

# DYLAN REVIEW, WINTER 2020

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## REVIEWS

**Spencer Leigh. *Bob Dylan: Outlaw Blues*. Carmarthen, Wales, U.K.: McNidder and Grace, 2020. xi + 511 pp. \$22.95.**

REVIEW BY D. Quentin Miller, Suffolk University

Like Dylan himself, no label is going to contain this book. As it sat in the middle of our coffee table for the past few months (causing the legs to bow slightly), Dylan's angelic eyes on the cover arresting the attention of anyone walking by, my bookmark traveling slowly toward the final pages, my wife asked, "What exactly is it?" Biography? Check. Analysis? Check. Overview? Yup. Anthology of pithy quotations culled from interviews? Certainly. Context-building historical and cultural study? That, too. Although I'd stop short of describing the book as an encyclopedia, I think it's fair to describe it as encyclopedic. I honestly had to double-check on more than one occasion to make sure it was written by one person.

That one person is Spencer Leigh, a Liverpool-based radio personality who has hosted a show on BBC Radio for some thirty-five years and who has published books on Elvis Presley, Simon and Garfunkel, Billy Fury, Buddy Holly (two), and the Beatles (four), to name a few. It's clear that he knows a hell of a lot about popular music in general and Dylan in particular, and it's fair to say that *Outlaw Blues* is an extremely accomplished record of his considerable understanding. In addition to sheer knowledge, his passion for his subject is palpable. The book brims with energy (until the last couple of chapters, as I'll discuss later). When I described my slow-moving bookmark earlier, it wasn't to imply that the book was dull in any way, just big. Very big.

Have I mentioned it's a big book? The 511 pages listed above don't really tell the full story. These are 511 pages without margins, printed in a font that I dare say most of Dylan's fans couldn't make out without some pretty strong reading glasses. The bigness of the book can't be overlooked, and I regard it as potentially

both its chief strength and its chief weakness. First to the strengths, since I hold Leigh's book in high esteem, and I want to lead by highlighting them.

*Outlaw Blues* is strikingly nonconventional, which Dylan aficionados should appreciate. The author describes it in the introduction as "the story of Bob Dylan" (x), but also acknowledges in no uncertain terms that Dylan is "mercurial" (ix), mysterious, unknowable, and evasive (though he balks at the word "enigmatic," suggesting it indicates a failure to dig deep enough). Late in the book he describes Dylan's "unpredictability" as the only thing that is predictable about him (397) and the thing Leigh loves most about him (414). In keeping with the spirit of that idea, the book is a little unpredictable, too. Leigh describes the structure in his introduction: each chapter essentially begins with thick context, which might involve Dylan's most recent location, or one of his musical influences, or a certain dimension of history that framed his transformations. The second part of each chapter (which is always the most substantial) traces Dylan's life with an emphasis on his creative output: primarily songwriting, recording, and touring, but also the side projects, such as *Tarantula* and other writing, painting, and film excursions. (As he says, "If you just want Bob's story, then you can read the second sections on their own" [xi].) The third section of each chapter is the wild card in which the author might bring in a contemporary artifact, such as the recent Broadway adaptation of "Girl from the North Country" or the Coen brothers' film *Inside Llewyn Davis* as a lens back into the time period that dominates the chapter, or as a demonstration of Dylan's ongoing influence on music and on culture more generally.

In short, the book keeps readers on their toes, inviting them into the broad Dylan universe and encouraging them to linger in it, enjoying the journey for which the author acts as a tour guide. As he says late in the book, "If a reader is coming to Bob Dylan for the first time with this book, then I don't think he or she could predict what would be on the next page" (414). Certainly true, but I really don't imagine any reader of this book would be a neophyte. In fact, I imagine the

reader of this book to be someone who knows Dylan more than just casually. You would have to be a fan or even a superfan to commit to this level of detail. Leigh knows this, too: on the same page, when he speculates about a first-time Dylan reader, he addresses the reader directly after summarizing Dylan's interview style: "But you know all this" (414). Yes. We know it even better by this point in the book. I teach a course on Dylan, but by the book's conclusion I felt like I'd taken one. That's a high compliment.

The number of books about Dylan is growing all the time, and in addition to "who is this one for?" the crucial question is: "what does this one add?" Leigh is aware of the way others have told Dylan's story or analyzed his work, and he nods toward previous publications when necessary without letting them interfere with his flow. There is a bibliography at the book's conclusion that indicates what others have said, and he occasionally quotes from these works (especially Scaduto), but this is not an academic study: we shouldn't expect a thorough review of the literature followed by a statement of how this work departs. The dominant genre is more journalism than literary/cultural criticism, and even more specifically radio journalism, I would argue. It reads a little like an extended radio program with the host frequently pivoting to include the words of Dylan's fellow travelers and inner circle, naming them before letting their words do the talking. The effect is to give a rich multivocal context for Leigh's core study. His is the central voice, but he is generous in letting others have a turn at the mic, including Dylan himself. What the book adds to the growing corpus of Dylanology is a living archive of opinions, analysis, and anecdotes, closer in nature in some ways to one of Scorsese's recent documentaries than to the books listed in the bibliography.

The author knows music and musicians very, very well, and the book has the potential to expand our sense of Dylan's influences, his milieu, and the next generation of musicians he influenced. There is, appropriately, a healthy amount of attention paid to Joan Baez, Judy Collins, Roger McGuinn, Robbie Robertson, Peter Yarrow, and others we might expect, but also a good number of pages

devoted to Phil Ochs, Kinky Friedman, Manfred Mann, and Kris Kristofferson, all of whom might have been diminished or overlooked in a different book. The author's ability to deftly string together the voices of Dylan's milieu constitutes the chief strength of *Outlaw Blues*.

In short, if you're looking for a magic key that will unlock a mystical understanding of Bob Dylan, it's not here, and probably not anywhere. Those who labor to interpret his work realize that. If you're looking for a dense, thorough overview with plenty of anecdotes about Dylan's development against the backdrop of the turbulent '60s, misunderstood '70s, best-forgotten '80s, and so on, right up almost through *Rough and Rowdy Ways*, you're in luck. This one's got all that and then some, and it has the advantage of an affable and knowledgeable host/author who is a clear writer and appreciator of Dylan, even as he insists that the book is "not hagiography" (x).

Those are the strengths, or some of them. So: what are the pitfalls of a big book about a protean subject written for a niche audience?

One, selection. In order to tell Dylan's story in such a way that it appears as a story, I believe, you have to select a "pivotal moment" and build outward from there. Stories have an arc. If you were to write about Dylan's relationship to the Bible, you might focus on his conversion to Christianity and back again as the climax of the story. If you were to write about Dylan's fraught relationship with the public, you might begin with his motorcycle accident-fueled disappearance following the exhausting mid-'60s tour, or perhaps his vanishing act after the Nobel announcement. If you were to write about Dylan's contributions to the evolution of rock music, Newport. But if you're tracing Dylan's story from start to now, you have to choose that moment and emphasize it as the moment to lean on. In this book which doesn't claim a single aspect of Dylan but rather tries to get them all in, there are multiple candidates for the pivotal moment, but one does seem more important than the others. That moment in this book is clearly Dylan's polarizing tours of England, balancing like a mattress on a bottle of wine on that

“Judas!” shout we have all come to know so well. If you want to know about Dylan, the book insists, start by scrutinizing that incident. Yes, it’s convincing. But also, it’s familiar.

Put differently, the Judas moment is well-recorded in Pennebaker’s *Dont Look Back* and deepened in Scorsese’s *No Direction Home*, to take only cinematic renditions of the infamous event. It’s the stuff of legend. Leigh is working with so much more material, and yet he locates the story’s climax in a familiar place, making us feel we’re walking a road other men have gone down. Leigh’s involvement in the mid-’60s England tours, clearly a main reason he’s so fascinated by Dylan, is personal. He speaks (as Scorsese and Pennebaker never would or could have) of how the history of British football framed Dylan’s 1965 appearance in Liverpool (Liverpool! who had just beaten Leeds for the League, and the FA Cup!). As a soccer fan I found details such as this one amusing and charming, but . . . most American readers of this book wouldn’t know Leeds from Liverpool, and what’s an FA Cup? More, Leigh attends the concert with a girlfriend Diana who was not a Dylan fan. We get to hear about the disastrous date, how Diana called it a waste of two hours of her life, and how Leigh considered that she’d also wasted some of his precious time . . . but he promises to tell us later how they managed to get together for another try at long-lasting love, and part of the test of that love is another Dylan concert. Leigh puts it this way: “in 1966 we were again having a threesome with Bob Dylan” (175). [*This reader: Facepalm.*] Since she couldn’t appreciate Dylan, Leigh implies, he couldn’t tolerate her, calling her “hapless” the second time around (207). Their ill-fated relationship might be an interesting anecdote for a dinner party, but I don’t think it tells us anything about Dylan. I really wouldn’t have a problem with a memoir called *Dylan and Me, and Girlfriend Makes Three*, but this book isn’t that, and it’s so much *more* than that. The brief personal anecdotes intrude more than they illuminate.

Two, tangents. A more streamlined book shaped by an editor with an eye on the page count would have let the author know where he was wandering. It's not as though anything in this book is irrelevant, but a book ought to be intentional about its forward motion. We came for Dylan, and although context is important, I sometimes felt as though I wanted to interrupt the author to remind him who he was supposed to be talking about. This point is related to selection and emphasis, but a little different because I'm primarily talking about the context sections. Chapter one tells about Minnesota, starting with the way the ice age flattened out glaciers to make the prairie. *Okay, I'm along for the ride here*, I thought; *I can handle a little geological history*, and I forged on. Chapter two gave me 13 pages on the history of the blues and the Beat generation, and I remained cool with it. The history of cultural events "that caused a stir" that preceded Dylan's Newport appearance, though, from Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*, to Coleridge and Byron's drug experimentation, to Wagner, to Stravinsky, to Joyce, to Picasso, to . . . you get the idea. Such background could go on forever, and when I felt like it was, I got a touch impatient. I can imagine readers who aren't as used to academic writing as I am would be even more impatient. Such points can be made effectively and economically, especially in a book about a figure who is complex enough on his own.

The longest tangent is easily the lengthy section on The Band. Obviously, The Band's story is related to Dylan's, but here it threatens to eclipse Dylan's for the better part of a chapter. The Band's story constitutes its own history and deserves a book of its own (and in fact recently got just that, albeit from the perspective of its central songwriter Robbie Robertson in a memoir entitled *Testimony*, tellingly included in the bibliography of *Outlaw Blues*).

Three, emphasis. In a book this ambitious, it's clear that not everything will be treated equally, and part of my point about selection is that the author has chosen to include virtually all the information he has amassed about Dylan. That's nearly true, but even in Dylan's personal history, which is a key component of this

book if not its main focus, there is a sometimes frustrating unevenness caused by an imperfect sense of emphasis. Dylan's relationship with his first wife Sara is especially underwritten. She appears in the narrative mysteriously, without a clear indication of how she arrived in his life. She's suddenly just there, though furtively, replacing Joan Baez (who gets a great deal of time on the mic, and who thus becomes three-dimensional in a way Sara does not). Sara disappears much more emphatically: we get to read about the messy divorce settlement, the amount of money she was awarded, her punching a teacher as she picks up the young Jakob from school. This is the only detailed description of her in the book, and she is somehow left out of the index at the back completely despite the fact that even Dylan's girlfriends are listed there (and listed as such). Although this isn't a straight-up biography and I don't expect a thorough look at Sara, she is a major figure in Dylan's personal story and this portrait of her is a mere outline of a sketch, and not a very flattering one even so.

I reached the point about three-fourths of the way through when I realized we'd only made it to 1980, which left forty years to cover. It's clear and obvious that the 1960s and 1970s were Dylan's great decades, and it's not surprising that the author chooses to emphasize them: some of Dylan's fans would prefer to pretend the '80s and some of the '90s didn't exist. And yet, if we're looking for something new about Dylan, the last four decades are less explored than the first two, and one would think that a story of the complete Dylan would spend more time here. I will say that Leigh manages to get quite a bit into the last quarter of the book, and he is generous when it comes to some albums that critics dismissed, honest about the Live Aid performance and a couple of disastrous movie projects, and knowledgeable about possibly overlooked details from this period, including the *Theme Time Radio Hour* program Dylan hosted from 2006 through 2009 (and again in 2020). The Traveling Wilburys get a kind and expansive treatment here. But it's undeniable that the energy of the book falters in the late chapters. There's less enthusiasm for the late Dylan, less of an attempt to

understand him and more of an attempt to catalog his various projects. The substance of the late chapters too often involves a reproduction of the set lists at the many concerts Dylan has given as part of the Never Ending Tour. Mildly interesting if you weren't at a particular show. Actually, if I'm being honest, not interesting, not unless the patterns of what he played were interpreted.

Which leads me to my final complaint: a shakiness in the interpretive approach, or the book's actual thesis, or mission, or through-line, or argument: call it what you will. I want to emphasize that Leigh isn't an academic and I am, so it might seem unfair for me to critique his methodology and to expect some critical consistency. And yet, all books seek to advance understanding, so even those which aren't all the way at the academic end of the spectrum have to be clear about their critical premises. I want to emphasize that the author *knows* so much about Dylan and the music that surrounds him that it dazzles and bewitches the reader, this reader included. What I'm grouching about is what he does (or sometimes doesn't do) with that knowledge. There are times in the book—most of it, in fact—when the intent is clear: he is helping the reader get closer to an understanding of a figure who is unique, inscrutable, controversial, fascinating, etc., and he accomplishes this through gathering everything he can and binding it together. Sometimes, though, it feels like an attic full of boxes more than a curated exhibit. One way for an author to get readers closer to understanding Dylan is to do the tough work of interpreting the lyrics, or the music, or ideally (as Christopher Ricks has said) the two together. Here Leigh sometimes seems nervous. Occasionally he offers a close reading of the lyrics, and the resulting interpretation gives the reader something to hang onto. At other times, he seems to give up on such analysis. “Dylan will never provide footnotes for his songs,” he tells us in his introduction. (True, and we'd be fools to trust them if he did, knowing his tendency to toy with us.) Very late in the book, discussing the song “License to Kill,” he laments, “It's only a song and doesn't have to mean anything but it is still perplexing. Sometimes I wish Dylan's songs came with footnotes” (345). But . . . that's a job for critics, isn't it? Like you?

And this is where the academic in me wants a little more. I certainly don't expect a close interpretation of every song mentioned in a book this big by a songwriter as prolific as Dylan, but I don't want the author to give up on the notion of interpretation altogether. He is more comfortable going through the albums and declaring which tracks are the best, and which aren't so inspiring. That type of assessment is a form of criticism, of course, but it also requires a little more work than it's sometimes given here. He calls "I Believe in You" from *Slow Train Coming* "one of Dylan's greatest performances. The song is very good, but is it a love song or a song about Jesus? It can be taken either way" (335). Again, he's leaving the interpretation to the reader, but I'm more interested in why the author considers this song one of Dylan's greatest, or what he means by "very good." Not arguing, just waiting to be convinced. He says of a performance in Tel Aviv from 1987, "He did well but not great" (368). Again, tell me more.

On one occasion the author argues that Dylan has encoded meaning in a kind of acronym game: "The album is called *Under the Red Sky*, UTRS—say that fast and you have Uterus, another indication that this is a children's album" (389). So, yeah, no: in asking for more consistent interpretation, I'm not hoping for more of *that*, nor of the speculation that the title of Pennebaker's film *Don't Look Back* "could also refer to John Osborne's play, *Don't Look Back in Anger*, which was at the forefront of the kitchen sink dramas" (178). The title of the play in question is *Look Back in Anger*, just the opposite. (Oasis added the "Don't" as the title of their 1996 hit, which may explain the confusion, but sort it out before committing it to print.) These two moments—not in any way typical—are just a different way to suggest that a stronger editorial hand might have helped focus and streamline the book, and might have also scrubbed out speculative or inaccurate moments like these that can serve to distract. (Along those lines, I won't groan here about the frequent puns, but I did groan when I read a few of them.)

For its ambition and its enthusiasm, for its passion and scope, and for its understanding of Dylan's many dimensions and radical transformations, *Bob*

*Dylan: Outlaw Blues* is a worthy addition to any fan's bookshelf. As "the story of Bob Dylan," it doesn't fully arrive at the intent of a story—to lend focus and clarity to a subject, and to suggest a shape that takes the form of a narrative—partly because Dylan's story refuses to cohere and partly because this lush garden could have used a little more pruning. The intent to try to approach Dylan's story creatively as Leigh does here is reason enough to read it, appreciate it, learn from it, even while wishing for that elusive clarity, focus, and narrative form.

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

REVIEW BY Michael Hacker, Independent Scholar

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 100<sup>th</sup> 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.

**Terry Gans. *Surviving in a Ruthless World: Bob Dylan's Voyage to Infidels*. Cornwall, U.K.: Red Planet Books, 2020. 283 pp.**

REVIEW BY Walter Raubicheck, Pace University

The establishment of the Bob Dylan Archive [BDA] in Tulsa marks the beginning of a new era of Dylan scholarship, revolutionary in scope and potential impact. Gaining access to multiple early drafts of lyrics as well as preliminary takes of officially released songs will significantly broaden our knowledge of both Dylan's working methods and his artistic vision. The depth and breadth of the tapes, manuscripts, notebooks, and handwritten notes are simply astounding. Certainly the BDA is an inestimable gift to those who wish to study his work.

One of the first products to emerge from work in this archive is the new book by Terry Gans, *Surviving in a Ruthless World: Bob Dylan's Voyage to Infidels*, published by Red Planet Books. The subtitle references Dylan's working title for the album, and the book traces the evolution of the lyrics, melodies, and arrangements from his earliest ideas for the record in 1982 to its release in the fall of 1983. It is a fascinating journey; Gans presents us with the results of his work in a well-ordered, meticulous manner that is a testament to the hours he spent listening to studio tapes and reading folders filled with *Infidels*-related material—and obviously taking copious notes. What we are given here is as thorough as it is revelatory.

I for one am grateful that Gans devoted this time and hard work to this particular record, which tends to be overlooked when lists of Dylan's "Ten Greatest Albums" are composed and compared. *Infidels* usually fails to compete with the three mid-'60s classics, the '70s masterpiece *Blood on the Tracks*, or such late-period triumphs like *Time Out of Mind* or "*Love and Theft*". This is due in part to a common perception that the '80s were Dylan's "Lost Decade," one in which he lacked a sense of direction and purpose after he completed the Christian trilogy. Supposedly he only found this direction again with *Oh Mercy* in 1989. I would argue that *Infidels* is infused with a newfound purpose, felt on each track,

and that the album is one of Dylan's deepest meditations on the modern world, every bit as insightful and revealing as those found on *Time Out of Mind* or "Love and Theft". And now we have Gans's book to provide convincing evidence to support this claim . . . though he himself refrains from such critical evaluations.

In his Foreword, Gans clarifies his purpose in writing the book, which does not include interpreting what he discovered in his research:

I will do my best to avoid hopeless traps like 'Bob must have thought' or 'Here is what Dylan meant' . . . my hope is to stick to the facts: the drafts, notebook jottings. . . . We can all study clues, we can all enjoy songs and we can all cherish the journey of interpretation. To paraphrase: if you want a meaning you can trust, trust yourself.

So the book resists all attempts to compare, for example, the religious content of *Infidels* to that of the explicitly Christian perspective of the preceding three albums or the religious imagery in the later *Oh Mercy*. This is the book's strength, and its limitation.

The book is organized chronologically as it discusses the stages of the creative process. It begins with information regarding where and when Dylan composed the songs in 1982 (often sailing the Caribbean islands on a boat he co-owned, *Water Pearl*); how he went about finding a producer (ultimately settling on Mark Knopfler); and which musicians he hired for the project. Then comes the heart of the book: Gans describes the recording sessions for each song in the order in which they were first attempted in the studio, regardless of whether they appear on the finished album or not. So we begin with "Blind Willie McTell," since it was the first song recorded for the album, and end with "Death is Not the End"—sixteen songs in all. Only eight were released on the album, others were released on subsequent albums (including official bootlegs), and one was never released at all ("Julius and Ethel"). For each of the sixteen songs, Gans uses the tapes in the BDA to inform us as to how many takes exist for each song, and how they differ from one another in tempo, arrangement, and, quite often, lyrics, since Dylan did

a lot of writing and rewriting of words in the studio during the sessions themselves. We are told how Dylan, Knopfler, and the engineers reacted to each take and what songs were played in the studio that day besides the one being recorded for the record (often blues jams). Following the chapter on “Death Is Not the End,” Gans lists the several cover songs that were recorded for possible release as well as what he calls the “Covers, Jams, Noodles, Etc” that Dylan and the musicians played for fun or relaxation in the studio in between the songs that were intended for the album or for separate release. He also devotes a chapter to describing the work that went into creating the two videos that were used to promote the album (“Sweetheart Like You” and “Jokerman”) as well as a rundown of Dylan’s March 22, 1984 performance on *Late Night with David Letterman* of two songs from the album (“Jokerman” and “License to Kill”).

Finally, Gans gives us useful appendices, especially the list of how often Dylan performed each song recorded during the *Infidels* sessions in subsequent years. We also receive a list of “Cliches, Aphorisms, and Images” that are either colloquialisms or adaptations of lines from other texts (which, as of 1983, were not yet considered scandalous). Interestingly, he also provides the information about each image and painting seen in the “Jokerman” video and concludes with a list of which songs, covers, and jams were played at each session between April 11, 1983 and May 5, 1983—the final session for *Infidels*.

It is instructive to learn how much Knopfler contributed to the album in terms of the arrangements, not to mention his constant affirmations and cheerleading. Also, to know for sure what Mick Taylor played, what Knopfler played, and how reliable and supportive Sly and Robby were gives us a new appreciation of the dynamic during the sessions. Since Knopfler had to leave in early May 1983 for a Dire Straits tour, he was not present for later overdubbing and mixing, during which Dylan took control. But the respect between him and Dylan comes through very clearly in the book, a respect that contributed to the wonderful performances and singing that characterize *Infidels*.

*Surviving in a Ruthless World* is now the definitive description of what went down in The Power Station Studio C in New York in April and May of 1983. The thoroughness that is the strength of the book, though, is also the source of a reader's occasional frustration. To what end is the research pointing? Clearly that must be interpretation of the lyrics and a reconsideration of the place that *Infidels* occupies within the Dylan canon—which Gans has no intention of attempting. He largely leaves it up to us to address some of the traditional controversy surrounding the record: Does *Infidels* mark Dylan's rejection of Christianity and his return to Judaism? Or is it a return to "secular music"? Why did he leave so many fine songs recorded at the sessions off the album, in particular "Blind Willie McTell"?

Despite himself, at times Gans does provide some interesting interpretations. In the discussion of "License to Kill" he writes that "the song encapsulates the core exploration of *Infidels*, the present-day self-absorbed species and its relationship with the Earth, its brethren and its Lord." Similarly, he says in his conclusion,

Man could be viewed as the Infidel, betraying the promise of life and the earth the Lord provided. A case for the poisoned relationship between Man and the universe can be made in each song. Perhaps *Infidels*, with a global application, is a title better suited to the collection of songs than the more personal *Surviving in a Ruthless World* would have been.

These are insightful reflections about the overall vision of the record. But Gans does not explore this vision "in each song," giving us instead a plethora of unused lyrics that, together with the lyrics on the album—along with the published lyrics—provide a framework for a fascinating insight into Dylan's worldview in 1983.

In addition, the number and quality of early lyrics Gans found for *Infidels* in the Archive is surprising and impressive. Dylan's writing for the album in 1982 and 1983—in notebooks, on typewritten drafts, on the stationery of the Ritz-Carlton

hotel in Manhattan, or created in the studio between takes—represents a resurgence of his unique lyrical abilities. After the heavy biblical imagery of the Christian albums, in which his own distinctive imagery was de-emphasized, the words he wrote for the *Infidels* songs are—well, Dylanesque. This new poetic vitality was first in evidence in several songs written during the *Shot of Love* sessions: “Every Grain of Sand,” “The Groom’s Still Waiting at the Altar,” “Caribbean Wind,” and “Angelina.” In fact, those four songs have more in common with the *Infidels* lyrics than they do with the other songs on *Shot of Love* or the songs on *Saved* and *Slow Train Coming*. Deeply religious, they express their spirituality in Dylan’s own symbolic language as opposed to the language of Christian scripture—even when they are conveying scriptural ideas.

Gans quotes or paraphrases many of the unused lyrics: for example, in his discussion of “Jokerman,” we learn that Dylan had written “standing in the river catching fish with your hands” for an opening line and that the prince in the final verse originally will “take your soul” and “take your children as his sacrifice.” In addition, the priests “at this point are not in a pocket but are turned ‘into pimps that make old men bark.’” The alternatives to the words Dylan sings on the album are often, but not always, just as powerful: and thanks to Gans, we now know what other lyrical possibilities Dylan the songwriter had to choose from. Why he made the choices he did, of course, can be known only by the songwriter, if they can be known at all.

Gans mentions that in 1983 Dylan studied with a Hasidic rabbi in Brooklyn. Of course, when this news was broadcast at the time, it led to the popular theory that Dylan had abandoned Christianity and returned to his Jewish roots. Gans does not speculate on this piece of Dylan’s biography, but *Infidels* was cited at the time as evidence of this new “conversion.” Christ is not mentioned specifically in the recorded lyrics, the published lyrics, or the alternative lyrics Gans provides. And while “Neighborhood Bully” is a passionately pro-Israel song, no matter how Dylan tried to downplay that fact in interviews, a close reading of all the lyric

alternatives indicates that the songwriter was drawing on concepts from both the Old and New Testament in these songs. For example, Gans points out that in a draft of "Clean Cut Kid" Dylan had written "MYSTERY BABYLON MOTHER OF WHORES," a direct quote from the Book of Revelations. We also have in "Man of Peace" the star "that three men followed from the East." That the Jokerman has "The Book of Leviticus and Deuteronomy" as his only scriptural teachers does not indicate that he is adequately prepared to resist the temptations of evil. If the trio of albums that preceded *Infidels* can be considered his Christian phase, then *Infidels* can be considered a Biblical record, one whose vision includes ideas from both Testaments. In his *Rolling Stone* interview of June 1984 (an excellent companion piece to *Infidels*), when asked if the Old and New Testaments were "equally valid," Dylan answered, "To me."

These are the kinds of reflections that Gans's book induces but does not carry out. As he says, any "speculations" he does make in his book are meant to "provoke" the reader, and clearly my reading of his book provoked me in many ways to re-think the meaning of *Infidels* and to reconsider its position within Dylan's corpus. It has risen even higher in my estimation, certainly lyrically, but also musically. Knopler's production is clean and crisp, his and Taylor's licks always enhance the atmosphere of the songs, and Sly and Robbie's rhythm section is rock solid. Dylan's singing is strong on the rockers and both forceful and tender on mid-tempo ballads like "Don't Fall Apart on Me Tonight" and "Sweetheart Like You." His singing has not yet accumulated the rasp that is first in evidence on *Oh Mercy* (and which he has learned to use for expressive purposes in his later work).

With *Infidels*, Dylan reclaimed his reputation as rock's foremost wordsmith. After *Blonde on Blonde* he moved away from the powerfully surreal imagery of his most influential song/poems, attempting to find new veins of imagery within traditional country and folk, until he found his distinctive muse again on *Blood on the Tracks*. The lyrics of *Desire* adopted a consistently narrative mode, and while *Street Legal* was a grand attempt at recapturing the lyrical fire of his mid-'60s

work, it was a hit-and-miss affair. Then came the Christian songs in which Dylan restrained his own unique language in deference to his new-found religious vocabulary . . . until, as mentioned, a handful of songs intended for *Shot of Love*. But on *Infidels* we have a compelling vision of the world described with symbolic images drawn from the creative mind of Bob Dylan. (Who else could have written “Well he worships at an altar of a stagnant pool” or “He can ride down Niagara Falls in the barrels of your skull” or “No more mud cake creatures lying in your arms”?) Thanks to Terry Gans’s research and new book, we now know infinitely more about when Dylan first wrote these lyrics and what other words he conjured up in the context of this album.

Gans has provided the groundwork for all future studies of this important period in Dylan’s career. Anyone else who writes seriously about *Infidels* will need to begin by reading and studying Terry Gans’s *Surviving in a Ruthless World*.

**Baron Wormser. *Songs from a Voice: Being the Recollections, Stanzas, and Observations of Abe Runyan, Songwriter and Performer*. Norwalk, CT: Woodhall Press, 2019. 178 pp. \$17.95.**

REVIEW BY Tommy Shea

*When you're making yourself up, there's no map.*

– Abe Runyan

He's a kid from Somethingsville, Minnesota, a place where the wind hits heavy on the borderline, where the rivers freeze and the summers end way too soon.

Before the age of twelve, Abe Starker's hobby was stamp collecting. But then he was gifted a beige transistor radio. And he started hearing voices.

Hank Williams, Ma Rainey, the Carter Family, Bessie Smith, Lead Belly, Howlin' Wolf, Jimmy Reed . . .

They became another family, different from his mother, father, sister, and grandmother, but no less real.

The new voices sounded like "they were coming a long distance. . . . They weren't perfect, but that's why the songs existed, because things weren't perfect."

Something then started to change inside Abe Starker.

He was already taking life seriously. He thought a lot but felt even more. His wanting became different. Then Abe diagnosed himself with an incurable case of the metaphysical blues. He had a guitar in his hands when he did.

Abe decided he wanted to take himself home, "to my truest place—my imagination." He wrote a song, then another.

"What I wanted to do wasn't taught in any college," he said.

Abe ended up in Greenwich Village.

Under a personal construction, believing he was in need of a new name, Abe came up with Runyan.

It rhymed with that of his childhood hero, Paul Bunyan, and was also the name of a dead New York writer who wrote about guys and dolls and didn't need it anymore.

If this all sounds vaguely familiar, it is.

Sort of.

But this is a new story, as alive as today.

Weaving fact, fiction, and a rare sensitivity, Baron Wormser is a storyteller who's a master at crafting revealing moments, growing pains, discoveries, and, in prose as smooth as a rhapsody, explores how deep a song can go.

In his novel *Songs from a Voice: Being the Recollections, Stanzas, and Observations of Abe Runyan, Songwriter and Performer*, Wormser uses the young and old Bob Dylan as his muse.

And those of the Dylanish main character.

Along with Man and God and law, the rest of the sparks to his flames are all here: William Blake, Little Richard, Lord Randall, Odetta, Dostoevsky and Modigliani, just as they all are on Montague Street in the basement down the stairs.

Baron Wormser must have been there, too, leaning close, listening, thinking, taking it all in and all down, merging the music and the art into Abe Runyan, someone who sings from the pages as real as your favorite song.

Dylan fans will nod along to the familiar journey. Readers who don't know a thing about the North Country will nod as they reflect on the captivating tale of self-reinvention via art that goes on to reinvent the world.

Both camps will find the lyrical in Wormser's style, but it shouldn't be a surprise. This Maryland-born, Vermont-based author of seventeen previous books is also an acclaimed and longtime poet who served as the 2000 poet laureate of Maine, where his life included nearly twenty-five years living off the grid, a

timespan and experience gorgeously chronicled in *The Road Washes Out in Spring: A Poet's Memoir of Living Off the Grid*. He's very much at home dipping his pen into political topics, as he did so deftly in the poems that fill *Carthage*, a timeless and timely look at the toxic combo of top-level power and ignorance. And fiction set against historical events is not a new avenue for Wormser—find his novel *Tom o'Vietnam* for his view from a fictional veteran's boots and journey. *Songs from a Voice* sings to the author's ability to take the winds of the old days that are an inspiration and make it his character's own, to make us want to follow each step Abe Runyan takes, and have the front row seat for not only each song but each sentence.

Wormser has said his goal was to have the reader “feel the complexity of an artistic imagination as it issues from one particular life.” That might be the only time he erred on any of these pages, because we take not just one but two men's creativity and gifts with us when we close this book, feeling keenly the complexity of both Runyan's and Wormser's gifts to the world.

**Patrick Webster, *A Wanderer by Trade: Gender in the Songs of Bob Dylan*.  
Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2019. 195 pp.**

REVIEW BY Matthew Lipson, Independent Scholar

Patrick Webster's *A Wanderer by Trade: Gender in the Songs of Bob Dylan* employs foundational cultural and gender theory to address the tricky issue of Dylan's treatment of women and sex, as well as the feminine and masculine spheres in Dylan's work. It's a murky and necessary topic, especially loaded and fertile in the wake of the #MeToo era and the ongoing, even existential issue of gender dynamics and social justice. And if Dylan's work speaks to life as it happens, the nature of love, relationships, and religion, then *A Wanderer by Trade* grapples not just with issues of gender and sexuality within Dylan's world, but by implication, a larger world, too. It's as wide-ranging an undertaking as it sounds, especially given the sheer breadth of Dylan's canon and various personae.

For this reason Webster narrows the field to Dylan's catalogue up to 1985, calling it Dylan's most significant period, and asserts that rarely has Dylan's post-1985 work been as worthy of study. While this drawing of lines will divide readers, especially given the critical acclaim and accolades of Dylan's twenty-first century output, the extensive focus on a handful of songs does allow for some provocative close readings.

Webster's central contention is that with a poststructuralist perspective, we may read Dylan's lyrics for the ways in which the performative aspects of gender identity play out in his narratives, as well as the ways in which those aspects and modern notions of sexuality conflict within Dylan's versions of masculinity. The argument is not without flaws, offering more of an introduction to gender theory through a Dylanological lens than a study of Dylan's lyrics from a gender theory approach. Even so, *A Wanderer by Trade* excels at what it does, weaving between its theoretical foundation and its subject.

The notion of misogyny and strongly gendered narratives in Dylan's work may not be news, but it is necessary and meaningful territory and a timely step

toward modernizing Dylan criticism. Webster draws fascinating links between the masculine domain and travel in early Dylan, highlighting Dylan's classic tropes of male rambling and roaming, getting away, abandoning, and the romanticization of the highway as a metaphor for self-discovery and reprieve, particularly from women. Granted, the trope of men "escaping" women who have done them wrong, or vice-versa, hardly begins or ends with Dylan; as with his lyrics and melodies, the topic of male victimhood falls firmly within the folk and blues traditions. Not only do Dylan's men seek to escape from women, but more broadly from the confinement of their dreams by women and familial responsibility. Men, Webster claims, travel as a way of protecting themselves from the inconsistencies in *their own* gendered identities, hitting the road as a method of performing and reasserting their own masculinity.

While this reading of gender performance in Dylan's world certainly has its merits, Webster's theory stops short of such a reading's implications. *Why* are men free to ramble and roam, shirking their duties in favor of soul-searching expeditions? Why do men *get* to leave in "Don't Think Twice, It's Alright," "One More Night," and "Isis"? If travel is an inherently masculine act, at least in Dylan's world, is it still performative? And what of exceptions, as in "Boots of Spanish Leather," where women travel, leaving men behind to fill the traditionally female role of pining lover receiving love letters? Webster leaves questions of the morality of men's travel in Dylan's lyrics wide open, favoring a laissez-faire reading of masculinity.

Webster does, however, follow up his discussion of masculinity by basing the next chapter on the question of why so many of Dylan's lyrics contain seemingly misogynistic sentiments. Even more puzzling, as the author points out, is the question of why Dylan's men are consistently suspicious and even hostile toward women and yet "irredeemably drawn to them." Countless examples are featured here, naming the women in Dylan's songs as "deceivers, castrators, temptresses, often unfaithful" and calculating in their intent to trap men into a

web of responsibility and danger. Webster does a fine job of categorizing the themes of Dylan's misogyny, though an audience of Dylan scholars, likely already aware of misogynistic tendencies in Dylan and his male songwriting peers of the '60s and '70s, will find the discussion cumbersome.

Still, the question of the *root* of misogyny in Dylan's narratives lingers. Webster hints at the performative aspect of gender early on, the male-dominated blues tradition, and even the notion of Christ's masculinity as a potential reason for diminishing the feminine sphere during Dylan's born-again years. What Webster makes clear, though, is the sheer breadth of Dylan's approaches to femininity, or rather, the nuances of female gender constructs. In Dylan's world, Webster asserts, women are not simply angelic or demonic, inviolate or inviolable, confused or contemptible. They are enigmatic, maternal, deceptive at times, subservient at others. And though the chapter defers any straightforward answers to the question it poses of why men are simultaneously suspicious of and drawn to women, it highlights the messy and fractured nature of gender constructs and romantic love in Dylan's lyrics and attitudes.

Webster works his way from gender as a performative construct to its role in sexuality, both hetero- and homosexual. The claim that Dylan exhibited a puritanical, indifferent attitude toward sex throughout the 1960s mostly holds true, though certainly unrequited heterosexual romantic love is a salient theme in so much of Dylan's early output. Still, the author suggests that Dylan is and has been misread as a heterosexual artist writing about heterosexual subjects; when so many songs lack gender pronouns, why do we assume "It Ain't Me, Babe" *isn't* Dylan's preeminent gay anti-love statement? The simple answer, according to Webster, is that nothing in the text suggests otherwise. Webster also highlights the potential for latent homosexuality in Dylan's work, citing what Craig McGregor calls the "camp bitchiness" of his 1966 persona. The example speaks more to the datedness of many of *A Wanderer by Trade's* references than it does to any convincing commentary on Dylan's identification with homosexuality. One

cannot also help but feel that Dylan's circumstances at the time, including his marriage to Sara Lownds and alleged trysts, diminishes Webster's post-structuralist reading.

The chapter is framed by Dylan's born-again attitudes toward homosexuality and examines vastly differing attitudes toward sex and sexuality throughout his career. This is done in a sort of zigzagging way as the author works through Judeo-Christian views toward sex, all to ask, not unreasonably, why would someone as seemingly sensible as Dylan buy into the homophobia and dogma promoted throughout the born-again era? Webster does a fine job of highlighting the juxtaposition between Dylan's born-again sermons ("You pray for ungodly vice and you'll get it, ungodly vice and lust," he once said of San Francisco's gay community) and his earlier nonchalance about sexual binaries. He also posits that by 1979, Dylan's belief in salvation through the romantic love of women runs dry, replaced by the love of Christ instead. The period of 1979–1981, however, represents a vacuum in Dylan's otherwise indifference to the modalities of human sexuality. Webster even goes as far as to suggest that Dylan's interest in male-female sexual relationships is overblown. Rather, it is femininity, and to a greater degree, masculinity, with which Dylan is especially concerned.

*A Wanderer by Trade's* penultimate chapter meditates on the roles of gender and sex in Dylan's own persona. Webster contends that more worthwhile than any biographical information we might use to demystify Dylan is to consider the ways in which "Bob Dylan" the legend works as an exploration of masculine identity. A central feature of the section is the idea of the "enemy within," the twin, the search for the lost "other," and sex as a means by which we seek to reunite with our other half. That half, Webster intimates, is none other than the gender identity which we are *not*. It is this gender anxiety that drives men to women and to simultaneously distance themselves from the feminine sphere.

It's a convincing argument on paper, grounded in the theories of Freud and Lacan. It is also, however, where Dylan criticism so often folds in on itself,

reaching so far as to ordain Dylan time and again as a sort of omniscient vessel for the human psyche. The theoretical foundation remains strong, but the notion of Dylan or his subjects working, perhaps consciously, perhaps not, in a Lacanian world, may for some ring hollow. Perhaps knowing that, Webster adds the caveat that this is again one of many possible readings.

Dylan critics and scholars ought to be encouraged by the multitude of issues raised in Webster's book. As cultural texts, Dylan's work from the period studied here offers insight into both his own treatment of gender identity and sexuality, and the evolution of those themes in popular music at large. The decade to come may serve not as a reckoning for the kind of machismo depicted in Dylan's work, but as a basis on which to continue bringing Dylan studies forward into the current societal re-evaluation of gender dynamics and sexual multiplicities. In this sense, *A Wanderer by Trade* offers hope for a future understanding of the nuances in Dylan's depiction of women rather than a continued mass shying away from his more unsavory tendencies. Despite its flaws, including the dated nature of Webster's references and the book's own tendency to wander, *A Wanderer by Trade* aims to grapple with themes long dismissed in the study of Dylan, and for that it should be commended.

## THE DYLANISTA

The back page of the British journal *TLS* (*The Times Literary Supplement*) featured, until very recently, a column by J.C. Over the years this column included some paragraphs reflecting on Writers More or Less Forgotten—writers who, J.C. reminds his readers with a determinedly light touch, are to be distinguished from writers “unjustly overlooked.”<sup>1</sup> A fine point, but one worth keeping in mind. Granted, the categories are porous, subjective, but this was their secret strength. They encouraged simultaneous expansion and delimitation, allowing J.C.’s periodic review of the canon to shine a torch into the dim library stacks of the literary past and drag many half-forgotten authors into the light.

Can we apply similar categories to Dylan’s work? Would gratifying rediscoveries emerge if we adapted J.C.’s categories, substituting the word “Songs” for “Writers”? I think they might. Maybe in dribbles, maybe in droves, Songs More or Less Forgotten and Songs Unjustly Overlooked might teeter into the light. I have a few candidates for these categories—who doesn’t? But, still, I should offer a (perhaps unnecessary) disclaimer: my nominations depend entirely on where, in the moment, I think the obscurity begins. Long ago, in the liner notes to *Freewheelin’*, Nat Hentoff quoted Dylan on “Blowin’ in the Wind:” “The first way to answer these questions in the song is by asking them. But lots of people have to first find the wind.” Let me borrow that thought: to determine which songs, More or Less Forgotten, should emerge from the darkness into the light, first you have to find the darkness.

But even before doing that—before separating the light from our highly subjective darkneses—it’s advisable to make a slightly different distinction between Songs More or Less Forgotten and Songs *Best Forgotten*. Most longtime

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<sup>1</sup> For the last installment of Writers More or Less Forgotten (numbered Part VII), see September 4, 2020. [J]ames [C]ampbell stopped writing the NB column on September 18, 2020. The back page of the *TLS* is currently being written by M.C., but there’s been no hint that this new columnist will extend J.C.’s literary themes into the journal’s future issues.

listeners have managed to compile lists of these songs—lists that read like FBI dossiers of crimes against the canon. Predictably, no two lists match, and, perhaps fortunately, there could never be perfect agreement on which songs are Best Forgotten (although the mid-'80s output seems to get the majority vote). The Dylan literature is chock-a-block with heated debates attacking and defending songs heard by one group as Dylan's nadir and by another as close to his zenith. Where the former finds only detritus, the latter uncovers hidden gems. But, ironically, by the very nature of public debate, these Best Forgotten songs tend to be more prominent than many others—among the six-hundred-plus—that have simply flown for decades under the radar.

There are examples, too, of infamous performances, live or in the studio, that are Best Forgotten. And sometimes when the studio recordings and album cuts are Best Forgotten, subterranean favorites surface in live performances: e.g., the largely vilified studio outtake of "Abandoned Love" (*Biograph*) superseded by the live version, recorded at the Bitter End by an audience member (and available on YouTube), in which the voice, timing, and humor of Bob Dylan come through with authority.

Best Forgotten Songs and Performances Best Forgotten, in all their variants, stand apart from Songs More or Less Forgotten. Less distant, however, is the subcategory of neglected or overlooked songs that became part of the popular canon precisely because they were neglected or overlooked. In my view, three of the most renowned of these are the stunning "Percy's Song," an acoustic masterpiece that received heavy radio play over the years, the impossibly brilliant "Blind Willie McTell," now canonized though originally excluded from *Infidels*, and "Up to Me," an outtake from *Blood on the Tracks*. To take the last one, most critics highlight the excision of "Up to Me" as a spectacular blunder. Yet, ironically, the very notoriety of its outtake status has brought more attention to "Up to Me" than to many officially released songs. As with "Percy's Song," of course, and even more so "Blind Willie McTell," this attention is deserved—these are simply better

songs and better recorded performances than many included on the albums. But valorization notwithstanding, they still fall into the subcategory of songs canonized because they were neglected.

Songs More or Less Forgotten, then, shouldn't enjoy the same visibility as Best Forgotten Compositions/Performances or Notoriously Neglected Songs. Instead, to be More or Less Forgotten, a song must break the surface of the waters of oblivion. This happens from time to time, accomplished not so much by a new *old* song on Dylan's concert playlist ("Lenny Bruce," anyone?) as by an enterprising artist covering a Dylan rarity. And in this subcategory, too, we all have our preferences. One of mine: Chris Smither, with his searing guitar and lean baritone, in a brave cover of "What Was It You Wanted?" (*Up on the Lowdown*)—brave, because the song is tailored for the virtuoso contempt of Dylan's vocal. And brave, too, because only initiates would even know it was a Dylan song, let alone one from *Oh Mercy* (an album More or Less *Unknown* to the timid pilgrims who fear to tread into the Slough of Eighties Despond).

This welter of categories and subcategories makes me wonder: is there a hidden economy of song suppression? Might there be a secret ecology of neglect patterning songs More or Less Forgotten? Or is it just vogue? This last possibility reminds me of the sixteenth-century poet Thomas Wyatt, who, reflecting on a lover's fickleness at Henry VIII's court, speaks of "a strange fashion of forsaking." No doubt, forsaking is part of the phenomenon, and it must be a fashion of forsaking foundationed deep for great songs to become More or Less Forgotten. But is it *merely* fashion? Music-company economics of A- and B-sided singles—back when such quaint things existed—might have contributed to the suppression of certain songs in the first flush of an album's release. But Dylan singles almost never overshadow Dylan albums. Not even "Like a Rolling Stone," a top-ten hit, could obscure "Desolation Row," "Just Like Tom Thumb Blues," "It Takes a Lot to Laugh, It Takes a Train to Cry." On the contrary, like all the '60s albums (as well as *Blood on the Tracks*, *Desire*, and *Infidels*) *Highway 61 Revisited* harbors no

song *More or Less Forgotten*. And, remarkably, this kind of assimilation doesn't stop way back when. The *Time Out of Mind*-*"Love and Theft"*-*Modern Times* trilogy (if it is a trilogy) reprises—almost but not quite—that same '60s comprehensiveness.<sup>2</sup>

All those albums are *systemically* present in the mind of any Dylanista. They are, as Roland Barthes says about language, “nothing but a human horizon which provides a distant setting of *familiarity*” (his italics). If we think of those comprehensively known albums as constituting a song-system, a horizon of familiarity, then songs *More or Less Forgotten* would have to pierce that horizon to change their status *and* to alter their effect on the song-system.

Allow me a digression to back this up. In his *Cours de linguistique général*, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure divided language into two distinct categories: the first he called *langue*, a kind of floating totality or system of conventions; the second he called *parole*, the real-time utterances by speakers. *Langue*, as Jonathan Culler explains, “is a system, an institution, a set of interpersonal rules and norms, while [*parole*] comprises the actual manifestations of the system in speech and writing.” And, bringing it all back home, Culler adds, “to learn English is not to memorize a set of utterances; it is to master a system of rules and norms which make it possible to . . . understand utterances. To know English is to have assimilated the system of language.”

Devoted, longtime Dylan followers have assimilated a kind of *langue* of early songs, almost like a system of linguistic conventions. New performances of those songs act as real-time utterances—*parole*—separate from the established Dylan songs. To have assimilated this institutional totality is to know the Dylan *langue*, as a native speaker would know English or Portuguese, Urdu or Igbo. No

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<sup>2</sup> In a *Rolling Stone* interview with Jonathan Lethem (9/7/2006), Dylan “disincluded” *Time Out of Mind* from a possible trilogy: “*Time Out of Mind* was me getting back in and fighting my way out of the corner. But by the time I made *Love and Theft* [sic], I was out of the corner. On this record, I ain’t nowhere, you can’t find me anywhere, because I’m way gone from the corner . . . I would think more of *Love and Theft* [sic] as the beginning of a trilogy, if there’s going to be a trilogy.” If “this record” is *Modern Times*, then the reconstructed trilogy would be “*Love and Theft*”-*Modern Times*-*Together Through Life*. And what about *Tempest*? An outlier? Who saw a trilogy in the first place? A critic? Now is the time for your tears.

song from this *langue* could ever be More or Less Forgotten because memory isn't really part of the process. To know Dylan in this way is equivalent to having assimilated the rules and norms of a language-system—or maybe a “song-system.”

Some songs never rise to the level of assimilation and are therefore never incorporated into the song-system, the Dylan *langue*. These songs are in the canon, of course, ready to be used by other artists, while proving to be convenient sources of annoyance for critics on the hunt for new talking points. And many of these songs are hiding in plain sight among the six-hundred-plus. Three personal candidates: “New Pony” (*Street-Legal*), “I’ll Remember You” (*Empire Burlesque*), and, very tentatively, “Cry a While” (from “*Love and Theft*”—an album replete with songs which were rapidly absorbed into the *langue*).

Sometimes pertinent songs fail to intersect the horizon, falling short of becoming part of the “distant setting of familiarity.” This happens even when an intersection would be timely, with practical ramifications. It seems to me there might have been a lot less handwringing about Dylan's delay in accepting the Nobel Prize if “Day of the Locusts” (*New Morning*) had been assimilated into the song-system, accompanied by the autobiographical interpretation of the lyrics.<sup>3</sup> Like “*Love and Theft*,” *New Morning* has been almost fully absorbed into the *langue*. Only “Day of the Locusts” and “Three Angels” seem to have “more or less” slipped through the cracks.

But the cracks themselves, like the darkness I mentioned earlier, appear differently to every Dylanista. Even my list of categories is fungible (and, certainly, J.C. shouldn't be held accountable for, nor is it likely he'd approve of, the

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<sup>3</sup> In 1970, Princeton University awarded Dylan a Doctorate in Music *honoris causa*. If “Day of the Locusts” is a response to that event, as critics suggest, then the apocalyptic indictment of the ceremony and the fictional speaker's escape from the scene might have given a hint about Dylan's feelings toward academic honors and the academically inclined Nobel committee. This attitude toward a prize is puzzling, certainly, since Dylan didn't seem to have any hesitation in accepting the American Medal of Freedom, the French Legion of Honor, or induction as an honorary member in the American Academy of Arts and Letters—not to mention countless music awards.

taxonomical fragmentation I've wrought on the original Writers More or Less Forgotten). The few songs I've mentioned as More or Less Forgotten could be multiplied many times over, but any list I made, long or short, would still be subjective and patently unverifiable. Yet I suppose that's the point of porous, subjective categories. While some people would strenuously object to my choice of songs, others might add to the list and cite songs they consider fully present in the song-system that seem to me to be outside the Dylan "institution." And still others might altogether deny the existence of a *langue*-like capacity in Dylan studies. But these different reactions would confirm, rather than obviate, the phenomenon of Songs More or Less Forgotten, which makes me wonder if songs good and great will continue to languish More or Less Forgotten. And I wonder, too, if those songs, should they escape from the shadows, will successfully merge with the Dylan *langue*, breaching the horizon of familiarity. It's hard to say. You can always bring them back, but can you bring them back all the way?

RF

## POEMS

### Visions of Desolation: Cleveland 1965 Austin 2012

Thomas G. Palaima

*Ecce homunculus.*

This new blank document  
could remain blank  
for all I care  
to reveal or conceal.

Ask me.  
I ain't sayin'.  
Coax me.  
My lips are sealed.

I could turn myself inside out.  
My soul could slowly spin about.

Spin? Turn? Rotate? Whirl?  
Like a chicken on a spit?  
Like coffee in a microwave?  
Like a top? A dervish? A compact disc?  
A vinyl record from my youth?

What would you like me to play?

The needle in the groove works

its wonder in high fidelity,  
but faithful to the max to what?

The songs from cheap speakers,  
two-bit, sentimental,  
still sound good to me.

But who cares?

If I stood naked, who would hear?

My dried voice  
is more than quiet  
and less than meaningless.

Not a whimper.

“Peanuts, here, four bags for a quarter.”

“Buy your rags from Daddy Wags!”

A naïve young  
Roman Catholic boy,  
Lithuanian-Polish,  
thirteen going on ten,  
by way of the CTS  
(Cleveland Transit System)  
Number 35  
—“Trowbridge next!” —

after eighteen miles  
and fifty minutes  
of fading storefronts  
run-down bars  
reading the same  
soon-to-vanish  
lexicon of Polish,  
Czech, Hungarian,  
Irish, Croatian  
and now Puerto Rican  
names,  
steps off  
at Lorain Avenue  
and 25<sup>th</sup> Street,  
walks from the West Side Market  
five blighted city blocks  
to the red-brick Jesuit high school,  
and sits among other boys,  
among, but not with.

What was that shell,  
what kind of envelope  
kept him sound,  
and soundless?

Move, move, move,  
you splendid little machine.

Not quite a robot.

What did Eliot really know  
about the butt ends of days?

Who can count  
the butt ends  
of the ways  
that life can play  
blind man's bluff  
with your soul,  
and for keeps?

There isn't even any key chain.

## ARTICLES

### The Simple Art of Music: Bob Dylan and Noir

John Radosta, Independent Scholar

**Abstract:** This article traces Dylan's extensive use of, and connections to, crime fiction, tracing its roots from ballads such as "Barbara Allen" through Poe's C. Auguste Dupin stories (particularly on the album *Tempest*), and into film noir. Many of Dylan's noir songs, such as "Beyond Here Lies Nothin'," "Down the Highway," "Scarlet Town," and "Tin Angel," share rhythms and themes with crime fiction that highlight the seedy underbelly of society. This is distinct from his songs of social protest, such as "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll," where the goal is to effect change, instead of the vicarious experience of crime for entertainment's sake. While there has been extensive study of Dylan's use of film noir dialogue in his lyrics, this study focuses more on the attitudes and aesthetic of pulp fiction. It also includes a review of several of Dylan's more recent music videos, such as "The Night We Called it a Day" and "Duquesne Whistle," and their relationship to the noir tradition.

**Keywords:** James M. Cain; Raymond Chandler; crime fiction; Bob Dylan; James Ellroy; Dashiell Hammett; Griel Marcus; noir; Otto Penzler; Edgar Allan Poe; Harry Smith

*Man has climbed Everest. He has invented, devised, created in every realm of human endeavor . . . but there is one that has been neglected, Mr Bond. That one is the human activity loosely known as crime . . . And yet . . . in one week, the curtain will go up for the single, the unique performance. And then will come the applause, the applause for the greatest extra-legal coup of all time. And, Mr Bond, the world will rock with that applause for centuries.*

—Ian Fleming, *Goldfinger*

With the exception, perhaps, of the title of 1983's "License to Kill," Bob Dylan seems never to have made an allusion to another enduring cultural phenomenon that came out of the 1960s: James Bond. However, this monologue from Ian Fleming's 1959 novel (Gert Frobe's iconic film version was so memorably delivered in 1964) anticipates Dylan's imminent arrival on the world stage as well as his long-abiding interest in crime fiction. Fleming wrote in the tradition of pulp and noir fiction, a tradition that Dylan continues to honor as he explores criminality throughout his work, not least in the albums of original material he has released recently, starting with *Together Through Life*. My intention in this essay is not to show that Dylan makes specific references to specific titles—though he does, and they will be explored—but that he draws extensive inspiration from this literary genre. In the same way that he has walked "a road other men have gone down," reworking the conventions of traditional murder ballads, blues, and other musical styles, Dylan finds a clear appeal in the cynical worldview of noir, which intersects easily with his interest in songs similarly populated by cons, harlots, and other low-lives. Each artistic medium provides his writing with themes that parallel our times.

Dylan's early work is best known for his concerns with injustices borne of poverty, social inequality, and race. The 1964 album *The Times They Are a-Changin'* takes aim at the injustice and asks us to change it: when we learn that William Zanzinger, who "Owns a tobacco farm of six hundred acres / With rich wealthy parents who provide and protect him / And high office relations in the politics of Maryland," walked off with a six-month sentence, Dylan tells us, "Now's the time for your tears."<sup>1</sup> When we hear of the mass murder-suicide and "seven new people born"<sup>2</sup> at the end of "The Ballad of Hollis Brown," we know instinctively that these new unlucky seven are likely to feel the same weight of poverty and despair that the Browns did, unless we do something to rectify economic

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<sup>1</sup> Bobdylan.com, <http://www.bobdylan.com/songs/lonesome-death-hattie-carroll/>.

<sup>2</sup> Bobdylan.com, <http://www.bobdylan.com/songs/ballad-hollis-brown/>.

inequalities. But improving the human condition is not the primary goal of noir, and so we leave this worthy cause to wander some more.

Noir does cast an eye on the crushing power of situations beyond a person's control, but it does so mainly to signal the foolishness of the character's attempts to win a rigged game. American pulp fiction began in the early twentieth century, in magazines such as *Black Mask*, in which Dashiell Hammett's Continental Op stories were published, as well as many others including *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, which survives to this day. The pulps, so called for the cheap paper on which they were printed, emphasized lurid stories, often set in seedy and sleazy corners of the city. There was no pretext of literary merit, just fast-paced stories designed to shock you into turning the page to the next hellish tale. In the introduction to *The Best American Noir of the Century*, Otto Penzler defines noir works as

existential, pessimistic tales about people, including (or especially) protagonists, who are seriously flawed and morally questionable. The tone is generally bleak and nihilistic, with characters whose greed, lust, jealousy, and alienation lead them into a downward spiral as their plans and schemes inevitably go awry.<sup>3</sup>

In his own introductory essay to the same collection, James Ellroy adds that "[t]he social importance of noir is its grounding in the big themes of race, class, gender, and systematic corruption."<sup>4</sup> Today, practitioners of noir are as varied as Ken Bruen, Dave Zeltserman, and S. A. Cosby. Given Dylan's attraction to similar themes, both with an eye towards social improvement in his protest songs, as well as an interest in some of his later work in presenting the seedy spectacle of little people making big mistakes, I would add Bob Dylan to that list.

Before the pulps, there were dime novels and myriad periodicals. One of those was the Philadelphia-based *Graham's Magazine*, which, for a time in the

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<sup>3</sup> Penzler, "Foreword," x.

<sup>4</sup> Ellroy, "Introduction," xiii.

early 1840s, was edited by Edgar Allan Poe. While at the helm, Poe published one of his own sensationalizing tales, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," in which he introduces the first literary detective, C. Auguste Dupin. One inspiration for Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, Dupin used "ratiocination" to deduce the outré truth behind bizarre crimes. But while Holmes generally remains in more civilized circles (except for his occasional escape to an opium den), Poe's Dupin steps boldly into the darkest corners of society. In "Rue Morgue," he confronts the brutal, animalistic murders of two women in graphic detail, down to a severed head. In the next Dupin story, "The Mystery of Marie Roget" (1842-3), following the tradition of murder ballads, Poe uses as his starting point the real-life murder of the cigar-store girl Mary Rogers, whose body was found in Newark, New Jersey in 1841. The final Dupin story, "The Purloined Letter," (which the first Holmes short story, "A Scandal in Bohemia" (1891) significantly resembles), invokes the memory of the surgeon John Abernethy.

It has long been known that Bob Dylan is well-versed in Poe and especially in the Dupin stories. As far back as 1965, he visited "Rue Morgue Avenue" in "Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues."<sup>5</sup> However, especially since the start of the new millennium, he has mined those stories for more than a simple warning to stay away from dangerous neighborhoods. In his *Theme Time Radio Hour*, ostensibly recorded in the fictional "historic Abernathy building," he reads "The Raven"<sup>6</sup> and "Annabel Lee."<sup>7</sup> During the legs of his "Never Ending tour" in support of 2012's *Tempest*, ticket pre-sale codes included such allusions to Poe as "nevermore" and "raven." Meanwhile, several songs on the album make direct references to Poe, including "Duquesne Whistle" and "Scarlet Town," which features a grotesque

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<sup>5</sup> Bobdylan.com, <http://www.bobdylan.com/songs/just-tom-thumbs-blues/>.

<sup>6</sup> Dylan, "Halloween." 2006. *Bob Dylan Theme Time Radio Hour* archive. <https://www.themetimeradio.com/?s=Halloween>.

<sup>7</sup> Dylan, "Women's Names." 2007. *Bob Dylan Theme Time Radio Hour* archive. <https://www.themetimeradio.com/episode-35-womens-names/>.

ball reminiscent of “Masque of the Red Death.” He also makes a direct reference to “Mr. Poe” and his “tell-tale heart” on his latest album, *Rough and Rowdy Ways*.

Dylan’s most detailed exploration of a Dupin story is in the *Tempest* tune “Tin Angel.” The song depicts a murderous love triangle, in which the cuckolded husband climbs through the window of the room where his wife is visiting her lover. It is a vile story of marital betrayal and murder, reaching as far back as Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*—the ancient play in which the triumphant commander of the Greek forces returned home from Troy, only to be murdered in his bed by his wife and her lover—right into the present day. On the face of it, the two works are not immediately connected, beyond the setting of a boudoir, but there are significant recurrences of details. For example, Dupin lives in “a time-eaten and grotesque mansion,”<sup>8</sup> while “the boss” of Dylan’s story comes home to “a deserted mansion and a desolate throne.”<sup>9</sup>

It is in the scenes of murder where Dylan hews closest to Poe’s description. He describes the boss’s approach to the murder room using many of the details scattered about the miserable apartment in the Rue Morgue. All of the witnesses attest to the fact that though they “heard two voices in loud and angry contention—the one a gruff voice, the other much shriller—a very strange voice,” they “[c]ould not be sure whether it was the voice of a man or of a woman.”<sup>10</sup> Dylan echoes that in his depiction of the boss as he “Peered through the darkness, caught a glimpse of the two / It was hard to tell for certain who was who.”<sup>11</sup> His entrance to Henry Lee’s room is similarly detailed. Dupin recognizes that the murderer must have entered and escaped through the windows, as the staircase was being observed. When deducing how the killer gained access to the room, Dupin notes that near the window “in question there runs a lightning-rod.”<sup>12</sup> Dylan

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<sup>8</sup> Poe, “Murders,” 106.

<sup>9</sup> Bobdylan.com, <http://www.bobdylan.com/songs/tin-angel/>.

<sup>10</sup> Poe, “Murders,” 114.

<sup>11</sup> Bobdylan.com, <http://www.bobdylan.com/songs/tin-angel/>.

<sup>12</sup> Poe, “Murders,” 127.

takes care to have the boss “Cut the electric wire” before “lowering himself down on a golden chain,”<sup>13</sup> an image quite similar to a copper lightning rod. Both rooms contain gold, the Rue Morgue’s site providing a red herring motive for the murder, while in the song, beyond the golden chain, the faithless wife claims her lover is “dearer to me than gold.”<sup>14</sup> One of the tell-tale clues Dupin finds is “a small piece of ribbon, which from its form, and from its greasy appearance, has evidently been used in tying the hair in one of those long queues of which sailors are so fond.”<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, Dylan’s harried boss “ran his fingers through his greasy hair.”<sup>16</sup> The cumulative effect of these repeated key words and images reinforces Poe’s influence on Dylan’s writing, while their transformed use in new contexts and plot points illustrates Dylan’s mastery in reinterpreting the source of that influence.

Of course, in Poe’s macabre tale, the killer is inhuman—literally. Straining credulity, Dupin deduces that, given the difficulty in attaining the height of the window and the savagery of the wounds found on the two women, the perpetrator must have been “no animal but an Orang-Outang.”<sup>17</sup> Twice in Dylan’s song the boss is knocked down a few rungs on the evolutionary ladder to be compared to a similar simian. First, Henry Lee (his name is the same as the title character in Dick Justice’s song on *The Anthology of American Folk Music*) calls him “a gutless ape with a worthless mind,”<sup>18</sup> and then the spurned husband acknowledges the transformation, telling Henry Lee, “You made a monkey of me, what and for why?”<sup>19</sup>

Poe’s story is notable for its bizarre plot, but also for its unusually diverse cast of characters, one that presents to his audience a broader and more realistic view of society than was often shown to readers at the time. This combination of

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<sup>13</sup> Bobdylan.com, <http://www.bobdylan.com/songs/tin-angel/>.

<sup>14</sup> Bobdylan.com, <http://www.bobdylan.com/songs/tin-angel/>.

<sup>15</sup> Poe, “Murders,” 134.

<sup>16</sup> Bobdylan.com, <http://www.bobdylan.com/songs/tin-angel/>.

<sup>17</sup> Poe, “Murders,” 133.

<sup>18</sup> Bobdylan.com, <http://www.bobdylan.com/songs/tin-angel/>.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

sensational events taking place within a realistically seedy setting is what spurred American pulp fiction decades later. The stories of both Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett feature their heroes tramping through desolate neighborhoods with broken down houses and apartment buildings, bars too cash-poor to afford new signs when they change names, and a frightening array of characters dragging through one miserable hour to the next. The vivid descriptions allow us, the readers, a vicarious (and cheap) thrill in walking down those alleys without the fear of getting a shiv in the back.

Dylan can't, or won't, stick with a musical form for more than two or three albums, but his interest in Penzler's world of bleakness and nihilism, a world seething with the most atavistic levels of lust and greed, is one interest that is long abiding. Returning to his earliest influences from traditional ballads with the pair of albums *Good As I Been to You* and *World Gone Wrong* in the 1990s, Dylan packed the playlist with murder ballads and voyeuristic glimpses of seedy lowlifes. These songs, like the sensationalist stories portrayed in pulp fiction, were popularized through mass media, first as broadsides, then later as recordings on shellac or vinyl. Over the course of two albums, Dylan sets sail on a transport ship to Australia with "Jim Jones," he's sentenced to hard labor on a chain-gang in "You're Gonna Quit Me," and he suffers plain old "Hard Times." During the same period, he also recorded the ghostly murder ballad "Polly Vaughn" and the Robert Johnson tune "32-20 Blues."

Though these are all covers of traditional ballads and blues, they are late-century rambles through those same dark and dangerous alleys that keep the focus on lurid crime, not for the romance of the west, as in "Lily, Rosemary, and the Jack of Hearts," or to protest injustice, as in "Hurricane" or "The Death of Emmett Till." These songs simply provide the vicarious experience of being in the murder room, of witnessing for ourselves as "they got old Stack-A-Lee and they laid him right back in jail."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Bobdylan.com, <http://www.bobdylan.com/songs/stack-lee/>.

## On the Road: From Poisonville to Smithville and Beyond

Noir's ability to get us to sympathize with low-lives and losers, to root for sleaze peddlers and dope fiends, to experience the corrupting forces of lust and greed and pure bad faith, is at the rotten heart of pulp fiction. But it grips us by the neck, as Poe's *Ourang-Outang* and Chandler's *Moose Malloy* both do, and it forces us to not just watch the roiling filth of the cities, but to revel in it.

In their novels, both Hammett and Chandler, in addition to countless other pulp writers, explored both the upper crust and the underbelly of society. Hammett moves his unnamed Continental Op through social circles that include rum-runners, duplicitous dames, and corrupt town officials. One such city can be found in "The Cleansing of Poisonville," which was serialized in *Black Mask* in 1927, and was ultimately transformed into the novel *Red Harvest*. In his Introduction to the Hammett collection *The Continental Op*, Steven Marcus says that Hammett "not only continually juxtaposes and connects the ambiguously fictional worlds of art and of writing with the fraudulently fictional worlds of society; he connects them, juxtaposes them, and sees them in dizzying and baffling interaction."<sup>21</sup> Some of those juxtapositions can be seen in *The Maltese Falcon* (a favorite film of Dylan's, which has provided him with countless lyrics), when Sam Spade tells Brigid O'Shaughnessy, "I'm going to send you over. The chances are you'll get off with life. . . . You're an angel. I'll wait for you. . . . If they hang you I'll always remember you."<sup>22</sup> The interplay of love, hatred, and the likelihood that her privileged background may get her a lighter sentence all put Spade's—and Hammett's—cynicism in the fore. The same types of juxtapositions are rife in Dylan's work, and are a common source of his art. For example, in "Pay in Blood," Dylan writes (though on *Tempest* he sings different lyrics),

Another political pumping out his piss  
Another ragged beggar blowin' ya a kiss

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<sup>21</sup> S. Marcus, Introduction, xxiv.

<sup>22</sup> Hammett, *Falcon*, 211.

Life is short and it don't last long

They'll hang you in the morning and sing ya a song.<sup>23</sup>

His cynicism rivals Hammett's, with the rhyme linking the political and the beggar, and Spade's iconic speech reduced to a jaded couplet.

Dylan also shares similarities with Raymond Chandler. In a conversation between Ian Fleming and Chandler, Bond's creator notes, "the thriller element it seems to me in your books is in the people, the character building, and to a considerable extent in the dialogue, which of course I think is some of the finest dialogue written in any prose today."<sup>24</sup> Indeed, Chandler's characters are well built. His knight-errant detective Philip Marlowe, himself the occupant of a room so small he uses a Murphy bed, scales the heights of society, such as when he "call[s] on four million dollars"<sup>25</sup> to meet the decrepit General Sternwood in *The Big Sleep*. The general, who retained his randiness late into his 60s, when he begat his two wild and wayward daughters, now gets his kicks by sniffing at the cigarettes and booze his visitors enjoy in his sweltering conservatory, which is filled with orchids whose "flesh is too much like the flesh of men. And their perfume has the rotten sweetness of a prostitute."<sup>26</sup> But later, in *Farewell, My Lovely*, instead of four million dollars, Marlowe finds himself at a "dried-out brown house with a dried-out brown lawn in front of it."<sup>27</sup> In other words, he walks in a world

in which gangsters can rule nations and almost rule cities, in which hotels and apartment houses and celebrated restaurants are owned by men who made their money out of brothels . . . a world where a judge with a cellar full of bootleg liquor can send a man to jail for having a pint in his pocket, where the mayor of your town may have condoned murder as an instrument of money-making, where no

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<sup>23</sup> Bobdylan.com, <https://www.bobdylan.com/songs/pay-blood/>.

<sup>24</sup> Chandler, *Interview*.

<sup>25</sup> Chandler, *Sleep*, 3.

<sup>26</sup> Chandler, *Sleep*, 11.

<sup>27</sup> Chandler, *Farewell*, 304.

man can walk down a dark street in safety because law and order are things we talk about but refrain from practicing.<sup>28</sup>

A world frighteningly like our own, where small people make big mistakes. It is a world eerily similar to the one Dylan depicts in “Early Roman Kings”:

They're peddlers and they're meddlers, they buy and they sell  
They destroyed your city, they'll destroy you as well  
They're lecherous and treacherous, hell bent for leather  
Each of them bigger than all men put together  
Sluggers and muggers wearing fancy gold rings.<sup>29</sup>

In these short lines, Dylan builds those characters Fleming so admired in Chandler's work. Though we hear none of them speak, their personalities are richly described in their self-importance: every single one of them believes he is more important than the group, and those gold rings most certainly do more than flash as they slug their hapless victims.

That gritty, sensationalist view has long been an important theme in Dylan's work. Much has been made of his romantic depiction of outlaws and villains, which are prominent in his early work. In his earliest live performances, he sang such songs as “Moonshiner” and Dock Boggs's “Pretty Polly,” in which Polly pleads for her life as Willie leads her through the woods to her grave. For both complete songs and inspiration for his own compositions, Dylan mined Harry Smith's *The Anthology of American Folk Music*, a collection Greil Marcus goes so far as to describe as the fictional town “Smithville,” a place where the

prison population is large, and most are part of it at one time or another. While some may escape justice, they do not remain among their fellow citizens; executions take place in public. There are, after all, a lot of murders here—crimes of passion, of cynicism, of mere

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<sup>28</sup> Chandler, “Art,” 17.

<sup>29</sup> Bobdylan.com, <http://www.bobdylan.com/songs/early-roman-kings/>.

reflex—and also suicides. Here both murder and suicide are rituals, acts instantly transformed into legend.<sup>30</sup>

Likewise, when Dylan recorded his debut album, 1962's *Bob Dylan*, he included noir-ish tales like "House of the Rising Sun," and in "Song to Woody," he gave a nod to prisoner-turned-recording star Leadbelly.

One trope that infuses noir and Dylan's work alike is that of the lonesome hobo, cursed like Cain to wander the earth from one rocky coast to the other. In the hands of Woody Guthrie, that type of tramping along the road takes on a romantic air. Guthrie's "autobiography" *Bound for Glory*, an early influence on Dylan, describes the situation like this:

I walked on down the highway bucking the wind. It got so hard I had to really duck my head and push. Yes. I know this old flat country up here on the caprock plains. Gumbo mud. Hard crust sod. Iron grass for tough cattle and hard-hitting cowboys that work for the ranchers. These old houses that sweep with the country and look like they're crying in the dust. I know who's in there. I know. I've stuck my head in a million. Drove tractors, cleaned plows and harrows, greased discs and pulled tumbleweeds out from under the machinery. That wind is getting harder. Whooooooo!<sup>31</sup>

The wandering is adventurous, a tale to be told with the cheerful glee of a raconteur. But a noir story, while presenting the same milieu of down-and-out laborers and drifters, has a mean glint in the eye, a cynical contempt for the world and everyone in it. For example, in the classic 1934 tragedy *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, James M. Cain's doomed lovers Frank and Cora have the following exchange:

"We'll ditch this Greek and blow. Just blow."

"Where to?"

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<sup>30</sup> G. Marcus, *Republic*, 124.

<sup>31</sup> Guthrie, *Bound*, 193.

“Anywhere. What do we care?”

“Anywhere. Anywhere. You know where that is?”

“All over. Anywhere we choose.”

“No it's not. It's the hash house.”

“I'm not talking about the hash house. I'm talking about the road. It's fun, Cora. And nobody knows it better than I do. I know every twist and turn it's got. And I know how to work it, too. Isn't that what we want? Just to be a pair of tramps, like we really are?”<sup>32 33</sup>

The same rhythms, the same optimistic misery can be heard in “Down the Highway”:

Well, I'm bound to get lucky, baby  
Or I'm bound to die tryin'  
Yes, I'm a-bound to get lucky, baby  
Lord, Lord I'm a-bound to die tryin'  
Well, meet me in the middle of the ocean  
And we'll leave this ol' highway behind...<sup>34</sup>

None of Guthrie's chipper road-earned wisdom is here, no pride in hard work or joy in the company of your fellow man or woman. Just an ongoing war against a hard-lipped fate that always crushes you in the end.

That hard-lipped fate is right there in front of you in “Scarlet Town,” from 2012's *Tempest*. Dylan's Scarlet Town shares borders with Smithville and Poisonville. Here, “the evil and the good” live “side by side.”<sup>35</sup> The song is a fascinating nexus of ancient balladry, nursery rhyme, biblical excess, and tragic waste. Some versions of the ballad “Barbara Allen” (though not the version Dylan sang in the

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<sup>32</sup> Cain, *Postman*, 13.

<sup>33</sup> The novel also features the following passage, which has the same refrain as the Shel Silverstein song Dylan sings to Fiona in *Hearts of Fire*: “We just got to sell him a story, that's all. You were in here, and the lights popped, and you heard him slip and fall, and he didn't answer when you spoke to him. Then you called me, that's all. Not matter what he says, you got to stick to it. If he saw anything, it was just his imagination, that's all” (Cain 19).

<sup>34</sup> Bobdylan.com, <http://www.bobdylan.com/songs/down-highway/>.

<sup>35</sup> Bobdylan.com, <http://www.bobdylan.com/songs/scarlet-town/>.

Greenwich Village coffee houses) are set in Scarlet Town, and here, as in that song, a young man named William lies dying for the love of a woman. But instead of telling the tale of too-late repentance, this song moves out of the death room to investigate other scenes of filth. Beggars crouch at the gate, love is a sin, and beauty is a crime. In Scarlet Town, all manner of perversions fester, where you fight your father's foes "with whiskey, morphine and gin" and then dance with your "flat chested junky whore"<sup>36</sup>—not an inaccurate description of the blackmailed daughter of General Sternwood, Carmen, that Philip Marlowe deals with in *The Big Sleep*: after rescuing her from a drugged nude photo shoot, he later kicks her out of his apartment when he finds her recreating the scene in his Murphy bed. The 1946 film of *The Big Sleep*, starring Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall, provides a number of lyrics to Dylan tunes over the years, as Michael Gray points out.<sup>37</sup> But it also has another connection to Dylan's output: in one scene, when the stars speak in a restaurant, the music in the background is the song, "I Guess I'll Have to Change My Plan," which he recorded for his last collection of American standards, *Triplicate*, in 2017.

### **Blood in My Eyes: Femmes Fatales in Story and Song**

The land of noir is a bastion of male misery, and, like the blues, this literary genre often trades in a simple, brutish attitude toward gender roles. In these tales, men are most often the aggrieved party, brought low by the machinations of a beautiful but foul woman. It's an attitude that reaches as far back as Eve and the "beautiful evil," Pandora. Dylan modernizes the image with the wife in "Tin Angel," discussed above.

Jim Thompson gives us several such "beautiful evils," notably in *A Hell of a Woman*. The 1954 novel follows the much-put-upon traveling salesman Frank "Dolly" Dillon (while the names are similar, it's unlikely that young, ambitious

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Gray, *Encyclopedia*, 226.

Robert Zimmerman looked to this book for his stage name). At the start, he's just another employee at Pay-E-Zee Stores, where you "got used to people who hid when they saw you coming."<sup>38</sup> But then he meets the alluring Mona, pimped by her own aunt, who sets him off on a tragic spiral. When Dolly's wife leaves him, she tells him, "I'm leaving. Now. Tonight. I don't want anything from you. I can pawn my watch and ring—get enough to get by on until I land a job. All I want is to get away from here."<sup>39</sup> Dylan echoes that decisive line in "Crossing the Rubicon": "I pawned my watch and I paid my debts and I crossed the Rubicon."<sup>40</sup> The similarity of diction across the decades shows Dylan's continued participation in the tradition of pulp and balladry.

During his sojourn with the Band in West Saugerties, New York, in the late 1960s, Dylan rediscovered that vast Americana collection of balladry and turned toward recording a string of outlaw and prison songs found or inspired by the denizens of what Greil Marcus, in *Invisible Republic*, would later name "Smithville." In these sessions, Dylan and the Band covered such songs as "Folsom Prison Blues," "That Auld Triangle," and "The Hills of Mexico." Smithville, as Marcus defines it, is a noir town, feverish with desperation, a place where "some crimes are instantly turned into legends."<sup>41</sup> Whenever Dylan travels through its environs, he gleans images and sordid tales that he salts away for later. For example, the caged bird who witnesses the murder of a lover in "Love Henry" on *World Gone Wrong*, first took flight in Dick Justice's song "Henry Lee" on Smith's *Anthology*. Another legend-turned-song is "Frankie and Albert," which Dylan recorded for 1992's *Good As I Been to You*. In this semi-true story, which is also told in Mississippi John Hurt's "Frankie" in Smith's collection, the woman gets her revenge, insofar as the song relates the murder of Allen Britt by his wronged lover Frankie Baker. Their relationship may have been even more complicated, as some reports suggest

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<sup>38</sup> Thompson, *Woman*, 4.

<sup>39</sup> Thompson, *Woman*, 30.

<sup>40</sup> Bobdylan.com, <http://www.bobdylan.com/songs/crossing-the-rubicon/>.

<sup>41</sup> G. Marcus, *Republic*, 135.

Britt was Frankie's pimp. In any case, it's another miserable ending sung in the gutter of a dead end street.

### **Drinking from an Old Tin Cup: Jailhouse Confessions**

One aspect of noir that often gets lost in the celebratory leering at vice and corruption, is that it is a fundamentally conservative genre. For all its wallowing in sin and foulness, noir plays a redemptive societal role, in that it rarely allows the misfits and criminals to win their crooked games. With a dying breath or the clang of a closing cell door, right is usually restored at the end. In the same way, many of the murder ballads and other tunes Dylan has recorded present a fated justice that strikes at the heart of those who would dare to transgress society's moral values.

One song that illustrates this is "Delia," recorded for *World Gone Wrong*. Dylan sticks close to the traditional version, in which Curtis is arrested and put on trial after murdering the gambling girl of the title. Smugly the killer addresses the judge, only to be coldly rebuffed:

Curtis said to the judge, "What might be my fine?"

Judge says, "Poor boy, you got ninety-nine."

All the friends I ever had are gone.<sup>42</sup>

In the liner notes Dylan says of the song, in his idiosyncratic typing,

Delia herself . . . doesn't need a blood change & would never go on a shopping spree. the guy in the courthouse sounds like a pimp in primary colors . . . does this song have rectitude? you bet. toleration of the unacceptable leads to the last round-up.<sup>43</sup>

What is "unacceptable," Dylan doesn't specify. While it's clear that his sympathy, and the song's, are with Delia, the fact that she herself is a "gambling girl" and is

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<sup>42</sup> Bobdylan.com, <https://www.bobdylan.com/songs/delia/>.

<sup>43</sup> Dylan, "About the songs."

shot dead suggests that she, too, is in need of rectitude. In the end, all are punished.

On the next track of the same album, Dylan follows the convict into the Smithville jail. In his version of Frank Hutchison's oft-covered "Stackalee," Dylan presents the supernatural agony that comes of a senseless killing:

Stack-A-Lee turned to the jailer, he said, "Jailer, I can't sleep.

'Round my bedside Billy Lyons began to creep."

All about that John B. Stetson hat.<sup>44</sup>

It's a knife-edge walk between reveling in the criminality of associating oneself with the villain, and assuming the air of righteousness by seeing him succumb to his existential punishment.

The guilty thrill of the jail cell continues in 1997's "Cold Irons Bound," in which the narrator is "beginning to hear voices and there's no one around."<sup>45</sup> We never find out what his crime was, but there is a strong sense that he has killed the woman he loved. The rest of the song is a plea to a woman who drives him "out of control" with a single look, one he "tried to love and protect," despite the fact that "Some things last longer than you think they will / There are some kinds of things you can never kill."<sup>46</sup> The cumulative references to mud, blood, and his seeing her from his cell "twenty miles out of town," even though she can't see him, suggest she's alive in his conscience but not in the real world. The punishment never ends, warning both the readers of pulp and Dylan's listeners that to act on their prurient curiosity will bring them no good.

### **Peddlers and Meddlers: Recent Noir Imaginings**

In the new millennium, Dylan's work took on more and more examples of sudden violence, even in seemingly urbane love songs. Throughout "*Love and Theft*" (its title is taken from Eric Lott's study of minstrelsy, but the sentiment equally

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<sup>44</sup> Bobdylan.com, <http://www.bobdylan.com/songs/stack-lee/>.

<sup>45</sup> Bobdylan.com, <http://www.bobdylan.com/songs/cold-irons-bound/>.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

applies to the idea that the album showcases the musical styles and literature Dylan plunders for inspiration), danger lurks around every turn of phrase. Among many oft-discussed allusions—some have argued thefts—on the album are lines from Junichi Saga's *Confessions of a Yakuza*. Lewis Carroll's Tweedle-Dee and Tweedle-Dum are shown “throwing knives into a tree” and in possession of a “dead man's bones.” This is not Alice's perverse looking-glass world, but the even worse “Land of Nod,” home to the Bible's first murderer and noir-ish wanderer, Cain, whose ironic punishment is a desperate life without death. The nonsensical partners in crime traverse a terrifying landscape of casual cruelty, where “a childish dream is a deathless need”<sup>47</sup>—the very definition of a noir loser's motivation.

The world-weary fatalism of noir continues in “Mississippi.” Here, the speaker's loving tones belie the hardship he and his partner have endured, “all boxed in, nowhere to escape.” When Dylan says, “Nothing you can sell me, I'll see you around,”<sup>48</sup> one can imagine “Dolly” Dillon knocking on one door after another, getting the same miserable response.

Though Dylan never strays too far from the noir sentiment, it is on *Together Through Life* where he dives into the abyss. The album, with David Hidalgo's accordion suggesting the norteño music of a border town, is a grim depiction of urban decay. The opening track, “Beyond Here Lies Nothin',” written with Robert Hunter, is spoken in the voice of a deluded pulp hero:

Just as long as you stay with me  
The whole world is my throne.<sup>49</sup>

But his tragic flaw of grandiosity is throttled in the downbeat lines that finish each stanza, especially the closing line, “Nothin' done and nothin' said.”<sup>50</sup> In classic noir fashion, the protagonist reaches too high, only to be thrown back to the ground.

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<sup>47</sup> Bobdylan.com, <http://www.bobdylan.com/songs/tweedle-dee-tweedle-dum/>.

<sup>48</sup> Bobdylan.com, <http://www.bobdylan.com/songs/mississippi/>.

<sup>49</sup> Bobdylan.com, <http://www.bobdylan.com/songs/beyond-here-lies-nothin/>.

<sup>50</sup> Bobdylan.com, <http://www.bobdylan.com/songs/beyond-here-lies-nothin/>.

This series of Dylan's musical tales of "flawed and morally questionable" characters culminates in 2012's *Tempest*, a noir album through and through. This album, long thought to be Dylan's final collection of original material until this year's release of *Rough and Rowdy Ways*, seethes with rage, vitriol, and violence. Even a swinging tune like "Duquesne Whistle" hides menace by way of its allusions to Poe ("Blowin' like she's at my chamber door"), trips through "another no-good town,"<sup>51</sup> and offers the threat of a time bomb. To listen to the music and Dylan's smooth singing on "Soon After Midnight," you might think the track could have been slipped onto one of his collections of American standards, but its lyrics prove there is little love to be found here. It's jarring enough to hear Dylan say in that sweet melody that he's "been down on the killing floors."<sup>52</sup> However, the image gets nastier when you realize it's an allusion to Howlin' Wolf's "Killing Floor," which uses the slaughterhouse to describe the singer's relationship with a woman. By continuing the misogynistic thread of early pulp stories, the song introduces murder to what pretends to be a romantic stroll.

When Dylan surprised us all with the gift of *Rough and Rowdy Ways* in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, the *Los Angeles Times* called it a "savage pulp-noir masterpiece."<sup>53</sup> In fact, it knots together many separate threads of Dylan's preoccupations, including nineteenth century poetry ("I Contain Multitudes"), the twining of music and history ("Murder Most Foul"), and the ancient world ("Mother of Muses" and "Crossing the Rubicon"). That's not to say that the *Times* got it entirely wrong. The album's second track, "False Prophet" evokes the despair of good intentions gone bad that accompanies most pulp:

Another day of anger - bitterness and doubt  
I know how it happened - I saw it begin

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<sup>51</sup> Bobdylan.com, <http://www.bobdylan.com/songs/duquesne-whistle/>.

<sup>52</sup> Bobdylan.com, <http://www.bobdylan.com/songs/soon-after-midnight/>.

<sup>53</sup> <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/music/story/2020-06-12/bob-dylan-rough-and-rowdy-ways-album-review>.

I opened my heart to the world and the world came in.<sup>54</sup>

As on *Tempest*, casual violence seeps throughout the album. For example, in “I Contain Multitudes,” he claims to carry “four pistols and two large knives.”<sup>55</sup> He continues to seethe through the defiant declarations of “Crossing the Rubicon”:

I feel the bones beneath my skin and they're tremblin' with rage

I'll make your wife a widow - you'll never see old age.<sup>56</sup>

There are also spurts of hardboiled cynicism. It's easy to imagine Humphrey Bogart quipping the lines from “Key West (Philosopher Pirate),” perhaps to Lauren Bacall:

Fly around my Pretty Little Miss

I don't love nobody - gimme a kiss.<sup>57</sup>

But these are flashes of cynicism and violence amidst so many other allusions to other songs, films, historical events and figures that it's hard to credit the whole album as a noir. Instead, the genre has become another pattern woven into the larger tapestry of Dylan's work, black and white threads that he pulls to emphasize a detail or draw a connection between genres or historical events. Perhaps, as the *Times* says, it is a pulp-noir masterpiece, but only because Dylan's overarching artistic theme is that the whole world is in the throes of what Ellroy terms “systematic corruption.” It's a jaded view, but one borne out by verse after verse of Dylan's output addressing society's ills throughout his career.

### **He Went to Hollywood: Noir Influences on Dylan's Music Videos**

Dylan's appearances in such films as *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, and his own *Renaldo & Clara* reveal his interest in visual media, and it is worth noting that both films involve a fascination with criminality. For instance, a complicated subplot of the later movie involves Harry Dean Stanton as the escaped con Lefkezio. However, while study of Dylan's work in film has been considerable, his

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<sup>54</sup> Bobdylan.com, <http://www.bobdylan.com/songs/false-prophet/>.

<sup>55</sup> Bobdylan.com, <http://www.bobdylan.com/songs/i-contain-multitudes/>.

<sup>56</sup> Bobdylan.com, <http://www.bobdylan.com/songs/crossing-the-rubicon/>.

<sup>57</sup> Bobdylan.com, <http://www.bobdylan.com/songs/key-west-philosopher-pirate/>.

music videos have not been discussed to any great extent. Yet it is in these short films that he interacts directly with noir images, often making visual references to tropes and even specific titles. Music videos, by their very nature, are collaborative projects, and it isn't always easy to discern Dylan's involvement in their production, but the connections between the few he has released and classic film noir are pervasive and provide yet another lens through which to examine Dylan's contributions to the genre.

It has been often pointed out that Dylan's album *Empire Burlesque* is laden with lines quoted from a number of classic movies, notably *The Maltese Falcon*. Interestingly, the record's release in 1985 coincided with the rise of music videos. Ever dubious of fads, Dylan's entries to the MTV listings were sparse. But two videos he did make to support this album—"Tight Connection to My Heart" and "When the Night Comes Falling From the Sky"—each bears strong connections to noir. A third, "Emotionally Yours," is not so obviously influenced by noir, but some similarities lead it to be caught up in the dragnet of this discussion.

The techniques used in film noir, especially those made in the post-war era between the 1930s and 1950s, involve stark contrasts between light and dark. Shadows pervade every frame, symbolizing the evil that lurks in every darkened doorway. Paul Schrader, in "Notes on Film Noir," points out that "[l]ight enters the dingy rooms of film noir in such odd shapes . . . that one suspects the windows were cut out with a pen knife."<sup>58</sup> Noir characters rarely see the sun, only the glare of a bare bulb in an interrogation room, or a flashing neon sign. Men dress in rumpled trench coats and fedoras tilted to hide their guilty faces. Society women appear in elaborate hats and elbow-length gloves, while their skid-row counterparts try to doll up in tattered fur collars and threadbare dresses. Bootleg whiskey mixes with blood in the gutters, and huge cars speed through the streets, desperate to outrace fate. The visual cues to virtue and vice are never subtle.

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<sup>58</sup> Schrader, "Notes," 11.

Dylan's videos, especially from the early period marked by *Empire Burlesque*, approach noir in an ambivalent fashion. For example, the video for "Tight Connection to My Heart," a song made up almost entirely of lines from old movies, pointedly avoids the harsh dichotomy of black and white, and instead is splashed with color. The setting, too, is transported from New York or Los Angeles to neon-lit Japan. But the story elements are plainly derived from the golden age of B-reels. In it, Dylan plays a man who may or may not be involved in a crime, one that left a body on the sidewalk outside of movie theater. Dragged by Japanese police into the interrogation room, he lip-syncs, "You want to talk to me, go ahead and talk,"<sup>59</sup> a favorite line from *The Maltese Falcon* (he later used it in *Hearts of Fire* as well). The wardrobe designers trade fedoras and trench coats in for a trucker's cap and a garish '80s shirt, but one of the two femmes fatales wears a white dress very similar to the one Jane Greer sports in her entrance at the start of *Out of the Past*. These scenes represent an overt attempt to drag the seediness of noir into the bright lights of *Miami Vice*. But it is ultimately unsuccessful, bordering on camp: Dylan winds up on a karaoke stage, trying to match the choreography of a trio of young women.

Darkness and sharp shadows make a return in the video for "Emotionally Yours," directed by Dave Stewart. Most of the video shows Dylan playing guitar in what looks like a bar or dancehall after closing time. Despite the seedy setting and black and white film, the mood is distinctly modern, but a few elements hint at something menacing. Silhouettes of crossed girders are projected on a wall; through a discarded photo shown at the start and end, as well as flashbacks, we see images of a tempestuous relationship, another trope of noir film. Schrader argues that such complex chronologies "reinforce the feelings of hopelessness and lost time,"<sup>60</sup> which certainly is appropriate to this video, as well as to the bulk of Dylan's work. A strange figure of the woman, hands at her neck as if fighting

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<sup>59</sup> Bobdylan.com, <http://www.bobdylan.com/songs/tight-connection-my-heart-has-anyone-seen-my-love/>.

<sup>60</sup> Schrader, "Notes," 11.

off someone choking her, can be seen rotating beneath a spotlight. The effect is a mismatch of words and images, once again displaying Dylan's holding the past and present in an uneasy balance.

Perhaps the most successful of the trio, in terms of incorporating noir aesthetics into a modern setting, is "When the Night Comes Falling from the Sky," directed by Eddie Arno and Markus Innocenti. This time, an appropriate setting—the back alleys of Los Angeles—and black and white film situate the video in a classic mode. In what looks like a performance at an illicit club, one spied on by kids through a back window, Dylan sings lines that might have been penned by Hammett:

I can't provide for you no easy answers  
Who are you that I should have to lie?

And later he adds,

You must have been protecting someone last time I called.

.....

I've never asked you to set yourself up for a fall.<sup>61</sup>

In his 2000 book *Song and Dance Man*, Gray points out film lines from other sections of the song,<sup>62</sup> but in these two verses, Dylan's own cynicism and snappy retorts are of a piece with all the hard-boiled books and films we're looking at here. He conjures up an entire scene of someone, probably a woman torn between two men, huddled over a telephone receiver. The scenario and the clichéd set-up are just what you'd expect from a pulp novel.

Never one to sit still, after *Empire Burlesque*, Dylan released a few more music videos in the 1980s, though none with noir connections. But with the album *Under the Red Sky* (1990), Dylan returned to the form. After trying to update the genre in fluorescent '80s duds, his clip for "Unbelievable" used more traditional noir images: a pair of classic Mustang convertibles, bar fights, cheap motels, and

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<sup>61</sup> Bobdylan.com, <http://www.bobdylan.com/songs/when-night-comes-falling-sky/>.

<sup>62</sup> Gray, *Song and Dance*, 552, 556.

a trip through the desert, where the hero is robbed by a duplicitously sexy (though not noir-ishly sultry) woman, played by Molly Ringwald. The license plate shown at the end, as the main character is picked up in a limousine chauffeured by Dylan himself, suggests that the whole thing has been one bad trip: LSD 752. The chaotic camera work and the unexplained nose-ringed pig in the back seat might seem to weaken the connection to noir, but as Oliver Harris notes, such disorientation in noir “functions . . . to implicate the film viewer in the dream within the film.”<sup>63</sup> By making us question whether we have just watched an actual narrative or fantasized one concocted from noir elements we have internalized over years of film viewing, Dylan (in conjunction with the director Paris Barclay), makes us complicit in that chaos.

In contrast, his twenty-first century efforts have stuck closer to the timeless images that harken back to the shadowy camera work and scruffy losers. His 2008 video for “Dreamin’ of You” (an outtake from 1997’s *Time Out of Mind*) returns to the lonely desert roads hazy with heat, and the washed-out colors of sleazy, sun-baked motels. The video features Harry Dean Stanton, veteran of *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* and, as already noted, *Renaldo & Clara* (closing another link, he also starred with Molly Ringwald in *Pretty in Pink*). Here, Stanton is noir personified, wearing a shapeless fedora, white shirt, and black tie. He’s a bootlegger, too—of concert performances. The feverish shots of him driving from show to show, plotting his trips with string on wall maps, and checking set lists with mug after mug of diner coffee portray his desperation and dedication to a cause that isn’t worth the gas money. Unlike the previous videos, this one could have been shot at almost any time over the last 75 years.

Even through his later music videos, Dylan’s fascination with and reworking of familiar noir tropes continues. He uses these raw materials to project new ideas onto the screen, as he works through the themes of alienation and violence, noted by Penzler and Ellroy, and offers them as reflections not of the smoky past,

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<sup>63</sup> Harris, “Fascination,” 8.

but a cold, bleak present. The first of these later explorations is “Beyond Here Lies Nothin’” from *Together Through Life*. It is clearly not “classic” noir in the sense that the narrative inverts the typical noir plot: it starts with brutality and ends with a kiss. The director, Nash Edgerton, told *Pitchfork*, “Usually, you get sent a song and you listen to it a bunch and then you write a treatment. But because it was Dylan, and piracy and all that, I only got to hear the song once over the phone.”<sup>64</sup> All the same Edgerton’s treatment—set in a run-down motel with a blood-stained bed and restraints, a syringe and no visible life outside—must have appealed to Dylan’s cinematic sense. As we watch the man (Joel Stoffer) enter the apartment, he’s scruffy, carrying a package the contents of which never get revealed, reminiscent of many noir and hardboiled MacGuffins (including the Mickey Spillane film *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), which is the glowing inspiration for 1984’s *Repo Man*—featuring Harry Dean Stanton—and *Pulp Fiction* (1994)). What follows is a whiplash series of attacks, in which the two antagonists, a man and a woman, strike, stab, and brutalize each other, culminating in the woman running him over with a car. Yet, instead of riding off and leaving him for dead, she gets out of the car, and the last shot is of her kissing him. The expectant look on the man’s face is one of hope, not tragedy, and so reverses the effect of noir.

Edgerton returned to direct three other song videos for Dylan, all of which tend to the dark side. Even “Must Be Santa” features what must be the worst Christmas party ever, with an unexplained fugitive tearing the place up. Its black and white countdown opening and the decorations in the house suggest the 1940s or 1950s, though other than that there are no connections to film noir. But Edgerton returns to the noir atmosphere of *Tempest*, in the video for “Duquesne Whistle.” Separate from the images in the song itself, as discussed above, the video presents two stories in fractured narrative: by night, Dylan and a crew of followers walk through gritty streets; by day, a clearly delusional man, with the gaunt face and lopsided grin of Robert DeNiro in *Taxi Driver*, struts through the

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<sup>64</sup> <https://pitchfork.com/news/35479-directors-cut-bob-dylans-beyond-here-lies-nothin/>

same streets, stalking a woman who doesn't hesitate to mace him. From there, the video explodes into rampaging violence: his escape from the police leads him to push over a ladder that holds a man changing the movie title on a rusting theater marquee. The pathetic post-beating fantasy he dreams while being transported in a van brings us back to the last ramblings of Frank in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*: "Whenever I can make it, I'm out there with Cora, with the sky above us, and the water around us, talking about how happy we're going to be, and how it's going to last forever."<sup>65</sup> But there is no stay of execution for Frank, and the delusional young man is tossed onto the sidewalk, stepped over by Dylan and his tough-looking crew. The message is the opposite of that in "Beyond Here Lies Nothin'": there is no loving redemption to be had for the miserable. These juxtaposed views in consecutive videos suggest Dylan's refusal to give answers, only vignettes that force us to judge for ourselves.

The culmination of all of these videos, though, is the black and white film that accompanies the Sinatra cover, "The Night We Called It A Day." Starring Robert Davi and Tracy Phillips, along with Dylan himself, Edgerton's "Night" is a full-blown noir. From the title card scrawled in B-movie script to the murderous love triangle that disintegrates under chloroform, a fireplace poker, and bullets, every noir trope makes an appearance. In the opening shot, Dylan walks past a bleeding man talking to a cop and into a bar, where Phillips is dancing a burlesque. Over a drink, he shows Davi the ring he's going to give Phillips, only to be shown a bigger one in return. But later, when Davi arrives at her apartment, he finds a gun-toting Dylan, who turns aside as Phillips brutally murders Davi. It looks like the pair will live happily ever after, until they pull guns on each other in the elevator. Flashes of light suggest shots, but we don't know what happened. The black and white is used to excellent effect as Phillips strides out of the elevator alone, her white dress radiant. Suddenly a blood stain grows on her abdomen.

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<sup>65</sup> Cain, *Postman*, 121.

Dylan escapes from the police out a back door, driving off in a hail of gunfire. "The End" appears in looping script.

As with "Dreamin' of You," the video is timeless. While most of the cars hail from the 1940s and 1950s, Davi's is from the 1970s. And while Davi wears the noir uniform of black hat, black tie, and white shirt, Dylan's patterned tie, and, later, untucked button down and black t-shirt all point to the present day. The result is a tightly woven tapestry of Dylan's voice, the evocative strings of the music, and the iconic shadows and violence of a B-reel. In three short minutes, "Night" ties together three-quarters of a century of music, film, and cultural history by way of its images of blood, betrayal, and greed.

The sensationalism of a classic noir calls to mind the violence of our own present and shows that its tangled roots are buried deep in a soil soaked in that same betrayal, blood, and greed. Schrader discusses noir's rise amid the disillusionment that followed the Second World War,<sup>66</sup> and it's interesting to note that Dylan turns to its themes during moments of national upheaval, such as the economic crises of the 1980s, the post-9/11 period, and the COVID pandemic and civil rights protests of 2020. Through both his musical and video output, Dylan, like the writers of pulp and the directors of film noir, lures us in with the vicarious thrill that mass entertainment promises. His depictions of a world where everything is broken fascinate and repel, forcing his audience to come to terms with their own complicity and mortality. By trafficking in familiar themes of vice and wholesale corruption, and by using images and even verbatim lines from folk and blues, from pulp literature and film noir, Dylan speaks to his audience with a common vocabulary.

But that common vocabulary is used with uncommon subtlety. As the transmitter of a larger, infinitely complicated culture, Dylan urges us to reckon with the truths that these dark stories reveal about corruption in our most trusted institutions, as well as in our own hearts. By reworking images that return to us out

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<sup>66</sup> Schrader, "Notes," 9.

of the past, he involves us in that narrative and questions our future. Thus, the culmination of his work transcends the limits of cheap mass media. Instead of simply providing that vicarious thrill, he uses the elements of noir—its preoccupation with lust, greed, misogyny, and class inequality, as well as our own uncertainty—to highlight the ills of society in much the same way he did with his protest songs. These short morality tales act as a call to action, one in which we are all urged to make a plea for peace and justice.

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## SONG CORNER

**Bob Keyes, *Portland Press Herald***

All the Songs: Dylan's Songbook Sale

Rob Stoner thinks the handwringing and conjecture over Bob Dylan's decision to sell his publishing catalog is nothing more than mixed-up confusion.

Too many people, all too hard to please.

"This is strictly a business deal. This is all about the numbers, cut and dry. It's not surprising, and I don't understand the controversy," said Stoner, who played bass and was bandleader during the Rolling Thunder Revue, and toured and recorded with Dylan later. "Bob is no dummy. Do you think he is going to make a stupid deal? He's always had his ducks in a row. He's always had the best advice, the best lawyers, the best accountants that money can buy."

Stoner's advice to fans: Calm down. Everything is going to be okay.

Dylan's decision to sell his entire publishing catalog of more than six hundred songs, up through *Rough and Rowdy Ways*, to Universal Music Publishing Group for what *Billboard* now says is between \$375 million and \$400 million reflects the unprecedented value of Dylan's catalog because of the near-ubiquitous nature of music streaming. It's the right deal at the right time, observers say, the confluence of opportunity and convenience for both sides in the landmark deal.

For fans, the sale likely means a lot more Dylan music will begin appearing in commercials and across mass media, as Universal recoups its investment by licensing as many songs as often as possible—and we can only hope with respect to the integrity of the collection. More significantly, it does not mean Dylan will stop recording, stop touring, or begin concentrating only on making paintings and sculpture. If he does, it almost certainly will be for reasons unrelated to the publishing deal.

Indeed, within a few days of the report of the sale to Universal in the *New York Times*, the Dylan camp announced the upcoming release of the new Dylan/George Harrison box set, following up a limited release of a special-edition

collection issued primarily to extend copyrights. Both products suggest it will be business as usual in terms of curated, bootleg-style releases.

For Dylan, the Universal deal is about cashing out at high value and walking away with the ability to continue to do whatever he wants to do, still with control of his masters but without the headache of administering a song catalog that grows more complicated with time, shielding his heirs from the hassles and complexities of evolving entertainment and business law.

“Now Universal will do all the administration, and Bob doesn’t have to deal with it,” Stoner said.

For Universal, it’s about gaining control over the most valuable and culturally significant collection of contemporary songs ever written, the jewel-in-the-crown of twentieth-century American art.

Dylan’s deal is the latest and most intriguing among the so-called evergreen generation of songwriters and recording artists, who generate huge revenue on streaming services because of the size, popularity, and sustaining nature of their song catalogs. Each time a Dylan song is sold, broadcast, or streamed—or placed in an ad, movie, or TV show—Universal will earn back its investment.

In addition to signing over his publishing royalties, Dylan also sold the copyrights to his songs, according to multiple reports. That means Universal will earn money each time a Dylan song is covered by another artist, and Dylan will have no say in how his previously recorded songs are used or how much Universal can charge to license them.

George Howard, an associate professor of music business at Berklee College of Music, said the sale of the underlying copyright (“the whole kit and caboodle,” he told *Business Insider*) “almost never happens,” which makes this deal unique. “That explains the valuation.”

It’s a safe investment for Universal because streaming services have made music revenue predictable, which makes music catalogs attractive to investors.

That is why so many artists have sold their catalogs, from Stevie Nicks to Taylor Swift. “The way streaming services are growing, this will be the gift that keeps on giving, in terms of royalties,” Howard said of the Dylan deal.

Tim Riley, a longtime Dylan observer, music critic, and associate professor at Emerson College in Boston, called the deal a slam-dunk for Universal and said the initial report in *The New York Times* of the sale being worth \$300 million “struck me as a small number.” He said Universal would earn back its investment in a few years’ time.

He wasn’t surprised by the news—nothing about Dylan surprises him anymore—but he was surprised how much attention the sale received and how much Dylan was criticized. It’s easy to criticize wealthy rock stars, Riley said, “but we will never understand the air they breathe. They make a lot of decisions that may seem weird to us.”

He agreed with Stoner that this deal is about timing and convenience. “The idea that you could sell it for a lump sum and never deal with it again—‘just get it off my plate’—that becomes very attractive after you have had to manage it all these years,” Riley said. “If he spends four hours a week administering his catalog on the phone with his team, it’s probably the worst four hours of his week.”

People who are upset with Dylan for making his music available for commercial purposes have had plenty of time to resolve those conflicts. Dylan has licensed his music for ads for more than a quarter-century, sometimes successfully and with artistic flair, sometimes less so. He filmed an ad for the “ladies’ garments” company Victoria’s Secret in 2007, using his song “Love Sick,” and appeared without music in another for IBM. “Forever Young,” it seems has ageless appeal among advertisers. The list is long. As Dylan himself said, money doesn’t talk, it swears.

“There is punditry that you now will start to see Bob’s songs everywhere, and you might,” Howard said. “But he’s not like Radiohead or Neil Young, who have never licensed their work. Maybe you’ll notice a bit more, maybe a bit less, but

the average consumer probably won't notice much. Dylan already licenses his music for such weird things. Not much he does would surprise me."

I've been listening to Dylan since the '60s, I've been a fan since the '70s, and I've attended eighty-plus shows all across the country. This year, 2020, will be the first since 1986 that I have not seen at least one Dylan concert. And yet, I have never appreciated his music more, with a tantalizing new record and the convenience of streaming music during my walks in the Maine woods that have carried me through the pandemic. When people ask what I did during the pandemic, I will tell them I listened to a lot of Dylan.

The use of his songs in TV ads in no way diminishes my connection to his music or my desire to see him again in concert. I sometimes wish he hadn't sold this or sold that, but who am I to judge his motives?

As Tim Riley said, we will never understand the air he breathes.

I appreciate the ads for their quirky mystery. I see the Chrysler Super Bowl ad, with "Things Have Changed" lingering in the background, as an extension of one of his road songs, a travelogue, and an homage to American adventure with at least one great line: "Because we believe in the zoom, the roar, and the thrust."

Richard Thomas, the Harvard classics professor who wrote the book *Why Bob Dylan Matters*, said the worst-case scenario of the Universal deal is that Dylan's music shows up in ads we don't approve of, that perhaps degrade the integrity of the song. But he's not too worried. "I don't buy Victoria's Secret, and that didn't bother me. I quite liked that ad. I thought the Cadillac ad was pretty good too," he said.

As a researcher who has worked with Dylan's team to secure permission to reproduce song lyrics, Thomas understands the work involved in dealing with those requests. He called it "a level of micromanaging" that Dylan and his management "are not enamored of." He said Dylan's team has always been cooperative, and he hopes Universal is equally responsive and open to allowing writers to quote Dylan's lyrics.

Further, Thomas said he does not read anything into the deal as the end of one phase or the beginning of another. It's nothing more than a business deal, timed to coincide with the high value of Dylan's catalog at this historic moment in the music business.

"Any new material is not included in the deal, so the implication is there could be new material, new song material as well as other things he is working on," Thomas said. "I sure hope he is writing another album, since the last one we got is so terrific. Dylan will keep doing what Dylan is doing, which is continuing to produce his songs, paintings, and sculpture. And I think he will tour again. I sure hope he does. I think touring is something that means a lot to him, and it means a lot to us."

Stoner said Dylan became savvy in business from fighting with Albert Grossman, his early manager who suffered an inglorious separation from Dylan in 1970. "Bob didn't want to let Grossman have a penny for his songs, so he retained his own rights and administered his own publishing through his own employees," Stoner said. "The people who ran his business office back in the 1970s were the people he poached from Grossman's office. When Bob split with Grossman, he replicated the same operation with the same employees a few blocks away."

The deal with Universal is the same kind of thing, only this time civil, and with higher stakes and rewards. With Dylan turning eighty in the spring, who can blame him?

"It's a huge chunk of change," Stoner said, "and now his heirs don't have to fight about it."

## INTERVIEWS

DR spoke with musical couple, duo, and Dylan collaborators Larry Campbell and Teresa Williams in the fall of 2020. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

**DR:** You've noted the importance of music as a special art form during your performances, an art form capable of building community and unifying people. Can you say anything about how that unification happens, what it looks like? Is it the lyrics that unify or the combination of the music and the lyrics?

**TW:** Music itself without the lyrics is the most bare-bones, close to the bone, primordial thing that reaches people. You don't *need* language. Music itself, first, is the most primal. But the language—the poetry of it—can affect you the way the music affects you, but that's after the fact of the music. The poetry can wash over you in a way that that music washes over you. Dylan is an excellent example of that.

**LC:** The effect of the music itself has always been the conscious and subconscious appeal to me of a song. Speaking of Bob, I heard a couple of things from his latest record. I haven't paid much attention to what Bob's been doing since I left the band, for various reasons. I heard a couple of songs from this latest record and you know, I gotta hand it to this guy, there's nobody like him. And with him and his body of work right now, the music is a landscape for what he's saying. I was able to go right to the words of what he was saying, the poetry is as moving on a subconscious level as good music is moving on a subconscious level.

**TW:** That's right.

**LC:** I knew when I started playing with him the role of the band. Bob Dylan is unique in that Dylan and an acoustic guitar is all you need. He gets everything he is across with that. If you're gonna be a band backing him up, then you need to be as subjective as that acoustic guitar. You can't showboat. It's not a place to

draw attention to your skills. It's not your place to detract in any way from the essence of what he's putting out. It was an interesting place to be.

**DR:** That's especially interesting, given that he's always had some of the most talented people performing for him. He's been with people who on their own can shine.

**LC:** I've never been one who appreciates the value of words like a lot of great artists do. To be a great songwriter you have to love words, or a great writer of any kind, and I'm okay with words, and they certainly do work their magic on me, but there's a mystery in music that gets to me right away on a visceral level.

**TW:** It takes the melody and the lyric crossing over each other in a certain way for a song to get to me. "Boots of Spanish Leather" is one that does that for me. The melody, the lyric of that song—I don't have words to say what it does to me.

**DR:** That's a great example!

**LC:** There's a maturity in that lyric writing, and a subtlety, and a nuance in the lyrics of that song. How can a young adult produce something like that? It's mind-boggling!

**TW:** It's like a ninety-year-old wrote it. But, honestly, some of it is just giftedness, and the person being open to let it channel through them. I don't want to take anything away from anybody's talent or intelligence. But to be open enough to let that go through you, and put it out there, takes a lot of courage and openness inside a person, to allow yourself to be that vulnerable in front of people.

**LC:** Yes, it's scary. Growing up in the '60s with what he was putting out then, and the anthemic nature of some of those songs, that was a blatant influence on the culture, and the unity of the culture at that time. And that's on a very conscious level. He sort of made social justice become fashionable or enabled it to become fashionable. And it wasn't just him. But he was the primary voice.

**TW:** Joan Baez might beg to differ.

**DR:** That's a really interesting way to put it. Because that's where we are now.

**LC:** The social justice movement ended up with some sort of sex appeal because that's what's gonna make a universal movement. It has to have sex appeal of some sort, and I don't mean that literally. Through that, it becomes fashionable, trendy. It starts out with the hip and Bohemian people thinking about it, and then it goes to the gay people, and then it ends up in Long Island. And once it's there, then it universal. And then it becomes a commercial, moneymaking thing, and then the whole thing gets destroyed.

To answer your question, that on its most obvious level, "Blowin' in The Wind" was the anthem of the time. "The Times They Are a-Changin'," "Hard Rain," all these tunes became anthemic to the movement. So obviously they had influence. But then his tunes that were more personal, that had nothing to do with Emmett Till or Hattie Carroll or any of those songs, they also—because of Dylan's poetry, and because of the honesty that was used to express them, the sentiment of those songs—were so universal that they caused a unity in the listener that was every bit as potent as his political stuff. As Teresa mentioned, with "Boots of Spanish Leather," the emotion that stirs in people is a unifying thing. So I think the answer to your question is yes.

**DR:** The speaker, or the voice in Dylan's song is sometimes dismissive and, people have said, vindictive toward women. Teresa, do you have anything to say about that from the perspective of women, the voice of women, the characterization of women?

**TW:** Some of the songs feel vindictive for sure. I guess I never thought of it that way. I don't remember it striking me so much, and if it did, I probably just wrote it off to, "well that's how things are." Seriously. Because I'm from far enough back when that was the way things were. So I'm just not calling that to mind offhand.

**DR:** Larry do you have any views on that?

**LC:** I never thought about it that way. "Like A Rolling Stone" is probably the first song that I heard that was sort of chastising in its lyric, whereas most pop music at

the time was love songs or "you hurt me" songs. "Like a Rolling Stone" is pretty acerbic if you think about it. I don't think it's misogyny. I think he's just painting a picture of the bitterness that's felt when you get dumped, because that bitterness is just as much part of the relationship as the sweet love stuff that was being expressed ubiquitously, at the time, in pop music. Nobody was expressing the bitterness. I don't see that as misogyny. All the years I was around Bob, I never got the impression that misogyny was any part of his personality.

**TW:** Sometimes I'm taken aback by the level of vitriol, and it's so well-crafted that it's like, "ouch." But that goes back to being open enough to put it out there. It helps somebody through something. All that stuff does, if you ask me. It all gets out there for a reason, and I think that if somebody's going through something, a song will get them through.

**DR:** Can you talk about conveying the meaning of Dylan's music as a guitarist?

**LC:** There's nothing Bob Dylan needs to express himself other than him and his acoustic guitar. And if you're going to add more instruments to that, and I'm going to be the guitar player whose role it is to enhance what he's putting out, then you have to think on the minimal level as an instrumentalist. One time I was thinking about trying to do a guitar instrumental album of Bob Dylan songs. The problem I ran up against is that his stuff is really not that melodic. He's certainly written memorable melodies, like "Just Like A Woman," but it's not like a McCartney tune, or a Paul Simon tune, where the melody is memorable. And the music with Bob has always seemed to me like a vehicle that gets his art out there, rather than the music itself being the art.

**TW:** What I keep being reminded of as we're talking is my Meisner training as an actor. One of the tenets was: the words you're speaking are riding on the river of emotion. Words aren't really what's going on, it's the emotion underneath. So the words, the music, it's all riding on that emotion. You can say the words are riding on the lyrics, the lyrics are riding on the melody; it's all riding over the emotion.

That image just keeps coming to mind. The words are the canoe riding over the river, which is, the river of emotion.

**LC:** As a guitarist you gotta be part of that river, you know. You don't want to be another canoe on that river. You just want to be—

**TW:** In the canoe!

**LC:** When we performed, Bob would have really good tunes that were just fun to play, that had nothing to do with anything, except the fun of getting up there, and banging on the guitars. We would do a bunch of traditional tunes that weren't Bob Dylan songs, and there you felt like you had more license to play your instrument in a more permanent way. But with his songs, even if you were taking a solo in one of his songs, you knew on some level you shouldn't try to compete with his lyrics.

**DR:** Larry, having had an integral role in his band, what do you think is the source of his ability to captivate a crowd?

**LC:** His honesty. That's it. Honesty and authenticity.

**TW:** That goes back to being vulnerable enough to do that. That's some kind of courage to me.

**DR:** How is a Dylan performance, from a performer's point of view, different from other performances, for example, like the Grateful Dead, or playing with Levon, or is there any difference?

**LC:** There's no difference. All of that is an opportunity to communicate through the vehicle of great music, so that's all the same. Teresa and I did a bunch of touring with Phil Lesh and that was about no parameters. Phil would even say when we got on stage, "You gotta remember, there's no such thing as mistakes, only opportunities," which means just get up there and play, and play, and keep playing until you feel, and connect with each other, and as we are connecting with each other, we will connect with the audience, and there were no rules. The

only rule was listen to each other. And with Levon, in not so much of an anarchic way, it was still about all of us being in this together, we're all contributing, were all on equal footing up here. And now playing with Bob, it wasn't about an equal footing, and you got into that knowing that.

**TW:** And that's okay because that's a different animal. Like you said, Larry, him and the guitar is really the focal point. Even when it was the rock 'n' roll band. And your role was to support that.

**LC:** And there was no resentment at all. I was glad to be part of something like that because his volume of work deserves that, and on my own personal level, after eight years of that, I knew that I had to put myself in situations where I had a broader opportunity to express myself.

**TW:** And what you did with Bob was part of being a journeyman, no matter what level of musician you are, in supporting something like that, that moves the artist like that, like you've described being in Spain, being on stage, and you guys doing something like "Blowin' in The Wind." It's part of why you become a musician, to be part of something that moves an artist like that. Journeyman is kind of the right word. Crossman.

**DR:** There must be incredible fatigue that goes with that kind of life.

**TW:** You can't even imagine. Can I just say with Levon, without saying it out loud, he required honesty. He was the North Star musically, and he was a touchstone for me as an actor, and a musician, and a singer, before I ever dreamed that I would meet him and work with him or any of that. He is a touchstone for me as an artist. If anyone ever asks me who's my favorite actor-singer, I would say Levon, because the honesty level is painful. It would just slay you. He expected everybody to bring their game and pull the others up by doing it. And it was very freeing working with him. He wants you to bring it, don't stand back, and it was liberating, and encouraging.

**LC:** And that's connecting to each other on the stage, and through that we connect to the audience, and the connection to the audience comes back to you, and that's a cycle that just keeps feeding on itself.

**DR:** You've both won accolades for Americana music. From your perspective Teresa, especially as a female artist, how do you see Dylan's influence, and his place, and relative to where you are in that genre?

**TW:** I think it's not for nothing that the Band was working with him, and the Band is known for being the first Americana band. As far as Americana goes, for me the great love of my life is that I got to work with Levon. One of the most exciting things when I first saw Dylan was when Larry was playing with him. I was taken by the fact that he played any genre he wanted to play during the show. It was bluegrass, rock 'n' roll, folk, showtunes. That was so freeing for me because I love so many different genres. When I was starting out, I was thinking, "which genre should I do?" Those folk people were also ensconced in Harry Smith, and all those field recordings, all that stuff. I like to quip that I was the person in the field. I grew up with that stuff. What went down was really raw. We literally were the people in the field. People would say, how did you get with these people (Levon, Phil)? My upbringing was certainly not as a Deadhead. It was so remote from where I am now, down here with my parents. That world was like another planet. I didn't even know about it. As an adult, to discover that stuff that they were really digging into, that Jerry was really bringing to that band, was that stuff that we were singing in church when I was growing up. So when I first started working with Phil, it was like, "Oh yeah, I know that song." It wasn't the stretch that I would've thought.

I'm basically doing now what my parents taught me to do in the living room when I was growing up: the Joan Baez version of "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down," with my little Yamaha guitar. And then I end up working with Levon. You just can't make this up. And he grew up just over the river from us. And he has a set of great-grandparents that came from right here where I grew up.

**LC:** Regarding his place in the genre, Bob is ground zero. Bob and then The Band—ground zero for what has become the Americana genre. And that's because what he did and what they did was take all these disparate American genres, everything that's organically American, blues, country, gospel, rock 'n' roll, Cajun, jazz, all the stuff that is uniquely American, and they threw it all into this big pot, mixed it up, and came out with a whole different style of music that's been emulated and refined and expanded.

And when Bob was at his height, and The Band was at their height, I was a fan of both of them, but during that time of my musical life I was obsessed with the roots of what these guys were doing. I wanted to hear Robert Johnson, I wanted to hear Ralph Stanley, Doc Watson, George Jones, Hank Williams. I was into the whole Bakersfield thing, chipped teeth and sideburns: country music. I was obsessed with that stuff from the *origin*. And it took mining all that stuff as deeply as I could to then really appreciate what Bob was doing and what The Band was doing.

**DR:** Do performers have any responsibility in getting various musical messages across to the audience?

**LC:** I think the performer has a responsibility to move the audience. The audience is paying money to have an emotional experience with the performer. And if that comes from directly from the vibrations that are coming from the music that they are making, and that's the only message that's getting across, then as long as it's moving the audience, then the responsibility has been met. From the perspective of people coming to see Bob Dylan, someone who has done plenty of political messaging and social messaging, it's the same. His only responsibility yet is to give the audience what his honest artistic output is, so if that at the time is encoding social and political messaging, then great. But if not, if it's just love songs or just hate songs, or if it's just bluegrass songs, and that's what he's feeling artistically, then that's his responsibility—to put that forth to the best of his ability, in any performance.

**TW:** That's exactly what I was going to say. Your responsibility is, if you're feeling compelled to share something, then it's got to be the truth, through you, whatever you're compelled to share truthfully. You're just sharing the truth as it's coming through you.

It's that performer's truth. Like if Steve Earle needs to expound on some political wrong, that's his truth in the moment. If it's melody, just music without the lyrics, that's what you should share. If it's a political statement, and it's your burden to share, then that's your burden to share. And you have to tell that as truthfully as you can.

**LC:** And as far as getting a specific message across to an audience, I don't see that per se as the responsibility of the performer. That's the responsibility of a politician, or a preacher, a lecturer, but as Teresa just said a performer's responsibility is to emotionally express the truth of what they are feeling.

**DR:** What Dylan songs do you play together, if any, and why those songs?

**LC:** We do "Boots of Spanish Leather" occasionally and we do "Wallflower" because it's a perfect little country tune that we sing together well.

**TW:** We play "Cry A While" during a benefit concert that's put on around Dylan's birthday to benefit schools in the area. It's kind of fun and it has some vitriol in it, but with humor. I enjoy doing that because it goes a little bit in the blues direction.

**LC:** And Teresa sings that and it's interesting because it's a different song when a woman is singing it. And Teresa sings the hell out of it.

**TW:** We also do "I Shall Be Released" and "Forever Young."

**DR:** Given the pandemic and the disruption in live performances, in your opinion, does music matter less or more now?

**LC:** I'd like to know the answer to that question.

**TW:** Music is always going to matter. It's primal. It's a soother. It's a happy dance. It's a common thing. It's a nostalgic thing. It can reach inside people who are

deep in dementia or trapped in their own bodies for some other physical reason. It can reach inside those people and move them. Music is vital.

**LC:** Given that, music does matter more now than ever, or any art form for that matter, because of its ability to be the glue that binds people together. And it enables them to express the insecurity they are feeling, to express the loneliness they may be feeling, to express the fear they may be feeling. It's because of this time we're going through. I think it's always needed as Teresa said, but now that need has been heightened to a pretty high degree.

**TW:** It binds us all together and reminds us that we're all human. We all go through these emotions. It's the key sometimes to your soul. It's a common foundation. All that's going on, the pandemic, the social unrest, the political unrest: music can remind us that we're all human and we're all in this together.

**DR:** Do performers have special leadership responsibilities in this crisis especially during lockdown, and if so, then how can they fulfill them?

**TW:** Thinking about the responsibility they have—it doesn't change the responsibility of delivering the truth as it's being given to them in the moment of their need to express something. They just express that truth. That alone is a leadership move and there are plenty of ways to get it out there. And people at home have more time on their hands, typically, to find the output with digital. I hate that it's digital, until we can all be together again.

**LC:** I completely agree with the view that performers have a responsibility to tell the truth. That is the responsibility. As far as being leaders in navigating through this pandemic, I don't see that as responsibility, so much as if you endeavor to take that responsibility, you do it with honesty. I don't think there's any sin in well-known performers wanting to sit back and hide during this time. I don't think they're obliged to have any sort of leadership role or comforting output or anything. But I do think that anyone who does set out to take a leadership role needs to do it with complete openness and honesty. That's the responsibility.

**TW:** The responsibility is if you have a talent and gift that way and you're feeling driven inside from whatever, spiritual thing you want to say, to make art, that's your responsibility to do it. And to me if you don't, it's kind of like slapping God in the face if you ignore it. But as far as politically or leading the world, no. I think the responsibility is within you, and what is driving you and getting your truth out. And beyond that, it lands where it's supposed to land.

**LC:** I concur.

**DR:** With regard to Dylan's music, does the ambiguous and sometimes cryptic nature of the lyrics make it impossible to determine a simple message?

**LC:** In a cranial sense yes, but in an emotional sense that's the beauty of it. Because if you allow yourself to be immersed in what he is saying and get away from the cranial part, the beauty of most of his lyric writing is that you can produce your own video in your mind of what he's trying to say. Then it becomes what it means to you, and that's because though it's cryptic and sometimes ambiguous and difficult to follow sometimes, it's always poetry, and poetry of the highest order. It's Teresa's appreciation for poetry that has gotten me to understand it a little bit better, to understand how this stuff can work on you through the subconscious and not look for a literal translation. Just ruminate on what this particular phrase does to you and how it's connected to all the other phrases in the song. But that's what's so enigmatic about his art. If you open yourself up, that stuff's going to have an effect on you.

**TW:** If it's something from the artist's subconscious putting that down, then it is sheer poetry. To try to combat it from the cranial place is wrong from the get-go. It's like the interviewer said to Robert Hunter, "We don't understand what this line means," and he flatly said, "It's poetry." I think that if you're just putting the honest thing that's coming through you down, it's like a painting. It means a different thing to different people. The subject is different to different people. But when performer gives you thirty minutes of how and where and when and why they wrote the

song, to me, it destroys the song. And we do it too. I will tell why a song means something to me. Larry tells why he wrote a song—he may say that on stage—but to me you do a disservice, even though it's juicy to hear. You want a blank slate so it can mean whatever, without you layering over your own interpretation. It's not your interpretation. It's what it does to that person. What goes through their soul, which is the point of a piece of art.

**LC:** Look at a song like “You Ain't Going Nowhere.” What the hell does that mean: “Whoo-ee! Ride me high / Tomorrow's the Day / My bride's gonna come . . . We gonna fly / Down in the easy chair.” What the hell does that mean? It doesn't matter. It just doesn't matter. There's something about it that conjures up pictures in your mind, and those pictures lead to a certain emotional experience. That's what the words are supposed to do. Bob could have written that just to parody himself. I don't know that, but I think he went through a phase of writing nonsense because he was Bob Dylan and people had all these expectations about how profound his lyric writing is.

**TW:** And it still evokes emotion.

**DR:** With regard to the Johnny Cash/Bob Dylan connection, didn't that help Dylan gain traction in the South?

**LC:** It did with some people, but it helped Johnny Cash more in the Dylan world than it helped Dylan in the Johnny Cash world.

**TW:** Yeah I think that's right. The hero here in the South was Johnny Cash. We watched that show religiously. And the Carter family singing behind them. The Dead wasn't that big down here either. And the people that Larry and I have played with were really more East Coast, West Coast, Northeast, Northwest. Around here, people really don't appreciate that music.

**DR:** Do you feel like knowing Bob Dylan makes it more difficult to hear songs with detachment?

**LC:** It did for a while, but I'm past that now. I'm back to where I can see him as two different entities. There is Bob who I got to know, and then there's Bob who has been, in my opinion, our most important artist of the latter twentieth century.

After I left the band, I wasn't interested in hearing Bob Dylan music anymore. Not because of any bitterness or anything like that, but just because the mystique had worn off. But now with enough distance—and these embers have been stirred by his last body of work, listening to some of that stuff, the JFK thing—there's no denying, the guy is unique. There's nobody like him, and his ability to tell the truth on a subconscious level is surpassed by no one.

**DR:** How would you characterize Dylan's impact on not only your careers but on American music at large?

**LC:** There is no more important artist in American music at large and on my career. Playing with him all those years and delving through his music gave me license to accept and embrace my own creativity because I was around someone who uses that talent in the most artful way. Through osmosis it gave me license to follow the path that I wanted to follow.

**TW:** Larry made a nonverbal commitment not be on the road anymore. You know the road is destructive to family life.

**LC:** I was having a very lucrative career as a studio musician, which had been my ambition from the beginning. So I was in this frame of mind that I wasn't going to go out on tour. I was going to stay in New York and do this. And then Jeff Kramer called me, and said that Bob wanted me to come down and play with him, and I said no. And the next morning I woke up and said, "What did I just do!" So I called Kramer back and told him I was reconsidering. The studio work, as lucrative as it was, and as interesting as it could be, you'd be hired to play stuff that you wouldn't play in a million years, because it meant nothing to you, but you're getting paid to do it so you do it. With Bob, and subsequently since then, I've been allowed to stay true to who I am as an artist.

**TW:** Two weeks after Larry left the band, Levon called Larry, and then Amy had heard me and Larry play, and then she called me up to work on the record that they had called on Larry to produce. So as far as how it affected the career, the sequence of events that followed: following your heart about things, like Larry did when he broke his own rule about not going on tour again and going out with Bob, is like sticking to your art. It will lead to beautiful places in your own life. All of those things gave us a platform to evolve our own thing.

**LC:** Levon gave us a great sandbox to play in, to hone what she and I could be.

**TW:** He wanted everybody to step up and bring your whole game. Even me meeting Larry was because I stepped out on a limb and sent a tape I had from a couple of demos I did in Nashville. A friend of a friend helped me get a band together to do it. It took my brother dying for me to decide to do something with this music. I plucked up my nerve and sent them in to a contest. That's how I met Larry, through a friend of a friend. Do what you love to do and be true to yourself first. From Dylan, to Levon, to us as our own thing together.

## **LETTERS**

The editors invite letters and comments for future issues. We encourage lively discussion but please confine commentary to topics raised in articles or interviews in the *DR*.

## CONTRIBUTORS

**Larry Campbell and Teresa Williams**, acclaimed Americana musicians, are a powerhouse of vocal and instrumental virtuosity. Their performing partnership was molded during ten years of recording and touring with Levon Helm, iconic drummer and voice of The Band. The couple's two albums, 2015's *Larry Campbell and Teresa Williams* and 2017's *Contraband Love* opened doors and ears as they toured with Jackson Browne, Emmylou Harris, and John Prine. *Mojo* dubbed the pair "The first couple of Americana," and *American Songwriter* wrote: "[Larry and Teresa] have created a unique sound inspired by the past, that is spirited, stirring and timeless."

**Michael Hacker** is the creator of *A Bob Dylan Primer*, a fifteen-episode podcast dedicated to Dylan's life and work ([www.abobdylanprimer.com](http://www.abobdylanprimer.com)). He is a writer, photographer, and filmmaker, raised and currently living in Los Angeles with long stints in San Francisco, Livingston, Montana, and Vienna. At present, Michael works mostly in television producing documentary content for a wide variety of providers. He's seen Dylan in concert many times, starting with the 1974 tour and including *The Last Waltz*, the "gospel" shows in 1979, and the last night of Dylan's run at the Beacon Theater in NYC in December 2019.

**Bob Keyes** writes about arts and culture for the *Portland Press Herald* and *Maine Sunday Telegram*. He's written about Bob Dylan since the early days of the Never Ending Tour and presented a paper about Dylan's visual language at the World of Bob Dylan Symposium in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 2019. He received an inaugural Rabkin Prize for Visual Arts Journalism in 2017 in recognition of his essential voice in the regional arts conversation and is currently working on a book about the artist Robert Indiana.

**Matthew Lipson** is an independent scholar from Montreal, Canada. His graduate studies focused on Dylan's performance of age from *Time Out of Mind* (1997) to *Tempest* (2012) and Dylan's twenty-first century role as elder statesman of traditional American genres. His future work will examine this topic from the perspective of Dylan's roles in television commercials. Lipson is currently based in Toronto, where he curates and manages music for a range of brands.

**Quentin Miller** is Professor of English at Suffolk University in Boston where he teaches courses on contemporary American literature, including one on Dylan and the Beat generation. He is the author or editor of a dozen books, most recently *Understanding John Edgar Wideman* (UP of South Carolina, 2018), *James Baldwin in Context* (Cambridge UP, 2019), and *The Compact Bedford Introduction to Literature* (Palgrave/MacMillan, 2020).

**Thomas G. Palaima**, Robert M. Armstrong Professor of Classics at University of Texas at Austin and a MacArthur fellow, has long thought and taught about evil, suffering, and injustice in human societies, ancient and modern. In 1963–68, Bob Dylan and James Brown changed his life. He has written over 500 commentaries, reviews, book chapters, feature pieces, and poems on what human beings do with their lives. These have appeared in such venues as the *Times Higher Education*, *Michigan War Studies Review*, *Arion*, *Athenaeum Review*, *The Texas Observer*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and [commondreams.org](http://commondreams.org).

**Tommy Shea** teaches in the MFA program at Bay Path University in Longmeadow, Massachusetts. He was an award-winning columnist for *The Republican* in Springfield. He co-authored *Dingers: The 101 Most Important Homers in Baseball History*. He's been a Bob Dylan fan since 1974.

**John Radosta** teaches high school English in Milton, Massachusetts. He is the co-

author, with Keith Nainby, of *Bob Dylan in Performance: Song, Stage, and Screen*. A board member of the New England chapter of the Mystery Writers of America, he has also, under a pseudonym, published a noir novel and many crime stories. He lives in Boston with his wife, son, and rescue dog.

**Walter Raubicheck** is a professor of English at Pace University in New York, where he teaches American Literature, film, and college composition. He is the co-author of *Scripting Hitchcock* (2011) and co-editor of *Hitchcock's Rereleased Films* (1991), both with Walter Srebnick. He also edited *Hitchcock and the Cold War* (2019). He has published essays on British crime fiction authors including Arthur Conan Doyle, Dorothy Sayers, and G. K. Chesterton, as well as essays on American authors such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, T. S. Eliot, and Dashiell Hammett.

## BOOKS RECEIVED

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Curtis, Jim. *Decoding Dylan: Making Sense of the Songs That Changed Modern Culture*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2019.

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## ERRATUM

Graley Herren's article "Young Goodman Dylan: *Chronicles* at the Crossroads," *Dylan Review* 2.1 (Summer 2020) contains a citation error (p. 68). Scott Warmuth's article, "Bob Charlatan, Deconstructing Dylan's *Chronicles*, Volume One" appeared in *New Haven Review* 006 (Summer 2010): 70-83.