

Bob Dylan. "Whiskey." *Theme Time Radio Hour*, Episode 102, September 2020.

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Dylanalchemy: Turning Whiskey into Gold

In September 2020, it was announced that *Theme Time Radio Hour*, the broadcast series curated by Bob Dylan, would be returning for a special two-hour episode after more than a decade's hiatus. The new episode was themed "Whiskey," and it was sponsored by Dylan's own celebrity spirits label, Heaven's Door. *Theme Time Radio Hour* originally ran on satellite radio from May 2006 to April 2009, stopping precisely after the airing of the 100th episode. (There was a later airing of Episode 101, known as the lost episode, which was titled "Kiss" and had to do with smooching.)

All of the episodes feature Dylan as a wise and all-knowing DJ with a twinkle in his raspy voice, announcing an hour's worth of songs revolving around a particular theme. Episode One was called "Weather," and included songs such as "The Wind Cries Mary" by Jimi Hendrix and "Didn't It Rain" by Sister Rosetta Tharpe. Each subsequent episode featured a different theme, with Dylan introducing the songs and spinning some historical background or a funny anecdote into the mix. The sound design harkens back to the golden era of radio, but the songs chosen span from the early days of records in the 1920s right up to the present moment—so you might hear a Louis Armstrong record bumped up next to a song by Reba McEntyre. By the time Dylan hung up his headphones in April 2009, the series had broadcast episodes ranging from "Trains" to "Divorce" to "Cops and Robbers." At first, most people, pundits, and critics were amused by the venture and thought it quaint and charming, but as is so often the case with Dylan's work, and especially his activities away from songwriting and performing, it slowly became obvious that this *Theme Time Radio Hour* series was a far more ambitious and consequential undertaking. In the process of making these episodes, Dylan not only showed us the vastness of his musical interests, but he also got to stick his nose and ears back into some old music and blow the dust

off, which must have had a strong impact on Dylan's own recent songwriting and choice of material to cover in live performance.

On September 21, 2020, the new episode aired, teasingly titled "Whiskey Part 1," and was immediately digested (swallowed?) by legions of Dylan fans, whose ranks had recently swollen and become energized by the startlingly strong new album released by Dylan that June, *Rough and Rowdy Ways*. The first thing acute listeners noticed upon hearing the new episode was that the female announcer had changed from the earlier broadcasts, and listeners no longer heard the sandpaper and satin voice of Ellen Barkin, that being replaced by the bourbon and honeyed tones of vocalist Diana Krall. After Krall's noir-drenched dramatic intro, Dylan does his usual set-up, made somewhat unusual in this case by the fact that the episode is a one-off (for the moment, at least, much like Dylan's lone memoir, *Chronicles, Volume One*), and also one driven by a marketing tie-in to the Heaven's Door brand of whiskey. A few years back, Dylan joined other celebrity liquor peddlers like George Clooney (tequila), Marilyn Manson (absinthe), and Jay-Z (cognac) in what can often be a very lucrative business. The origin myth of Dylan's whiskey brand goes something like this: in 2015, Dylan trademarked the name "Bootleg Whiskey." The phrase appears memorably in Dylan's haunted song about bluesman Willie McTell:

There's a woman by the river
With some fine young handsome man
He's dressed up like a squire
Bootlegged whiskey in his hand

An entrepreneur who owned a company set up to invest in new beverage startups came across the trademark registration and reached out to Dylan about starting a partnership. Heaven's Door Whiskey launched in 2018 and currently sells various high-end bottles of whiskey, bourbon, and rye. The way most of these celebrity spirits companies work is that there is a big and mostly anonymous booze maker who mixes together a custom blend with input from the celebrity; in this

case, Dylan said he wanted his whiskey to “feel like being in a wood structure.” The high-test liquid is then branded, bottled, and marketed per the celebrity’s particular taste and style—Dylan’s bottles are decorated with patterns from his metal sculpture gates, and they range in price from about forty dollars a bottle to several hundred for limited editions packaged with memorabilia.

At some level, this new episode of *Theme Time Radio Hour* is a nearly two-hour promotion for Dylan’s liquor business, an advertisement, a *commercial*. There are many examples of Dylan, our great artist, dipping his toe and sometimes diving headfirst into the green pool of filthy lucre, and even many of the most devoted Dylan people sometimes feel that Dylan has sullied his artistic integrity by getting involved in money-making ventures. Responses to Dylan-as-capitalist swing between two poles: at one end people believing Dylan is a genius who deserves every last penny he can squeeze from the public; at the other, people believing Dylan is a sell-out and always has been. Most people fall somewhere in between. And to be sure, Dylan has put his name on a long and sometimes comical list of products for sale. Recently, a line of Dylan-sanctioned clothing inspired by the Rolling Thunder tour appeared online, joining all manner of official Dylan-branded gewgaws, including key rings, drink coasters, coffee mugs, and tote bags. Over the years, Dylan has lent his name and music to a panoply of companies including Apple, IBM, Google, Cadillac, Chrysler, and Pepsi, among others. Dylan’s most infamous/beloved product tie-in was connected to the Victoria’s Secret lingerie line. Not only did Dylan allow the use of the song “Love Sick” for the campaign, but he also appeared in a slickly filmed commercial shot along the canals of Venice with supermodel Adriana Lima. (Oddly, or perhaps not so oddly, Dylan and Lima never appear together in the same shot.)

And then, as I was in the middle of putting down words for this piece, news came that Dylan had sold the copyrights of his entire song catalog to the Universal Media Group for somewhere between \$300–\$400 million. At first, the sale seemed like another cruel dagger flung at the pockmarked corkboard that is the

year 2020. But after taking a beat, which is always the optimal way to process any Dylan news, it seems just another step in the infinitely straightforward and circling journey that is Bob Dylan. On a purely clear-eyed practical level, Dylan knows he will not live forever, and were he not to have taken this step, control of this catalog would have been left to his heirs, which I don't think anyone can imagine as a non-complicated situation. We have relished the thought, I think, that Dylan single-handedly controlled most of his publishing for many years, which seemed another mark of his fierce independence, but of course that sense of independence is simply relative when all is said and done. There is little doubt that this latest move, and all of Dylan's marketing and licensing forays, have something to do with financial gain, with cold hard cash. But if accumulating wealth were Dylan's goal, he could have done many other things to accomplish that more effectively. I think these moves have more to do with two aspects of Dylan that also imbue his creative work: his peculiar uniqueness on the one hand, and his everyman ordinariness on the other. And these two qualities are front and center when listening to the *Theme Time Radio Hour* series, including the recent "Whiskey" episode.

I was struck immediately upon listening to the new broadcast that Dylan's voice and delivery sound as if he had helped himself to a sampling of the sponsor's goods during the nearly two-hour broadcast. Dylan's trademark quirky delivery and behind-the-beat timing are spot on throughout, but his tongue is thick and slurry, at least to my ears. No matter, this episode reaches the high bar set by previous episodes, swirling together an entertaining cocktail of cornball jokes, obscure historical and cultural anecdotes and a terrifically curated song list, with a few obvious choices sprinkled among mostly rare and seldom-heard recordings.

The "Whiskey" episode kicks off with Wynonie Harris singing "Quiet Whiskey." Later, in one of the episode's sweetest moments, Dylan "calls up" actor John C. Reilly and asks him to read "Comin' Through the Rye," by Scottish poet Robert

Burns. Reilly tells Dylan he'd rather sing the poem, which he proceeds to do. And Reilly's beautiful voice and interpretation suddenly pierce the "wink-wink" bubble created by Dylan talking to a Hollywood actor. It's an illustration of the power of music that shows just how, even in this semi-hokey format of an old-timey radio show updated for the modern sensibility, a song well sung can still transcend. After Reilly's version, Dylan rambles for a bit, and then he spins "Comin' Thru the Rye" again, this time Julie London's sultry as-all-get-out version of the song. That construction is one of the joys of the *Theme Time Radio Hour* series, as the information and the music engage with one's own experience and prior knowledge and spur a movement toward openness, toward learning something, toward a new way of looking at things. Julie London is a singer who barely registered on my listening radar, but now, after hearing her rendition of "Comin' Thru the Rye," I will pay more attention to her work. And a "little birdie" (aka the Internet) told me London was married to both Jack Webb and Bobby Troup, two show-biz men whose careers were tightly linked to Los Angeles, my hometown. So there's this intensely seasoned stew of interconnected music and facts and stories that make up *Theme Time Radio Hour*. That concoction elevates the listening experience. What more could one ask?

There's a didactic quality to much of Dylan's patter, such as when he explains the meaning of the phrase "pinpoint carbonation," which refers to an old-time process that uses dry ice to get smaller bubbles into carbonated beverages like soda pop and beer. The process creates a more intimate gas-to-liquid bonding than conventional techniques, and thus the fizzy bubbles are smaller and more effervescent than beverages carbonated in the modern way. It's one of the magical effects of the *Theme Time Radio Hour* series that hearing about this arcane bit of industrial technology evokes a feeling similar to that one has upon hearing many Dylan lyrics, a kind of half-recognition/half-puzzlement that always leaves room for exploration, for wandering.

Much credit for the intelligent and seamless weave of the entire *Theme Time Radio Hour* series, including this "Whiskey" episode, must go to Eddie

Gorodetsky, the producer. Gorodetsky is a successful writer and television producer who is also an enthusiastic record collector and musicologist of obscure rock 'n' roll, blues, country, and novelty records. My assumption has always been that records from Gorodetsky's massive collection form the germ of each episode, and I've also assumed someone is writing most of the words Dylan speaks during the broadcast. However, when I encountered Gorodetsky at a social gathering about a year ago, I said to him, "I'm just curious—who is it that comes up with the wild facts and stories on the show?" He looked at me with a slight grin and said, "It's all Bob."

When all is said and done the most striking thing about *Theme Time Radio Hour* is that the entire enterprise smacks so loudly of DYLAN. It's "Dylanesque." What does that mean? And how is the approximately 160-pound figure of a man known as Bob Dylan able to infuse so *many things*: songs, drawings, poems, speeches, photographs, movies, live performances, even radio shows—with this same Dylanesque quality? The answers to those questions won't be found here, but I'm coining a term, DYLANALCHEMY, to represent the near-mystical process by which Dylan's work is first created and then transformed into meaning by his audience. Not the most elegant word, to be sure, but it's my attempt to convey the sense that no amount of analysis or contemplation will ever fully reveal *how* Dylan's work does what it does. With Dylan, there's always the sense that he's singing to someone, or *communicating* with someone, usually more than one person. There are great artists who create work mostly for themselves, for their own particular satisfaction—Dylan is not like that. Dylan's work is always addressed to a listener. Even in those moments where Dylan appears to be almost deliberately antagonizing his audience, he is still singing to someone, possibly just not the expected listener. And this is one of the ways in which the *Theme Time Radio Hour* series clicks into place amongst the vast array of Dylan's multi-faceted output.

The Dylan "project" is more than just his songs, of course, but there is sometimes a tendency to see Dylan's "side projects" as distractions or diversions

from the contemplation of Dylan as our representative songsmith. To cop from the name of a bootleg release of *The Basement Tapes*, Dylan's work is a "tree with roots." The most obvious offshoot of Dylan's songwriting and singing is his protean live performance output—the thousands of times Dylan has stepped in front of an audience to play music. But Dylan's hundreds of paintings and drawings, his large metal sculptures, his books, his films, his interviews, all of these things also stretch out as branches from the trunk. The *Theme Time Radio Hour* series represents another deep root extending far into the earth and helping to anchor this majestic oak, now nearly eighty years old.