Daryl Sanders. *That Thin, Wild Mercury Sound: Dylan, Nashville and the Making of Blonde on Blonde*. Chicago, IL: Chicago Review Press, 2019. xvi + 240 pp. $26.99

REVIEW BY Nick Smart, The College of New Rochelle

That Thin, Wild Mercury Sound: Dylan, Nashville, and the Making of Blonde on Blonde (2019) is not a commentary on or mere history of the making of *Blonde on Blonde* (1966). The book's experiential re-creation of the making of the record manages to improve upon the primary pleasure of listening to Bob, and that's not an easy trick.

By most standards *Thin, Wild Mercury* probably won't rank among the most important Bob Dylan books in the catalog. Sanders relies on sources well known to Dylan criticism for much of the material he marshals, and his intimate connections are mostly with the Nashville musicians who played on the record; he can't tell you anything you don't know about Bob Dylan and Edie Sedgwick. There is no gossipy or erudite currency to be gained from this book. But if you'd like to hear more of songs you've played a zillion times, or if for some reason you haven't yet understood why the release of *Blonde on Blonde* is such an inescapable moment in the history of music, then you'd better call your librarian.

With its title, *Thin, Wild Mercury* certainly provokes the skeptical Dylan reader. This phrase, Dylan's own, is so well known to enthusiasts that it seems foolhardy at first for author Daryl Sanders to claim he can contribute to anyone's understanding of what thin, wild mercury means (no, not what it means, what it sounds like, because its meaning is only its sound) and how Dylan conceived and delivered it. But this guy Sanders, he pulls it off. The distillation of his experience with Nashville's people and sound, and all the impressions of Dylan he's collected from first- (and second-) hand witnesses, results in the proof that *Blonde on Blonde* meets the Wild, Mercury standard to which Dylan retroactively holds it.

For better or for worse (mostly better), Daryl Sanders is a lifer, a Nashville music journalist who has covered Music City scenes and players since the late '70s. His feel for the town is put to good use when he recounts anecdotes like Al

Kooper's run-in with street toughs on his way back to the studio from a record shop or an effort to have illegal liquor brought to Studio A as a lubricant for the recording of "Rainy Day Women #12 & 35." These tasty details, gleaned from interviews with the musicians and made immediate by Sanders's experience of the scene, give much of the book a gritty and honest atmosphere. Of course, Sanders is also a writer who likes the marquee value of his subject, and has interviewed many major figures including Robert Palmer, Joan Baez, and Tom Petty. Perhaps it is this nearly epic sense of scope that makes him want to fit his take on *Blonde on Blonde* into more arenas than it should play. Occasionally the density of what Sanders knows deprives the book of focus (like a great song with too many verses?).

Both aspects of this book (unchecked recitation of record label names, locations of minor gigs, antipathies of industry executives, and spot-on storytelling once tape starts rolling in Studio A) are necessary. Together, as in novels and life, the banal and the brilliant create the effect. If you don't know how old drummer Kenneth Buttery was when he started playing Tennessee roadhouses, your jaw won't drop far enough at the sound of his brushwork many years and chapters later.

The book provides backstory for anybody who played a note, called a take, snapped a photo, or rode along in a limo with Bob Dylan between July 1965 when Dylan resumes work on *Highway 61 Revisited* to the day in in 1967 when the layout of *Blonde on Blonde*'s inner sleeve is reconfigured because an Italian starlet doesn't want her picture in the montage of faces that are mostly Bob's. It's possible to feel too carried away by this bloodhound approach, but it will all be worth it when Sanders displays his spellbinding mastery of minutiae by uncovering the shape of the lyrics and the sound of the songs.

This description of some of the takes of "Most Likely You Go Your Way (and I'll Go Mine)" is a good example of the payoff:

> "The second and third verses and the bridge all underwent significant changes between the first take and the sixth, the only complete takes—none of the other four made it past the first verse and the chorus. Dylan also made a key lyrical change in the bridge between the first and final takes, adding "the judge" who "holds a grudge." The introduction of the judge underscored the reckoning awaiting the woman for what she had done to the man when "time will tell just who has fell and who's been left behind."

The up-tempo arrangement (in the key of G) developed fairly quickly—it was mostly together on the first take. Between the first and the second takes they settled on the primary melody line, a catchy bluesy riff suggested by McCoy that was repeated in unison by a number of instruments throughout the song.

"There was a little figure after each chorus that he [McCoy] wanted to put in on trumpet, but Dylan was not fond of overdubbing," Kooper recalled in his memoir. "It was a nice lick, too, Simple, but nice. Now Charlie was already playing bass on that tune. So we started recording, and when that section came up, he picked up the trumpet in his right hand and played the part while he kept the bass going with his left hand without missing a lick in either hand. Dylan stopped in the middle of that and just stared in awe." (154-155)

These paragraphs show you all of the book's strength, and another, forgivable, weakness. If you read *Thin, Wild Mercury* with your headphones on, as I did, Sanders's detailing of each track's development will bring you to moments of genuine exhilaration when each song's full sound is realized. While reading the chunk of *Thin, Wild Mercury* quoted above, I played "Most Likely You Go Your Way (And I'll Go Mine)" over and over, reveling in those trumpet flourishes that showed me the contortion of Charlie McCoy, the band leader who kept all the Nashville musicians working toward the realization of Dylan's sound, and also Dylan's face registering McCoy's sublime contribution. What had once been an undifferentiated aspect of a song I really liked, became a moment of creation I felt in my

bones. The palpability of this rendering is a great accomplishment, and it happens often.

Robbie Robertson's "blistering lead" on "Leopard Skin Pillbox Hat" might have remained for me just the sound of good guitar playing had I not read *Thin, Wild Mercury* and overheard the arch-Southern McCoy, telling Robertson (such a Northerner he's Canadian), "'Robbie, the whole world'll marry you on that one'" (167). Sanders reanimates the recording sessions by listening to every scrap of raw tape available, reading every book that mentions *Blonde on Blonde* (that great McCoy line is sourced to Sean Wilentz's *Dylan in America* [2011]), and interviewing those Nashville musicians we hear on the record (McCoy insists he never played the trumpet with one hand, but Sanders, with due respect, provides enough evidence that he might have to allow a reader's startled impression to linger).

So that's what the section under review, and the book as a whole, do so well, take us to Nashville by way of New York and drop us in the studio with Dylan and the bands. What isn't as wonderful about the book is apparent in the last line of that first quoted paragraph. Anyone who follows the Never Ending Tour hoping to hear Bob drop a new couplet into "Tangled Up in Blue" is going to love the way Sanders keeps track of Dylan's on-the-spot revisions. Anyone who does not love to have other listeners tell them what Dylan meant, especially when the proffered meanings are standard and somewhat sexist, is going to take exception with this book from time to time.

Glossing lyrics is not Sanders' best skill. After he shows how each track of *Blonde on Blonde* ends up in the can, he often strays from listening and reads the words for an obligatory paragraph or two. His notes rarely improve the experience of the record the way his sterling stories of social and sonic convergence always do. The "fever down in my pocket" on "Absolutely Sweet Marie" refers as well to musical pockets and spiritual containers as to hard evidence of sexual urgency. But because Sanders, like so many explicators of *Blonde on Blonde*, can't resist imagining Dylan's feelings for Edie, Nico, Sarah, or Joan, meanings are frequently

overdetermined. But this trap's jaws catch everyone who writes about Dylan; some struggle more often and less gracefully than others. Sanders quotes many unsatisfactory critical attempts to reduce Dylan songs to stable meanings, or prove they mean nothing. Knowing that Lester Bangs and Clinton Heylin and Jann Wenner don't deserve the last word on any of this stuff should allow us to just ignore Sanders's unremarkable effort to render *Blonde on Blonde* a record about women delivered via the thematic twin engine of "waiting and gates."

Thin, Wild Mercury does not need to be regarded and shouldn't pose as the sort of Dylan book in which one available version of some of the songs backstops an author's view of Dylan as activist, poet, or profligate. No, this book is an example of what English professors call performative rhetoric, an act of speech or writing that enacts the very thing it also describes. Eulogies bury and vows marry and *That, Thin Wild Mercury Sound* reveals its sonic referent by reverently turning our ears to *Blonde on Blonde*.