

REVIEWS

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

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Containing History

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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