrovsky pursued "a work of 'fiction, of events and facts strictly real'" (Carlick). In the ensuing decades, by projecting fictional elements onto their life stories, authors have better coped with their more difficult experiences by transforming them. Famous examples include Karl Ove Knausgård's *My Struggle* series; Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*; and Annie Ernaux's *The Years*. Jack Kerouac might've called these "true-story novels," a phrase he coined and practiced with the Duluoz Legend: *On The Road*, *The Dharma Bums*, *Desolation Angels*, and many more. Along with other so-called singer-songwriters like Joni Mitchell (*Blue*), Carly Simon ("You're So Vain"), and James Taylor ("Fire and Rain"), Dylan himself may have worked in the genre with such autofictional songs as "Day of the Locusts," "Sara," and "Idiot Wind." Long before Dylan, and Kerouac, Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* may have been "the first work of autofiction" (Carlick). Fittingly, Sussman regularly harkens back to Proust, both in the novel through the fictionalized voice of Norman Raeben—modernist painter and Dylan's actual mid-70s painting teacher—and through interviews he's given and articles he's written to help market this release.

A list of authors and musicians like the one above sets a high bar, and though talented, Sussman hasn't quite reached the stylistic heights of Knausgård, Vuong, and Ernaux, let alone Dylan, Kerouac, and Proust. A week after that initial *New York Times* profile, book critic

[2] The quote appears in *Steal like an Artist* by Austin Kleon (Workman Publishing Group, 2012), whose website links to the blog *Rick on Theater*, which references Tom F. Driver's interview with "Beckett by the Madeleine" in *Columbia University Forum* 4 (Summer 1961): 21-25. In its original: "To find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artists now."

Dwight Garner followed up with his own review, calling Sussman's writing "florid, therapized and sentimental. It is radically un-Dylanesque." Continuing his assessment, Garner writes, "[Sussman's] novel is bereft of drama and close observation. Almost everything in it is rounded off and softened, like pebbles on a shore. If not for the Dylan angle, we wouldn't be talking about it at all." This criticism feels excessive, especially since the Dylan angle is, after all, inextricable from the book, its characters, and their desires. Garner's hypothetical version of this novel bereft of Dylan remains impossible to grasp, and once readers invest in the heartfelt encounters between mother and son that propel the novel we do have, their reward is the first-hand experience of that caretaking drama, especially when the mother has left so much unsaid. All the while, the possibility of the mother's death works like a ticking clock on her sharing the information Sussman's stand-in, Evan, needs to know about his father. On this front, even if sentimental, the book works well. One still wonders, however, why Sussman chose to hide behind Evan to begin with.

By resorting to autofiction, Sussman effectively disowns this story which he has elsewhere professed to be true. Evan, the novel's first-person protagonist, happens to be Sam Sussman's real middle name. His mom, Fran in real life, is now June, a summer sunshine figure who radiates positivity even through her battle with cancer, and in the wake of multiple non-Dylan-related sexual traumas in her past. A sister mentioned in the *Harper's* "memoir" never appears in the novel, so one wonders where she disappeared to during Fran/June's chemotherapy treatments. One wonders, too, about the reliability of Fran/June's account of painting classes with Norman Raeben, who "paced and painted and talked in a rolling monologue that seemed to have begun in the Russian shtetl where he was born" (97). Similarly, one questions intriguing new details about how Dylan came to write "Tangled Up in Blue," his immersion in Petrarch sparked by a book from Fran/June's shelf, and Dylan soon "talking about how Petrarch stood between everything significant, touching God with one hand and man with the other, the past with one hand and the future with the other" (137). After Dylan finally plays her the song that places that "Italian poet" in the 13th century, June informs him that "'Petrarch lived in the fourteenth century'." Dylan' response? A simple, "'Oh, right!'" (149), though he never did make that correction. One might even doubt Sam/Evan's own memory of Dylan scooping him up off the couch as a little boy, recalling, "In his embrace was the warmth of the fire. With a longing I could not explain I wanted him to stay with my mother and me" (47). All of these incidents and more coalesce in a fictional soup, the important story Sussman and his mother have to tell blending in with the broth.

Memoir

While the novel *Boy from the North Country* might make one wonder where truth ends and fantasy begins, at least Sussman's original writing on the topic of his parentage stands on sure footing. The 2021 *Harper's* "memoir" begins in 1974, with Sussman placing his mother, an aspiring actor, and Dylan together in the painting class of "the eccentric Ukrainian-Jewish artist Norman Raeben" (since Ukraine was part of the U.S.S.R. until its collapse in 1991, Raeben could've been a "Ukrainian Jew" born in a "Russian shtetl"). Leveraging his fame as a tool for courtship, Dylan soon asks Sussman's mother to host a party at her Upper East Side apartment. At the end of the night, after the last guest leaves, he hangs around to seduce her. The couple begin quote-unquote "dating" and, by the third paragraph, Sussman spills the goods: that evocative fifth verse from "Tangled Up in Blue," the one where "She lit a burner on the stove," procured "a pipe," and "opened up a book of poems … by an Italian poet / from the thirteenth century"—yeah, that really happened. "She" was his mom, nearly two decades before he was born. That is, as much as a character from a set of lyrics can be any one person, as opposed to a literary figure representing any and all people, a point Sussman readily concedes by the end of his piece. When he and his mom attend a Dylan concert in Bethel Woods, New York[3] and Dylan performs "Tangled Up in Blue," the two burst into laughter, then tears. They understand that Dylan's "infamously mutating lyrics … must have become about almost anything other than the young actress in the East 70s walk-up."

To believe Sussman's *Harper's* piece is to believe Sussman's mother. This leap of faith is made more possible because of the genre label, even if our information comes third-hand, via Sussman, via his mom, who died of cancer in 2017. And whether or not this "Tangled Up in Blue" claim or any other claim is verifiably "true," we must at least believe that *he* believes it, or that he would tell us if he didn't. Such is the contract of nonfiction: authors provide a good faith version of the truth as they understand it, and readers regard their writing as at least a version of the truth. As Vivian Gornick writes in her classic text, *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative*,

> The poet, the novelist, the memoirist—all must convince the reader they have some wisdom, and are writing as honestly as possible to arrive at what they

[3] Presumably they attended this concert on August 11, 2011.

> know. To the bargain, the writer of personal narrative must also persuade the reader that the narrator is reliable. (14)

When authors prove unreliable—when they break that contract—readers feel misled, and scandal ensues: think John D'Agata, whose "lyric essay" failed *Harper's* fact-checking, which must've taken the same rigorous look at Sussman's work; James Frey, who received a public scolding from Oprah; Margaret B. Jones, who was a fake persona that fell apart as soon as she went on book tour. Each of these writers took liberties the genre hasn't traditionally afforded, like changing key details, making up new episodes, and inventing entire histories. In short, they were all dishonest, forsaking whatever wisdom they may have brought to the bargain.

A seeming exception to this nonfiction agreement, of course, is Dylan's own memoir, *Chronicles, Volume One*. It's a memoir and not an autobiography because it strives to make sense of a few discrete eras of the author's life, rather than accounting for his life as a whole. It's nonfiction because it deals ostensibly with what's real, though anyone consulting the book for an accurate timeline of events would be sorely disappointed. Its wisdom derives from Dylan extracting meaning from experience, discovering what he already knows. Its honesty lies in its fidelity to Dylan's own mind, the associative leaps, the quickly sketched characters like "gaunt and battle-scarred" Ray Gooch (26) and "cool as pie" Chloe Kiel (102) from New York City in the early 60s, or Sun Pie who "repaired boats in a trussed-up backyard" (204) outside New Orleans in the late 80s. Except that these characters all appear to be fabrications from Dylan's own mind. They fill in the gaps between major, well-known players like Daniel Lanois and Archibald MacLeish, but even Dylan's interactions with MacLeish in *Chronicles* appear grossly embellished against details from theater producer Stuart Ostrow's own 2005 memoir.[4] The most we can say is that Dylan's memoir reflects Dylan's experience of his own life, even when he recycles other people's words.[5] In this way, *Chronicles* challenges our understanding of the memoir genre: its conventions, its relationship to the truth, and all the apparent multitudes the genre may contain.

Above all, we call *Chronicles* a memoir because Dylan and his publisher marketed it as such. And yet, in speaking of the book's origins to Mikal Gilmore of *Rolling Stone* in 2001, Dylan said, "I guess I call it novelistic writing." But it's real, or real enough, so it's not exactly

[4] In his essay "*Oh Mercy*: Bob Dylan, *Chronicles*, and the Mysterious Hand Injury" (*Medium*, September 2, 2019), Fred Bals charts these discrepancies and more while referring the Ostrow memoir, *Present at the Creation: Leaping in the Dark and Going Against the Grain* (Applause, 2005).

[5] As Scott Warmuth has so diligently shown.

a *novel*, even if *novelistic*, meaning character-driven, alive with detail, and episodic. Dylan went on:

> It's a biography. It's biographical, in every sense of the word. But there's more to it than that, because I'm a public figure, and so I can mention all kinds of things that have been written about already, but I bring a different resonance to it. My story on myself would have to be more interesting than anybody else that could look at it from the outside. Right?

Except that, for it to be a biography, Dylan would've needed to have written the book about a public figure other than himself. Or a third-person biographer would've needed to write the story of his life, such as Michael Gray, Robert Shelton, or Howard Sounes. The National Book Critics Circle did name *Chronicles* a finalist for Biography/Autobiography in 2004, and in the intervening years began to separate biography and autobiography in their annual awards. In this case, "autobiography" serves as a catch-all, it seems, for what we understand "autobiography" to mean—a comprehensive account of one's own life—and memoirs. Within this model, *Chronicles* remains a memoir because, even with its borrowings and confabulations, its focus remains on exploring distinct realms of memory for larger truths.

Truth in written texts is a notoriously slippery concept, and memory itself a fallible tool. All the same, memoirists who don't possess Dylan's ability to market his hallucinations as figments of reality do well to lay out the facts as they understand them. Sussman's *Harper's* "memoir" fits the bill, accounting for his mother's holistic health work, his rocky relationships with the men she dated throughout his youth, and the frequent, unbidden comparisons of his looks to Dylan's. Through it all, Sussman contemplates what it might mean for a storyteller like himself to be made of the same DNA as one of the most significant artists of our time. That Dylan and Sussman's mom supposedly rekindled their romance nine months before Sussman was born seems to seal the deal, and yet—thankfully, judiciously—the weight of evidence linking him to Dylan isn't the main point. As with the novel, Sussman's mother's love wins the day. Her catchphrase-of-sorts, "We are here … to take the pieces of the universe we have been given, burnish them with love, and return them in better shape than we received them," provides the guiding theme. In the final lines, Sussman concludes, "I am never sure how being Bob Dylan's child would help me come closer to beauty or truth. But I know the infinite gifts of being my mother's son."

The thoughtfulness of Sussman's *Harper's* "memoir" preempts the inevitable chorus of naysayers who would accuse him of opportunism. He navigates the tricky straits of possibly being Dylan's son with writerly aplomb. In its earnestness, the essay asks for nothing more than an audience to serve as witness to Sussman's lived story. As an added benefit—and perhaps proof of concept—Sussman also provides new information about how Dylan composed *Blood on the Tracks*, particularly "Tangled Up in Blue." The "memoir" label makes this graceful landing possible, creating the conditions for the author to stand by his words. No wonder Sussman got a book out of the deal. In his expansion, though, by fictionalizing his story, Sussman chose to forfeit the credibility that goes with the memoir genre, and it's hard to say why.

Every facet of the *Harper's* "memoir," from the "Tangled Up in Blue" anecdote, to the mom's series of boyfriends, to the Dylan concert in Bethel Woods appears at length in the novel, though, as befits a work of autofiction, Sussman takes liberties with timelines and details. That Dylan concert, for instance, while occurring years before Fran's battle with cancer, in the book becomes a major plot point where Evan pushes his curiosity. After an ecstatic reaction to "Tangled Up in Blue," June, in a dip between her weekly chemotherapy treatments, is too depleted to stay for the rest of the show. Sussman writes, "My mother touched my arm. I could see the pain in her eyes. She didn't need to say anything" (199). With Dylan's voice still rattling through the venue, amid the mother-and-son's arduous trek to the car, Sussman adds, "I hated my selfish need to know the truth" (199). Even so, in the car ride home, Evan poses the question directly to his mom: "I am twenty-six. I have every right to know" (200). Rather than answer, June keeps her silence while "[t]ears glistened on her cheek" (200).

Readers of this autofiction might not find Evan's need to know the truth selfish at all. The question of his father remains relevant, especially when his father might be *Bob Dylan*, and especially when he himself claims of Dylan's music, "His songs had given me a way to feel and live" (20). In this moment, though, with his mother in anguish, readers might understand Evan's self-blame. He feels as if he's hounding his mother, who wants to enjoy what might be the last days she has alive with her son. A few days later, while June is at the doctor's office in Manhattan receiving another chemotherapy treatment, she tells Evan how, presumably in the early 90s,

> Dylan called. He was going through a difficult period, said he'd lost his sight again. Raeben was dead by then. I was in an unhappy marriage with Simon. I wanted to be

> borne back to that earlier time in my life. Dylan and I started seeing one another and it was like old times. It went on that way for years. (218)

This is new information for Evan, who exclaims, "It went on that way for years? You told me you saw him once." (218). But June shuts him down, seeming to anticipate where his thoughts are going. "Please listen to what I'm saying, Evan. Please" (218). This plea from June to *listen* recurs each time Evan gets too close to the truth, allowing her to either change the subject or interject some bromide about "find[ing] the unexpected joy in the way things are" (225). How *frustrating* this is for the reader, for the novel's putative hero, June, to be so skilled at redirection. And how fascinating, too, to watch Evan attempt to balance his responsibility as a caretaking child with the enforced ignorance his mother has cast upon him.

In these emotional dynamics lie the makings of a compelling memoir, one where the author comes to terms with the past and helps the reader understand more precisely what it felt like to live within that bind. The autofiction version, though, makes plot points out of this rich emotional matrix. And it isn't that the plot doesn't work, but more to the point, that the takeaways could've been so much greater within the context of nonfiction.

Caution

"Completely unusable," said Fabio Fantuzzi, a leading Norman Raeben scholar who has written at length about the painter's influence on Dylan.[6] Fantuzzi was comparing Sussman's novel to another book, *The Creative Path* by Caroline Schlam,[7] in that they both embellish experience for narrative effect, rendering their accounts void for scholarly research. I got Fantuzzi on the phone while writing this piece, because *Boy from the North Country* brings to life moments from Raeben's painting studio, which Dylan began to frequent in early 1974. Fran Sussman was in attendance, too, Fantuzzi says: "I know that for a fact." Painting, for Fran Sussman, at the behest of her coach Stella Adler, was a way of improving her acting. According to Fantuzzi, she was less invested in painting than she was in connecting with Dylan.

[6] From The Village Trip website: Fabio Fantuzzi is a scholar, a music critic, and a songwriter. He is also a Marie-Curie Fellow at Columbia University and Ca' Foscari University, directing the project POYESIS, which studies artist Norman Raeben and his influence on various leading artists, including Stella Adler and Bob Dylan. He co-edited the book *Bob Dylan and the Arts* (ESL, 2020).

[7] Schlam, Caroline. *The Creative Path: A View from the Studio on the Making of Art.* Allworth Press, 2018.

"She was not really attending all that much," Fantuzzi told me, "but when she figured out Dylan was there, she ended up hooking up with him."

In Sussman's novel, however, June expounds on Raeben's artistic philosophies, ranges over which artists he admires (Chagall) and which he detests (Warhol), and even details how he slops brown paint across canvases of students whose uninspired work offends him. She seems to be a regular in the class who happens to be there when "The door opened and an unshaven man with shaggy hair wandered into the studio" (101). Sussman writes this passage through June's own perspective: "He wore dirty jeans and a rumpled shirt and looked like he'd slept the night in Central Park. I couldn't say where I knew him from" (101). The man, of course, is Dylan, and though imagined, these scenes do feel informed at least by research and firsthand knowledge.

Unimpressed with whatever fame Dylan may have garnered in music, Raeben eventually turns his critical eye on Dylan's attempts at art. In the studio, when the class critiques Dylan's painting of a fish, Raeben lays in: "'You are imagining without seeing,' he declared. 'You want to transform a fish into a feeling? Fine. We are all here to transform objects into feelings. First you must see the object. Here I do not see a fish but only your imagination of a fish'" (106). As with everything else in this book, this recreated scene, with the class of painters gathered around Dylan's easel, seems entirely plausible. Fantuzzi even cites "at least two or three occasions where Raeben picked on Dylan directly." Fantuzzi has interviewed Sussman before, for research purposes, and finds Sussman "fairly knowledgeable about the core aspects of Raeben's ideas."[8] To Sussman's credit, this knowledge about Raeben breathes life into June's narrated scenes. Had he been transparent with readers about how he knows what he knows—what his mother said, what came through research, what he imagined—readers would at least know where they stand. His wisdom, plus honesty, could've bestowed reliability.

That said, June's ability to narrate scenes in the narrative at all is actually a strength of the autofiction form. Since she's no longer alive to stand by her words, we'll never know how Fran might've told the story, or if she ever would've. Still, three times during the novel Sussman shifts from Evan's into June's first-person perspective. All three times occur while June is sitting for chemotherapy, with Evan listening. Whether Sussman is aware of the

[8] More of Sussman's Raeben insights appear in another nonfiction piece, an article he wrote for *Forward* titled "Bob Dylan, my mother, and the unknown painter behind *Blood on the Tracks*: Dylan Once Said That Norman Raeben Was the Man Who 'Taught Me How to See.'" 15 Sept. 2025, https://forward.com/culture/music/765628/norman-raeben-bob-dylan-sam-sussman-boy-from-the-north-country/

significance of June's habit of knitting while she holds forth—*spinning a yarn*, as it were, or knitting together a text—is unclear. But the monologues themselves are totally absorbing, as even Garner admits, writing, "June's segments constitute a novella of their own and are easily the best thing in the book." The chapter where Dylan composes *Blood on the Tracks* finds Dylan coming and going from June's apartment, driven by a frenetic energy, sometimes staying several nights in a row, other times disappearing for more than a week. During one of his absences, June peeks into his infamous Red Notebook, now housed at the Morgan Library & Museum in New York City. In it, she finds "half-formed sketches, fragments of stanzas jotted at odd angles, lines of poetry written over one another, every bit of handwriting illegible (144). Meanwhile, June has gotten a break in her acting career, playing the title character in an underground production of the Henrik Ibsen play, *Hedda Gabler*. This chapter culminates with two creative forces, June and Dylan, both harnessing Raeben's artistic philosophies to reach new heights in their work, even if one remains an obscure performance and the other changes the course of American music.

After weeks of creative anguish, Dylan calls from Minnesota where he's re-recording the album. His rationale? "'Too much blood, too little tracks. Every word is too damn raw. Nobody wants to listen to that kind of anguish. You can't make art out of seppuku'" (151). Where do these words come from? Are they Fran Sussman's testimony? Paraphrased from jottings left behind? Utter fictional invention? And after finally pulling off the virtuoso performance of Hedda Gabler she'd been striving for, June relays, "I felt Raeben and Dylan, too, heard him saying art could become more real than life, and I understood" (153). The process of creation compels change in June and Dylan alike, who affect the world around them with their art. On the whole, though, the weaving together of June's past and Evan's coming-of-age, all together with the troubadour trickster figure of Dylan flitting through, outpaces what this auto-fictional novel purports to hold.

Readers of literary fiction will wonder what Dylan is doing here, and Dylan fans will be distracted by the mother-son relationship. The question becomes one of audience, and no matter its targeted demographic, the novel's muddled treatment of the real holds it back in the end. And it's not like Sussman wasn't advised about this point. That original *New York Times* profile touches on Sussman's Dylanesque looks, the apartment he still lives in that remained in the family since his mom hosted Dylan there so many times in the 70s, and the topic shift Sussman attempts from Dylan's potential forgotten son to purveyor of his mother's wisdom. "Sussman has already written two novels, neither published," writes profiler David Segal. "His comfort with the medium is one reason his first hardback will land in the fiction section, even

though little has been changed in the story besides names and dates—Dylan is the only person who doesn't get a pseudonym—and publishers told him a memoir would sell more copies." Writing in the fictional mode, even though Sussman's first two novels have yet to sell, seems a matter of comfort for the youngish writer. But one wonders, too, if heading off Dylan's ire factored into his choice of genre.

Throughout the novel, Sussman avoids copyright issues by omitting lyrical quotes, though the spare Dylan allusion inevitably slips in through an unattributed "*every step of the way*" (Sussman's italics 9), or a "series of dreams" (22), or an "Early one morning I lay in bed, sun shining" (177). While sketching the Dylan concert in Bethel Woods, Sussman even skirts copyright by *mis*quoting a Dylan lyric: "Dylan sang that you can't lose with a winning hand" (196). In another moment, Sussman describes how "Dylan strode across the stage gasping that truths are lies and lies are truths" (199). And while he professes on a November 5, 2025 appearance on the *Word in Your Ear* podcast that "I'm not a Dylanologist … I'm not a historian of Dylan," readers might think otherwise when the novel turns to inevitable musings about Dylan the timeless troubadour:

> He was singing lyrics that spoke to Homer, Shakespeare, Whitman, Ginsberg. He could transform himself into whatever he wanted to be. He came straight out of American folk, a boy on a freight train moving through the night, a student of Guthrie, Seeger, Hank Williams. He was a Roman king descended from Ovid, Virgil, Horace. He was a Greek satyr, half man and half beast. (191)

This litany continues through Robert Johnson, T.S. Eliot, the bible, and more. The voice of this analysis sounds less like a young man collecting observations at a concert and more like an intellectual who's been reading and thinking about the topic of Bob Dylan since he discovered him as a teen. "He refused interviews, turned away from celebrity, gossip, nonsense, commentary," the narrator Evan continues. "The art was deep inside himself and only that was worth pursuing" (191). So while Sussman props up the fictional Evan as a means of working through his real sense of abandonment and dismay—"Everything that I know about myself might be other than I think, that's not a pleasant experience," the real Sussman tells the *Word in Your Ear* hosts—he still dedicates a number of auto-fictional paragraphs to the Dylan mythos. And to hear Sussman talk about Dylan's artistic dissatisfaction in the early 70s is to realize the closeted Dylanologist ever lurking beneath the surface.

Sussman is capable, that is, of writing fiction, nonfiction, memoir, and more. According to Fantuzzi, Sussman claims to possess ephemera from Dylan's romance with his mother that could not only help corroborate his story, but help further the field of Dylan studies. As for this book, he could've published June's monologues as a novella, as Garner suggested, and formed the rest into a memoir. As long as he stuck to the truth, Dylan couldn't have stopped him. Of the *Harper's* "memoir," Sussman told the *Word in Your Ears* hosts, "[Dylan's people] asked to see the piece in advance. And [they] came back and said, 'No changes requested. No comments in the piece.' You know, of course, I won't say too much, but they had every right to object to anything that they thought was not a faithful account." Which is to imply, the Dylan people must've felt the *Harper's* "memoir" *was* a faithful account. All the same, when expanding into the book, Sussman still covered his tracks by fictionalizing his story. He may have made this choice for the sake of art—the sake of form, in the name of Beckett and Proust, Kerouac and Knausgård. At the same time, Sussman chose caution, which, to quote Garner again, is radically un-Dylanesque.

Unfortunately, caution is all we can proceed with concerning *Boy from the North Country*. Whereas the *Harper's* "memoir" promised a meaty new set of details for Dylan studies to sift through, all couched in an engaging personal narrative, this work of autofiction removes itself from the scholarly conversation surrounding Dylan's work in books and magazines and journals like the *Dylan Review*. We'll reference this book as a compelling-yet-dubious tale of what might've taken place between Bob Dylan and Fran Sussman under the tutelage of Norman Raeben. We'll allude to that Sussman guy who might possibly be Dylan's unacknowledged son, but we won't run too far with the claims laid out in *Boy from the North Country*, no matter how many rhetorical backflips its author performs. Until Sussman consents to that nonfiction contract at length and shows us what he's holding, we'll be left wondering what to believe.

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Interview

The* Dylan Review *spoke to songwriter Emma Swift about covering Bob Dylan, Lou Reed and her own creative process. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

***Dylan Review*:** As we speak, you're back in Nashville after playing the historic Bearsville Theater in Dylan's old stomping ground of Woodstock. How was it?

Emma Swift: It was fantastic, it's a beautiful theater. Albert Grossman is buried in the backyard. There's a lot of really cool memorabilia around. Lots of old photos of artists who lived or played there, like Janis Joplin and Dylan. It's pretty magical.

***DR*:** Does all that history affect the performance, or is it just another gig?

ES: All gigs are special, everybody brings their own different energy. Last time in Woodstock—and the town is blessed with wonderfully unique places—I played at Levon Helm's barn. And that was pretty cool too, because they had lots of Levon's old musical equipment, and photos of The Band on the walls. Everywhere is a treat to play.

***DR*:** You played another storied theater last summer—Cain's Ballroom in Tulsa—for "Going Electric," a concert of Dylan covers put together by Sonic Youth's Lee Ranaldo and Wilco's Nels Cline for the Dylan Center. What was that like?

ES: That was a really cool evening at another amazing venue. It was interesting, that gig, because it was like there were two supergroups involved. Mikal [Jorgensen] and Nels from Wilco, and then Lee and Steve [Shelley] from Sonic Youth. So that was the band! I was really lucky. They were celebrating the anniversary of Dylan going electric, but they also wanted us to perform a kind of preview of Dylan before he went electric. So they asked me to sing "The Times They Are A-Changin'."

***DR*:** Is it difficult to prepare for a Dylan cover like that?

ES: The hardest thing in Dylan's songs, at least for me, is the phrasing. Sometimes it can just take a long time to get inside the phrasing. It's not like karaoke, you can't just pick up a mic. I really have to be inside the song, and know the song, before I can sing it. I couldn't just do it with a teleprompter.

But it's funny too. It's like as a fan, some albums are more appealing to you wherever you're at in your life. If you're going through a breakup you might be super into *Blood on the Tracks*. Different things appeal to you at different times. So that affects what one might choose to do.

When I made my covers record [*Blonde on the Tracks* (2020)], there's no way I would have put "The Times They Are A-Changin'" on it. But now I really enjoy singing it, because I live in America and it's pretty crazy here at the moment. It's got a whole new meaning.

I think the intent of that song when Dylan sang it was positive, *the times, they are a-changin'!* And now, when I sing "The Times They Are A-Changin'," it feels a little more desperate and concerned. We're caught up in the hamster wheel of history, and not necessarily going somewhere we all want to go.

So singing a song like that ten years ago, I probably would have said no. Now, I said yes. I love playing that song.

***DR*:** Can you remember when you the first heard a Bob Dylan song?

ES: I'm a child of the 80s—I was born in 1981. So I arrived just in time for *Infidels*, which I love. But my first conscious memory of Dylan, when I was a kid, was of him being the grumpy old uncle in the Travelling Wilburys. So I guess my early memories of Dylan are not what many people would expect. It's "Congratulations" and "Tweeter and the Monkey Man." So even though he's one of the most iconic solo artists of all time, I met him as being part of this supergroup. And then, I guess, I remember hearing "Maggie's Farm" and "Like a Rolling Stone" after.

***DR*:** For those of us who grew up with the later Dylan, lots of those newer songs are our classics. I think that's why your cover of "I Contain Multitudes", on *Blonde on the Tracks*, excited fans, because Dylan cover albums usually focus on the 60s and 70s.

ES: I loved recording "Multitudes." *Rough and Rowdy Ways* means so much to me, as it does to so many Dylan fans, because it came out in that odd pandemic time. I love that song.

There's nothing new in covering Dylan. Many people have done it before me, and a lot better than I have. I'm just continuing the tradition of loving his work and wanting to sing his songs. But with "Multitudes" I was able to be the first person to have recorded it. So that felt magical, in a way.

When I look back on *Blonde on the Tracks* now, I'd definitely be inclined to record a few more contemporary songs. When we played at Bearsville Theater a couple of weeks back, I played "Sweetheart Like You," which I really enjoyed. And I also really like "Too Late," which is an outtake from *Infidels*. I don't know when I'll record another Dylan project—I would definitely like to—but I'll shake it up a bit.

***DR*:** You shared your "Multitudes" only a month after Dylan first released it as a single. How soon after hearing the original did you know you wanted to cover it?

ES: Pretty much the second I heard it. There's something really appealing about "Multitudes" for me. I majored in English Literature at college when I lived in Australia, in Sydney, and so dead poets have always been fabulously appealing to me. The line about Edgar Allan Poe, and juxtaposing it with the Rolling Stones, and Mott The Hoople's "All The Young Dudes": I really like the post-modern magpie quality that Dylan has in that song. From the second I heard it, covering it seemed like a no-brainer.

***DR*:** It's an unusual song, in that Dylan often seems to be singing about himself—"I fuss with my hair," "I paint landscapes / I paint nudes"—but it sounds like the song spoke to your character as well.

ES: It's what the best songwriters do, isn't it? They take a hyper-specific experience, or an examination of one's own character, and then send it out and see how many people connect with it.

I mean, so much of myself is made up of all the things that I like. So if I'm writing my own version of "I Contain Multitudes," it may not have Mott the Hoople, or the Rolling Stones, but it might have, I don't know, Sinead O'Connor and the Pogues. Fragments from my own life that I find appealing.

***DR*:** You started work on *Blonde on the Tracks* several years before releasing "Multitudes." What was the genesis?

ES: I thought of the title first—*Blonde on the Tracks*—and then I sat down and tried to rehearse the songs and, this is going back some years now before the pandemic, I recorded six songs in two days in Nashville. But my art practice at the time was very haphazard—I've improved a little since then—I recorded it, then abandoned it and went and did some other stuff. Living in Nashville, and Nashville being an important place in Dylan mythology, I wanted to record a whole collection of his songs. I didn't want to do just a one-off.

And then when the pandemic happened, and I didn't have anything to do, I was able to see the project through to completion. I added "Multitudes," and also "Simple Twist of Fate," and packaged it together.

Actually one of the inspirations for *Blonde on the Tracks*—which I forget—was Dylan's *Triplicate*, when he started covering standards. I found that inspiring.

***DR*:** Did recording *Blonde on the Tracks* in Nashville influence your approach? It's a town with a specific sound, in terms of both Dyan's history and country music.

ES: Nashville wears its country music hat for publicity purposes, but musically it's pretty diverse. I guess the best way to describe that record is "adult contemporary-slash-Americana-slash-indie," so I don't know if it would have been different had I recorded it somewhere else.

That said, everybody in the room was a big Dylan enthusiast, right down to the engineer, John Little. He had a small recording studio on Dickerson Pike, in East Nashville. It was very DIY. And very different to, say, Dylan's experience recording on Music Row. Not surprisingly, I had a much lower budget. But John's studio had all of these old copies of *Rolling Stone* lying around, with Dylan on the cover. Everybody was having fun with what we were doing.

***DR*:** Listening to the album, some arrangements aren't that far from the original, and others like "Sooner or Later" sound more modern. How do you decide whether to keep a cover faithful, or mix it up and rearrange it?

ES: You know, I don't really know. I think it's just something that happens. It's like when you see Bob Dylan live and you just don't know how he's going to play the song—like, how will "I'll Be Your Baby" sound tonight?

When we went into pre-production—I say "pre-production," it wasn't very sophisticated—I was sat around my kitchen table with Pat [Sansone] and Robyn [Hitchcock] playing acoustic guitars, and we worked on what key I would be singing in, because I sing in a different vocal register [to Dylan], and we worked on the tempo. We would just sort of move things in and out to see how it felt.

Recently, I've started workshopping *More Blonde, More Tracks*—or whatever the next cover album will be called—and there's a couple of really interesting Dylan covers that I've been listening to where the tempo changes. I don't want to say what they are, so I won't give it away, but I'll definitely be having fun in that regard.

I'm a ballad singer, you know? I love slow, sad ballad-type music. I grew up listening to Dusty Springfield, Linda Ronstadt and those kinds of singers. And my voice, for whatever it may mean, has a sad timbre. If I did a rollicking version of "Maggie's Farm", that might be really enjoyable live but it would sound ridiculous on a record.

I'm a big Brian Ferry fan; I love his Dylan cover record *Dylanesque* and his interpretations. The great thing about Bob Dylan is that, aside from the majesty of the lyrics, the melodies are so exquisite. They're glorious, and as a singer you can really stretch out. It's a wonderful place to be.

There's a reason why so many people cover his songs. They're so well constructed. They are open to interpretation, because there's so much there that can be emphasised or pulled back. He's very enjoyable to cover.

***DR*:** How did you approach singing a song as long as "Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands?"

ES: It was like running a marathon, but I liked the challenge. That song to me is, aside from "Visions of Johanna," my favourite Dylan song. "Visions" probably sits above it now. But at

the time of recording, "Sad-Eyed Lady" was *the one* and it felt like a mountain that I just had to climb.

I didn't know if I would succeed or not, but I've always found that song particularly moving and devastating—just this great love letter. I really wanted to sing it. And it was, I'm not going to lie, pretty difficult. In truth I've never played "Sad-Eyed Lady" live, partly because I don't know if I can play all of the verses, but also because I think there's only a very select group of Dylanophiles who would enjoy the experience. And everyone else would go "*oh another verse!*" He's really showing off on that song, it's fantastic.

It's very much against our contemporary culture, with our short attention spans, and people who say, "please don't write a song over three minutes, because it definitely won't get played on the radio and you won't get on any algorithmic playlists." I like the way that Dylan always made art on his own terms and went against the grain. He said, "Well, you know what? If this has to be on a whole side of an LP, so be it. I'm Bob Dylan!"

It's amazing, his ability, and how he was rewriting the rulebook on how to make an album.

***DR*:** Did that approach influence the making of your latest record, *The Resurrection Game*? It's a cohesive album—with string arrangements linking each track—more than a collection of singles**.**

ES: Totally. I think of music in terms of albums. I know that makes me very old-fashioned, but it's definitely the way that I work. Everything was written intentionally to belong together and sit side-by-side.

Having those kinds of cinematic strings is very un-Dylan; it's going in a very different direction but one that I enjoy. Working more within the realm of Scott Walker, and Harry Nilsson who I really love. When I was growing up I had a very small record collection that I got from my Dad, and I used to play all these records.

So I wanted to have cinematic strings, inspired by Scott Walker, Harry Nilsson and then Burt Bacharach and David Lynch films. That was the reference.

***DR*:** We have this romantic idea of songwriters like Dylan pulling songs out of thin air, but in his manuscripts he'll revise songs for pages. How much unseen craft goes into penning a song cycle like *The Resurrection Game*?

ES: I spend a lot of time writing, and I spend a lot of time revising too. And that's fun for me. I enjoy the revision; I like to work things over in my mind.

The world that we live in wants things instantly. It's, "hey, here's a song I wrote yesterday. I'm going to perform it on my Instagram!" I'm incapable of doing that as a person, because I have

to live with the songs. I have to bring the idea down from wherever it comes from, and then I have to sit with it and finesse it.

I start with titles. For a long time I'll just have a title, and it's like, "okay, where is this going to go?" I could definitely stand to be more prolific and to let things go. I don't think I'll ever be Leonard Cohen, working for seven years on "Hallelujah." I'll never write anything that good and I'll never spend as much time trying to write anything as good. But I don't rush things either.

***DR*:** Your new single "You Got Here First" has an obvious Dylan connection, with the lyric "I'll keep the copy of *Blood on the Tracks* / You can take 'Mack the Knife.'"

ES: It's funny, I guess, because most people who found out about my music have come to me by the music of Bob Dylan. So I thought it would be fun and sweet to put in a little Dylan reference.

***DR*:** Currently, you're working on an album of Lou Reed covers. Does that require a different process, compared to covering Dylan?

ES: It's totally different. Oh my goodness! It's going to be called *Sweet Hassle*—another pun in the title—and the "Sad-Eyed Lady" of this record is [Reed's 11-minute song] "Street Hassle." It's been really fun to work on. It's been very different to the Dylan album in that it's a lot more stop-and-start.

What's fascinating for me is trying to work out what Lou Reed songs to cover. He was, again, a fantastic lyricist, but not as great with melodies. He has this very charismatic attitudinal vocal delivery. And when you're covering a song, unless you're going to be in a Lou Reed tribute band, you can't really copy that. Or at least I feel like I can't. So it's been challenging, but ultimately a really fun process.

There were no strings on the Dylan record, and there were strings all over *The Resurrection Game*. There's some strings on this album. I've got a version of "Candy Says" and "Berlin" with strings. "Street Hassle" obviously has strings, because, when Lou did it, it had strings. But then there's some really interesting textural elements on this album. There's a fantastic woodwind player in Nashville, David Williford. He plays the clarinet, but he puts it through loop pedals. There's just some weird shit happening that I've not done musically before, and I'm very happy and excited.

***DR*:** Does covering Dylan and Reed affect your own approach to songwriting?

ES: Totally. One of the ways you learn to write, or that I've learned to write, is by covering other people's songs. You get inside those songs and figure out what works and what doesn't. That's helped me as a songwriter enormously.

And I'll always do that. I'll do a covers project, then an original project, then a covers project and so on. I'm not a prolific writer, but each cover project is like going to school. What can I read to teach me about songwriting? What can Dylan teach me?

I'll definitely do a Leonard Cohen project, that's definitely coming down the line. And Neil Young too, probably. I've got a deep fantasy about going to Hansa Studios in Berlin, where David Bowie made so many iconic records. I don't yet have the budget for that; it's fully in the dream realm.

They're all dudes—it's not because I don't like women songwriters. I've got a lot of female songwriting heroes. But, you know, Joni Mitchell's already sung her songs in a female voice. So I don't think that I have anything necessarily new to reveal in her songs, except that I'm singing them—probably not as well as she does.

***DR*:** Besides the Lou Reed album, what else is in the pipeline?

ES: I released a single, "You Got Here First," and there's another single coming out soon and they'll be bundled into a short EP, called *Down and Out In Party City*. I'm going to put it out on 10" vinyl if I can. And then I've also recorded a bunch of songs from *The Resurrection Game*, as well as some Dylan songs in a live studio session.

As I increasingly rush towards middle age, I feel like a lot of the procrastination that I suffered from in my thirties is now giving way to a more prolific period—I'm trying to get stuff done, mostly because we never know how long we've got. But also, it's a tremendously fun way to spend time, going out and making stuff.

***DR*:** Like Dylan's Never Ending Tour?

ES: Right! I am going to see Dylan soon. He's not playing a Nashville date in the Spring, but he is playing in Louisville, Bowling Green, Chattanooga and Knoxville. They're all very close to Nashville, so I'll be at one. I'm very excited—I can't wait to see these upcoming shows.

Contributors

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