

Bob Dylan. *Travelin' Thru, 1967-1969: The Bootleg Series, Volume 15*. Sony Music, 2019

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Travelin' Thru, 1967-1969: The Bootleg Series, Volume 15, the latest installment in Sony Music's series of archival releases of Bob Dylan's work, compiles outtakes, alternate versions, rehearsals, and informal collaborations related to *John Wesley Harding* (released December 27, 1967) and *Nashville Skyline* (released April 9, 1969). Ostensibly, what ties this material and these (stylistically and sonically) different albums together is that they document Dylan's exploration of country music following his mold-breaking transformation of rock in *Bringing It All Back Home*, *Highway 61 Revisited*, *Blonde on Blonde*, and the incendiary 1966 tour of England with The Hawks, all before Dylan's July 29, 1966 motorcycle accident brought this phase to its close. At the time, those of us who avidly followed Dylan's work and parsed each new text as if it were our era's *The Waste Land*, and we its naive New Critical acolytes, didn't know that this unprecedented break in Dylan's productivity had included the informal music making and home recording sessions that have become known as *The Basement Tapes* (Columbia Records released a double LP selection of this material, selected and post-produced by Robbie Robertson in 1975; in 2014 Columbia/Legacy Records released *The Bootleg Series, Vol. 11: The Basement Tapes—Complete*). But even if we had had *The Basement Tapes*, *John Wesley Harding* would still have struck us as initiating a new direction for Dylan and we would still not have expected Dylan's genial smile on the cover of *Nashville Skyline*. *Travelin' Thru*, like earlier installments in the Bootleg Series, invites us not only to recall how Dylan's various albums and stylistic pivots were originally received but also to reconsider these stylistic pivots and to remap their implications for understanding his career.

In his *All-Music Guide* entry for *John Wesley Harding*, Stephen Thomas Erlewine categorizes it as "a quiet, country-tinged album that split dramatically from his previous three," then adds that the album "isn't a return" to Dylan's "folk

roots" but rather "his first serious foray into country." And for Erlewine, *Nashville Skyline's* status as country is even clearer. It is, he declares, "a full-fledged country album."¹ That both albums were recorded in Nashville with A-List Country Music studio pros, such as Charlie McCoy, clinches the matter of genre and style, and the series of duets with Johnny Cash gathered on *Travelin' Thru* ices the cake. The only thing missing is an album cover featuring Dylan posed in a Nudie suit awash with rhinestones and set off with fancy embroidery. Instead, the actual covers evoke different *country* possibilities: the black & white image used for *John Wesley Harding* signals country as rural home-made music of the sort we imagine predated commercial recordings in the 1920s, and the color photo on *Nashville Skyline* of a smiling Dylan holding his guitar up in one hand as he reaches for his hat with the other as if about to say *Howdy* seems to belong more to the semi-professional traditions of the first decades of the twentieth century that evolved into commercial country, as if a contemporary Jimmy Rodgers had paused to greet the camera. In this regard it is perhaps telling that Dylan planned to use a photo of the Nashville skyline for the cover of *Nashville Skyline* before deciding instead to use this Elliott Landy image that came from a shoot that was to yield a photo for the back cover. In any case, Dylan's *country* was neither *the country* music of Nashville in 1967 when Buck Owens and Tammy Wynette were riding the charts nor in 1969 when Merle Haggard hit big with "Working Man Blues" and Loretta Lynn was asking "Woman of the World (Leave My World Alone)."

The material gathered on *Travelin' Thru* makes it possible to consider the differences between the takes chosen for *John Wesley Harding* and for *Nashville Skyline* and the alternate takes that were set aside, and these differences help clarify the terms of Dylan's engagement with country music. Similarly, the series of duets with Johnny Cash, as he and Dylan search for common ground between

¹ Stephen Thomas Erlewine, "Bob Dylan: John Wesley Harding," *AllMusic*, n.d., <https://www.allmusic.com/album/john-wesley-harding-mw0000189848>; and Erlewine, "Bob Dylan: Nashville Skyline," *AllMusic*, n.d., <https://www.allmusic.com/album/nashville-skyline-mw0000650101>

their distinctive styles, helps clarify Dylan's relationship to the traditions of country music, as do the four informal recordings that document Dylan's first meeting with the great bluegrass banjoist Earl Scruggs. As well, *Travelin' Thru* provides an occasion for recalling, or at least trying to recall, what it was like to hear these albums when they were first released—a time when the United States was deeply divided by the Vietnam War, and music was still largely divided by politics—the country music of Nashville playing as the soundtrack of those who supported the war and Dylan's music and rock music more generally playing as the soundtrack of those who opposed it.

In 1967 and 1969, when *John Wesley Harding* and *Nashville Skyline* were first released, rock and country were not just different musical styles; they represented two intensely opposed camps, each tending to demonize the other. Styles and genres were not simply aesthetic practices or performance traditions but social and political symbolism, and having long hair or a crew cut were assumed to be reliable indicators of whether one rolled a joint or knocked back a brew and whether one marched against the war or counter-marched in support of it. (The mock naiveté of The Byrds' "Drugstore Truck Driving Man" on *Dr. Byrds and Mr. Hyde*, released a few months before *Nashville Skyline*, exploits this polarization.) *Travelin' Thru* not only provides a context for exploring Dylan's aesthetic choices in *John Wesley Harding* and *Nashville Skyline* and appreciating the artistry of these albums, the set also provides an occasion for recalling that the term *country* and using country elements outside the context of mainstream Nashville country music was more fraught than we might credit today and that this may bear on how we understand what might be termed Dylan's stylistic rhetoric in this period.

***John Wesley Harding* and *Nashville Skyline* as we heard them then:**

Over the two-and-a-half years that it took Dylan to release his first four albums, he transformed contemporary folk music from a practice of re-expressing traditional

folk material into one of creating new material in the folk idiom (especially material engaging contemporary issues) and then into a mode for highly literate self-expression. In the fourteen months that followed, from March 1965 through May 1966, Dylan similarly recast contemporary rock, over the course of three of his most powerful and influential albums: *Bringing It All Back Home*, *Highway 61 Revisited*, and *Blonde on Blonde* (a double LP) along with the major single "Positively 4th Street." While Dylan's first album wasn't widely circulated when it appeared, and even though many came to know his work through the recordings of Joan Baez and Peter, Paul and Mary (or perhaps more belatedly through The Byrds recasting Dylan's avant-folk into folk-rock with "Tambourine Man"), from *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* forward, Dylan's own releases were avidly purchased and parsed by what was then termed as youth culture listeners. We hung out on "Desolation Row," and we mined the lyrics for adages and mantras. We believed we didn't "need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows," and we heard both the license to reject and the challenge to test and understand one's motives in "if you live outside the law, you must be honest."

Looking back a half century or so later, the year-and-a-half interval between *Blonde on Blonde* and the release of *John Wesley Harding* in December 1967 is a brief pause in Dylan's productivity, but at the time it seemed much longer than that. The newspapers had reported Dylan's July 1966 motorcycle accident, but details about the extent of his injuries were not to be had. And in that pre-social media era, rumor ruled; rumor had it his career might be over. The uncertainty of *if* there'd be a next album replaced the anticipation of *when* the next album would be out and where it might spin us next. And when *John Wesley Harding* did come out, it registered more as a reset for Dylan's career or a kind of taking stock than the advent of a new stylistic direction. The relatively spare arrangements mostly featured Dylan's acoustic guitar and harmonica backed by

Charlie McCoy's bass and Kenneth Buttrey's drums playing more subtle patterns than we would likely have noticed even if our less-than-audiophile stereos had reproduced their parts with the presence they deserved. The tempos and the changed quality of Dylan's voice brought the lyrics to the fore, and the lyrics presented stories with what seemed, but elusively so, an allegorical reach. At the time, we registered the country-ish use of steel guitar on "I'll Be Your Baby Tonight" and "Down Along the Cove," but even more we heard the rest of the album as a variation on, a new inflection of, some of *Blonde on Blonde* with the surreal edge softened and the redeployed symbolic narratives presented in a more acoustic, rural context. If we had heard *John Wesley Harding* as Dylan's "first foray into country," we lacked any real sense of what this might involve stylistically. Just as those who were listening to commercial country music, the music of "Music City, U.S.A.," weren't listening to Dylan, we weren't listening to Buck Owens or George Jones. We weren't attuned to hear the poetry of Haggard's "Working Man Blues."

In any case, in 1967 we heard *John Wesley Harding* more as a coda to the series of remarkable albums Dylan had produced in the 1960s than as the advent of a new arc of experimentation and development. When *Nashville Skyline* arrived sixteen months later, what struck us was not only that the country stylistic elements now dominated the album as a whole, but how relatively slight the songs seemed lyrically when compared to the allusive, elusive allegorical work collected on *John Wesley Harding*. "Lay Lady Lay" was a great number to slip onto the turntable when your girlfriend came by, but it wasn't "I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine," and tracks like "Country Pie" were amusing but seemed, for Dylan, like filler. We listened to *Nashville Skyline* and asked it to be profound (in something akin to the manner that we found *John Wesley Harding* to be profound), and when we accepted that it wasn't, we shelved it, turned back to *John Wesley Harding* and the albums before it, and wondered whether this new Dylan, crooning and genial, would ever take us again to "Positively 4th Street."

John Wesley Harding and Nashville Skyline in the context of Travelin' Thru:

I first circled around to Dylan's country period some 30 years after its initial release. Unmoored as I was from the late 60's, it didn't seem like that much of a creative detour. It was enjoyable enough, just sort of slight in comparison to what had come before. It didn't sound like an attempt to breach the walls of the silent majority. Nor did I hear how it might have helped pave the way for the emergence of more left-leaning country writers like Kris Kristofferson. It simply felt like Bob took a deliberate step back and scratched another musical itch. Yet another example of Bob willfully choosing to confound expectations and be, well, Bob.

While Dylan can be called many things, I rarely think of him as subtle. He can be winkingly subversive on occasion, but rarely subtle. The material here, however, both bootlegged and as originally released might be the warmest, gentlest, and yes, subtlest of his career. Aside from his stints with The Band and the Traveling Wilburys, the session with Johnny Cash might also be among his most generous and spontaneous collaborations.

The songs, recorded for *John Wesley Harding* and *Blood on the Tracks*, though newly recorded, sound patinaed and slightly outside of their time, with their veneer of crooned pop vocals and understated instrumentation. There is nary a slashing Mike Bloomfield blues guitar riff, penny whistle, or biting sardonic vocal to be found. Instead of reaching back to modernize and amplify the singalong protest music and attitudes of Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, on *John Wesley Harding*, Dylan pulls out the darker themes of A.P. Carter's *Appalachia*, remixing them through his own surrealist folk filter. Lacking high harmony vocals, straight ahead 4/4 drumming, or overtly twangy guitars, these songs are more akin to the acoustic side of *Bringing it all Back Home* and the

quieter moments on *Highway 61 Revisited* than they are to the country rock of the International Submarine Band, The Byrds, The Flying Burrito Brothers, and Poco, among others. Jimi Hendrix might have been the first to identify the darker rock core of what Dylan was doing with this material, and his amped up cover of "All Along the Watchtower" has become the definitive version. The alt-country and literate rockers who would follow, whether it be the '70s Outlaws, early Springsteen, Steve Earle, or later Uncle Tupelo, all eventually drank from the same musical well.

Where *John Wesley Harding* built on the thematic elements of older country music as its lyrical foundation, musically *Nashville Skyline* pushes Dylan as close as he would officially get to the sounds of contemporary country. However, if one listens past the light pedal steel adornments and dials down the crooning, *Nashville Skyline* plays even more aggressively as a return to the folk of his pre-electric albums, particularly tracks in the vein of "It Ain't Me Babe" from *Another Side of Bob Dylan*.

The first track of *Nashville Skyline*, the newly updated "Girl from the North Country," now a duet with Johnny Cash, is spare and subdued. Really, only the second track on *Nashville Skyline*, the instrumental "Nashville Skyline Rag," overtly plays up the country aspects of the music, and the song is pushed even more dramatically into the country sphere on the closing track of *Travelin' Thru*, where it is performed with Earl Scruggs and Family. However, the rest of side one of *Nashville Skyline* dials back the country influences. The chugging baseline and sparkling piano heard on the released version of "To Be Alone with You" sound more like shuffling rock accompaniments. The heavily echoed drums on the released version of "I Threw it All Away" have more in common with Hal Blaine's elevator shaft sound on Simon and Garfunkel's "The Boxer" (which also features an appearance by Charlie McCoy) than it does with, say, Marty Robbins. Side

Two of the original album kicks off with the most hallowed of traditional country rhythmic instrumentation: congas and cowbell.

Though he clearly incorporates country influences and inspiration on *Nashville Skyline*, Dylan still sits somewhere outside of the genre. The studio chatter between Dylan and Cash on *Travelin' Thru* as they try out various songs illustrates this, capturing both their efforts to find a shared musical vocabulary that would enable them to work together and Dylan trying to find a more general footing in the country idiom. Dylan is clearly familiar with both the Johnny Cash and Jimmie Rodgers catalogue, even though he's less in his vocal element when it comes to the yodels on the Blue Yodels. He sounds particularly out of sorts on the awkward attempt at "Amen" and the gospel tracks that follow after Cash asks him, "Say Bob, what religious song do you know?" It shouldn't be surprising then, given Dylan's age and respect for Cash, that the two artists most seamlessly and joyously come together on the Sun Records tracks. The proto-rock of Elvis Presley via Arthur Crudup's "That's All Right Mama," Carl Perkins's "Matchbox," and Cash's own "Big River" provide some of the best moments on the whole set. Both musicians are seemingly relaxed and right at home in the Sam Phillips wheelhouse. Near the end of "That's All Right Mama," Cash asks Dylan, "How far do you want to go?" Dylan wryly retorts, "How far do you want to go?" As Carl Perkins on guitar keeps driving along, Cash laughs and says back, "Let's do it some more," leading to them *do-do-doing* their way through the melody to get to a final shared chorus and a blazing outro from Perkins.

Taken together, all of this might be why I have never really thought of Dylan's country period as being all that *country*. However, like other entries in the official Bootleg Series, *Travelin' Thru* provides new context to the originally released material and challenges earlier assumptions and narratives. My ears have always heard a somewhat hesitant embrace of modern country sounds on the two

officially released albums. However, the outtakes presented from both the *John Wesley Harding* and *Nashville Skyline* sessions, particularly the early attempts at "To Be Alone with You" and "I Threw it All Away," push Dylan into a more overtly contemporary country sound, dialing down the folk while playing up the telecaster twang and adding a little more saloon to the piano. In particular, *Travelin' Thru* reveals that Dylan, had he chosen some of the alternate takes for *Nashville Skyline* and resequenced the album so that it opened with, for instance, "To Be Alone with You," could have ended up with a record that would have registered more overtly as contemporary country (if not quite country-politan). Perhaps this muting of the country style may help explain why Dylan didn't push himself further down the country road but instead moved quickly onto the next thing: *New Morning*, then the mishmash of *Self Portrait*, a reunion with The Band, and finally fully regaining his creative footing with *Blood on the Tracks*. It would be up to others like Graham Parsons and Gene Clark to realize more fully the country rock sound Dylan hit on in the outtakes on *Travelin' Thru* and to explore more fully its expressive possibilities.

Typically an archival compilation such as *Travelin' Thru* helps reveal underlying continuities that might not have been apparent, or provides a more comprehensive context that helps us make sense of discontinuities. Instead, *Travelin' Thru* brings various questions more clearly into view, underscores their importance, and leaves us less able to wrap the package in pretty paper and put a bow on it. *John Wesley Harding* has country touches, but the two songs that use steel guitar ("Down Along the Cove" and "I'll Be Your Baby Tonight") are its final two tracks and are distinctly different (both stylistically and in their lyric scope) from the preceding ten, non-country songs that dominate the album. We are left to wonder whether the country elements of the first album are in any useful sense to be understood as a precursor to the second or whether the second is a stylistic veer or break from the first. And in either case, we're left to wonder what *country*, whether as style or repertoire or marketing label, might have represented to Dylan in this period and in his sense of these two albums.

The four tracks that close *Travelin' Thru* offer a clue—or perhaps a complication. These performances with Earl Scruggs and his sons were recorded for possible use for the documentary *Earl Scruggs: His Family and Friends* that aired on public television (then NET, now PBS) on January 10, 1971. In early 1969, Lester Flatt and Scruggs had broken up their long-running and trend-setting bluegrass partnership. Flatt was adamant in his support of the Vietnam War and a staunch traditionalist in his music. Scruggs had come to question the war, and he wanted to play music with his sons. With them he wanted to expand the bluegrass repertoire to include the music of Dylan, among others. The musical divorce was not amicable. The one Dylan-Scruggs collaboration used in the film and included on the soundtrack is "Nashville Skyline," which easily adapts to bluegrass picking and shows Scruggs as the master he was, but it's the previously unreleased recordings that are more revealing. The first is "East Virginia Blues," a traditional song recorded by The Carter Family, a staple of the folk revival scene when Dylan first came to Greenwich Village, and a favorite of first-generation bluegrass acts. The song is *folk* and it's *country* in the sense that bluegrass had been part of the commercial country music scene in the later 1940s and early 1950s. It isn't, though, *country* in the contemporary sense of country music at the time when Dylan and Scruggs recorded the piece. Even more telling is their performance of "To Be Alone from You" from *Nashville Skyline*, where the acoustic instruments rock the beat against Dylan's blues-inflected delivery of the lyrics, all but erasing its possibility as a *country* song.

In part, the success of the four brief Dylan-Scruggs collaborations reflects Scruggs' instrumental virtuosity, his ability to play in a variety of idioms, and probably as well a willingness to suggest material that he believed would most allow Dylan to be Dylan. But there's perhaps another dynamic in play. For Scruggs, the break with Flatt was a rejection of the current politics of the country music

scene and the general sense that country was (when not safely apolitical) the music of the right. Even in the later 1960s, country was already predominately a music addressed to those who felt threatened by the urban mainstream and functioned not just as an assertion of patriotism and the war but also as a defensive construction—an attempt to refuse to be marginalized that can be seen as a precursor of MAGA hats. For Scruggs, to embrace youth music was to refuse this construction and to assert the possibility of a humane and inclusive populism rather than an exclusionary and corrosive one.

And perhaps this parallels Dylan's interest in drawing on country music in the era covered by *Travelin' Thru*. When Dylan recorded *John Wesley Harding* and *Nashville Skyline*, to use country music elements in one's music was a political gesture, whether or not the lyrics were political. In the context of *Travelin' Thru*, Dylan's country phase suggests less an attempt to record country music (and certainly not to be perceived as a *country* artist) than an attempt to reclaim the country tradition from the political and cultural right: to reassert its possibilities for narrative and reclaim its roots in the folk tradition. This is not the folk tradition of the so-called folk revival typified by the neo-traditionalists or such commercial acts as the Kingston Trio, or even the practice of the young Dylan. Rather, *Travelin' Thru* invokes the *country* music of the 1920s which included Appalachian traditional music, folk blues, and parlor songs, along with the synthesis of these categories. Such innovators as Jimmie Rodgers, for example, spoke to and for rural and small town folk across the southeast, reasserting country as *folk* and folk as *country* to create a newly democratic music. If so, *John Wesley Harding* veers less from *The Basement Tapes* than it initially seemed, and the ambition of *Self Portrait* can be seen, in some small way, as deriving from and connected to *Nashville Skyline*. And if nothing else, *Travelin' Thru* underscores that *country*—whether understood as genre, as repertoire, as musical practice—is a problematic descriptor for Dylan's

music in this period. Coming to terms with this phase of Dylan's creative output requires treating the term *country* as a central problematic rather than a reliable interpretive key.