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*Decades of Dylanology have missed the point
—the music is the message.*



By Alex Ross

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f you look through what has been written about Bob Dylan in the past thirty-odd years, you notice a desire for him to die off, so that his younger self can assume its mythic place. When he had his famous motorcycle mishap in 1966, at the age of twenty-five, it was presumed that his career had come to a sudden end: rumors had him killed or maimed, like James Dean or Montgomery Clift. In 1978, after the fiasco of “Renaldo & Clara,” Dylan’s four-hour art film, Mark Jacobson wrote in the *Village Voice*, “I wish Bob Dylan died. Then Channel 5 would piece together an instant documentary on his life and times. . . . Just

I the immutable facts.” James Wolcott was unhappy to find him still kicking in 1985: “My God, he sounds as if he could go on grinding out this crap *forever*.” When Dylan was hospitalized with a chest infection in 1997, newspapers ran practice obituaries: “Bob Dylan, who helped transform pop music more than thirty years ago when he electrified folk music . . .”; “Bob Dylan, whose bittersweet love songs and politically tinged folk anthems made him an emblem of the nineteen-sixties counterculture . . .”



Photograph by Brian Rasic / Getty

Puyallup, Washington. I’m at the 1998 Puyallup Fair, in this agricultural suburb of Tacoma, and among the attractions are Elmer, a twenty-four-hundred-pound Red Holstein cow; a miniature haunted house ingeniously mounted on the back of a truck; bingo with Hoovers for prizes; and Bob Dylan. He is announced, with cheesy gusto, as “Columbia recording artist Bob Dylan!” He saunters out from shadows in the back of the stage, indistinguishable at first from the four other band members. He is dressed in a gray-and-black Nashville getup and looks like a lopsided owl. As the show gets under way, he tries a few cautious strutting and dancing moves, Chuck Berry style. He plays five numbers from his most recent album, “Time Out of Mind”; several hits, among them “Don’t Think Twice, It’s All Right” and “Masters of War”; and something more unexpected from his five-hundred-song back catalogue—“You Ain’t Goin’ Nowhere.” He ends with “Forever Young.” The crowd goes wild.

When I told people that I was going to follow Dylan on the road, I got various

bemused reactions. Some were surprised to hear that he still played in public at all. It's easier, perhaps, to picture him in "Citizen Kane"-like seclusion, glowering at the Bible and listening to the collected works of Blind Willie McTell. Maybe, but he also plays more than a hundred shows a year. Last year, he appeared in Buenos Aires, Nuremberg, Brisbane, Saskatoon, and Bristol, Tennessee, among other places. Starting in June, he will pass through thirty American cities, with Paul Simon in tow. As of this writing, he is in Slovenia.

What are these shows like? How are they different from the classic-rock nostalgia acts that clutter summer stages? I've been to ten Dylan concerts in the past year, including a six-day, six-show stretch that took three thousand miles off the life of a rental car. The crowds were more diverse than I'd expected: young urban record-collector types, grizzled weirdos, well-dressed ex-hippies, and enthusiastic kids in Grateful Dead T-shirts. Deadheads are a big part of Dylan's audience, and they created odd scenes as they descended on each venue: in Reno, they streamed in psychedelic lines through the Hilton casino. I asked some of the younger fans how they had become interested in Dylan, since he is not exactly omnipresent on MTV. Most had discovered him, they said, while browsing through their parents' old LPs. One kid, who had been listening to a 45-r.p.m. single of "Hurricane," thought that he should come and check out the man behind it. The younger fans didn't seem to be bothered by the fact that Dylan was three times their age. A literate teen-ager asked me, "Do you have to be from Elizabethan England to appreciate Shakespeare?"

Before each show, for some reason, minor-key sonatas and concertos by Mozart were played over the P.A. system. Male Dylanologists explained lyrics to their girlfriends. "Every Dylan song contains *eight questions*," I heard one saying. A crowd of drunks who sat in front of me at a show in Minnesota seemed to have the Dylan songbook pretty well memorized. The rowdiest of them was shouting out first lines of the songs

at the top of his voice, and once, in his excitement, he crashed into the hard plastic seats. He got up again, blood dripping down his chin, and bellowed in my face, “*Once upon a time you dressed so fine! God said to Abraham, ‘Kill me a son!’*” Other fans took a cooler view. Before a show in Portland, I chatted with a levelheaded twenty-something guy who plays in a progressive funk group. “Last time I saw him, in ’90, it was *brutal*,” he told me. “I hope he doesn’t fuck up the songs again. I hear he’s better. Even when he’s awful, he’s sort of great—he’s never just *mediocre*.” In Dylan’s vicinity, I noticed, everyone italicizes.

Many people had told me that Dylan makes a mess of the songs. He does change them, and fans who come to hear live-action reënactments of the favorite records of their youth tend to be disappointed. Dylan sometimes writes new melodies for old songs and he sometimes transposes one set of lyrics into the tune of another. He writes a little more every night; I kept hearing fresh bluesy bits of tunes in “Tangled Up in Blue,” which was at the center of every set. As a performer, he is erratic: his voice sometimes thins into a bleat, he occasionally drops or jumbles lines, and every so often his guitar yelps wrong notes. But he has a saturnine ease onstage; even from a hundred feet away, his squinting stare can give you a start. And he is musically in control. The band’s pacing of each song—the unpredictable scampering to and fro over a loosely felt beat, the watch-and-wait atmosphere, the sudden knowing emphasis on one line or one note—is much the same as when Dylan plays solo. You can hear him thinking through the music bar by bar: he has a way of tracing out his chords in winding one-note patterns and bringing them alive. And the basic structures of the songs are unshakable. There is never a wrong chord.

In the verbal jungle of rock criticism, Dylan is seldom talked about in musical terms. His work is analyzed instead as poetry, punditry, or mystification. A new book, entitled “The Bob Dylan Companion,” goes so far as to call him “one of the least

talented singers and guitarists around.” But to hear Dylan live is to realize that he *is* a musician—of an eccentric and mesmerizing kind. It’s hard to pin down what he does: he is a composer and a performer at once, and his shows cause his songs to mutate, so that no definitive or ideal version exists. Dylan’s legacy will be the sum of thousands of performances, over many decades. The achievement is so large and so confusing that the impulse to ignore all that came after his near death and disappearance in 1966 is understandable. It’s simpler that way—and cheaper. You need only seven disks, instead of forty-three. But Columbia Records, after years of putting out bungled live recordings, is finally beginning to illustrate, in its Bootleg Series, the entire sweep of Dylan’s performing career. Columbia is now preparing an expanded version of his best-written album, “Blood on the Tracks,” which should enable fans to hear the almost unbearably sad early versions of “Tangled Up in Blue” and “Idiot Wind.” There are other wonders from the archives waiting to be revealed.

Don DeLillo, in his novel “Great Jones Street,” imagined a Dylanesque rock star and said of him, “Even if half-mad he is absorbed into the public’s total madness; even if fully rational, a bureaucrat in hell, a secret genius of survival, he is sure to be destroyed by the public’s contempt for survivors.” But Dylan has survived without becoming a “survivor”—a professional star acting out the role of himself. He has a curious, sub-rosa place in pop culture, seeming to be everywhere and nowhere at once. He is historical enough to be the subject of university seminars, yet he wanders the land playing to beery crowds. The Dylan that people thought they knew—“the voice of a generation”—is going away. So I went searching for whatever might be taking its place. I went to the shows; I listened to the records; I patronized dusty Greenwich Village stores in search of bootlegs; I sought out the Dylanologists who are arguing over his legacy in print. Strange to say, Dylan himself may explain his songs best, just by singing them.

Concord, California. The crowd is dominated by ex- and neo-hippies from Berkeley, twenty miles to the west. Dylan threatens to dampen their enthusiasm by opening with “Gotta Serve Somebody,” the snarling gospel single with which he had horrified the counterculture in 1979. But he works his way back to the sing-along anthem “Blowin’ in the Wind.” I was sitting near a teen-age girl who had first heard Dylan in a class on the sixties and was there with her teacher.

Dylan’s looming presence in the politics and culture of the sixties is for many a point in his favor: he wrote songs that “mattered,” he “made a difference.” For others, particularly for those of us who grew up in later, less delirious decades, the sixties connection is a stumbling block. Until a few years ago, when I started listening to Dylan in earnest, I had mentally shelved him as the archetypal radical leftover, reeking of politics and marijuana. I’d read a story that went something like this. He was born in Minnesota. He went to Greenwich Village. He wrote protest songs. He stopped writing protest songs. He took drugs, “went electric.” He was booed. He fell off his motorcycle. He disappeared into a basement. He reappeared and sang country. He got divorced. He converted to Christianity. He converted back to something else. He croaked somewhere behind Stevie Wonder in “We Are the World.” And so on. If you’re not in the right age group, the collected bulletins of Dylan’s progress read like alumni notes from a school you didn’t attend.

The challenge for anyone who thinks Dylan is more than a life-style trendsetter is to define those qualities that have outlasted his boisterous term as the voice of a generation. So far, the informal discipline of Dylanology—founded around 1970, by a creep named A. J. Weberman as he fished through Dylan’s trash on MacDougal Street—has reached no consensus on the matter. At the moment, there are about a half-dozen luminaries in the field. Greil Marcus, the most formidable of rock critics, connects Dylan with a homegrown, folk-and-blues surrealism that he calls “the old,

weird America.” Paul Williams, who founded the rock magazine *Crawdaddy!* in the sixties, celebrates Dylan as a tireless, generous performer who rewrites his songs at every show. The Dylan biographer Clinton Heylin lavishes attention on the gospel period and the apocalyptic rants that followed in the eighties. Christopher Ricks, a renowned scholar of Milton, Tennyson, Eliot, and Beckett at Boston University, supplies a formalist reading—of Dylan as a pure poet, who thrives on word choice, rhythm, and structured rhyme. In the same spirit, Gordon Ball, a professor of English at the Virginia Military Institute, has nominated Dylan for a Nobel Prize in Literature.

Below the main authorities are the amateur Dylanologists: enthusiasts, cranks, editors of fanzines, caretakers of gigantically detailed Internet sites. There is no end to their productions. “The Cracked Bells,” for instance, is an unreadable book-length guide to Dylan’s unreadable book-length poem “Tarantula.” The author, Robin Witting, writes, “‘Tarantula’ has six main themes: America, Viet Nam, Aretha, Mexico, Maria, and—the great panacea—Music.” I didn’t find much about music, but I enjoyed a note on geraniums: “Do geraniums stand for coolness? Insouciance? Moreover, the odour of death?” Aidan Day’s “Jokerman,” a book on Dylan’s lyrics, analyzes some lines from “Visions of Johanna,” in “Blonde on Blonde,” and finds in them “a reduction of form to primal elements as—in an image that itself displaces Marcel Duchamp’s rendering of the Mona Lisa in the painting ‘LHOOQ’ (1919)—even gender difference becomes confused and human contour and feature are erased.” The text in question is “See the primitive wallflower freeze / When the jelly-faced women all sneeze / Hear the one with the mustache say, ‘Jeeze / I can’t find my knees.’ ”

Despite everything that has been written about Dylan, not a great deal is known about him for certain. Heylin’s chronology of Dylan’s life, for example, is an archly self-cancelling document, in that every piece of information points to a larger lack of

information. Here are three consecutive entries for the year 1974:

Late April. Dylan attends a concert by Buffy St. Marie at the Bottom Line in New York. He is so impressed he returns the following two nights, and tells her he'd like to record her composition, "Until It's Time for You to Go."

May 6. Dylan runs into Phil Ochs in front of the Chelsea Hotel and they decide to go for a drink together.

May 7. Dylan visits Ochs at his apartment and agrees to perform at the "Friends of Chile" benefit.

What happened during the rest of the first week of May? Where *was* he going when he ran into Phil Ochs? Dylan's life story sometimes feels as if it has been pieced together from centuries-old manuscripts that were charred in a monastery fire. "Between January and June 1972 there is no evidence that he was in New York at all," Heylin writes in his attempt at a full-scale biography, "Dylan: Behind the Shades." Heylin, a skeptical Englishman who is known for a history of American punk, is at least willing to admit what he doesn't know, and his book is the most readable and reliable of four biographies.

The accumulated files of Dylanology, despite their gaps, give a rough sense of the personality behind the enigma. A thumbnail sketch from a classic 1967 essay by Ellen Willis holds up well: "Friends describe [him] as shy and defensive, hyped up, careless of his health, a bit scared by fame, unmaterialistic but shrewd about money, a professional absorbed in his craft." Stubborn persistence is his main characteristic: although he has often vanished in a funk brought on by the vagaries of his career, he never fails to trudge back with some new twist on his obsessions. He is at odds with

the modern world in many ways. “There’s enough of everything,” he said in a 1991 interview. “There was too much of it with *electricity*, maybe, some people said that. Some people said the *light bulb* was going too far.” His eccentricity has an everyday quality—he’s the weird neighbor you can never figure out. I heard an excellent Dylan anecdote from a friend who played on a Little League team with Dylan’s kids in the late seventies, during the singer’s gospel period. When a dog ran onto the field, my friend yelled, “Get that goddam dog off the field!” A familiar voice rasped from the parents’ bench, “Ahhh, that’s a *what* kind of a dog?”

Dylan’s rise was fabulously odd. He was famous before he was twenty-one. World fame—not just celebrity but intellectual fame, with plaudits from Allen Ginsberg, Frank O’Hara, and Philip Larkin—came to him by the age of twenty-five. The speed of his ascent required some luck, but it was mostly a function of his energy. He skipped heedlessly from one genre to another: folk, blues, country, spirituals. He played at being an activist, but his sharpest polemics, such as “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll,” were the character-driven ones. His early vocal style incorporated pieces of Woody Guthrie, Mississippi John Hurt, Hank Williams, and, not to be forgotten, Johnnie Ray, the flaky fifties crooner who smacked his consonants with unnerving ferocity. In the early sixties, Dylan sought to play rock and roll and electric blues alongside his acoustic material: he had hammered the piano, Little Richard style, in high school, and he longed to resume that kind of noisemaking. He originally planned to have his second album, “The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan,” be part electric and part acoustic, like the later “Bringing It All Back Home.” He signalled his intentions by covering “That’s All Right, Mama,” Elvis’s *début* single, at his first electric session, in October, 1962. He was trying frantically to say everything at once.

But he soon discovered that you can be famous for only one thing at a time. The record business and the music press wanted a narrower genius. The electric songs from

1962 didn't fit the image that Columbia wanted to create—Dylan as folk prophet. He was gaining notoriety chiefly for his civil-rights and anti-war material, and Columbia advertised him accordingly:

Bob Dylan has walked down many roads. For most of his 22 years he “rode freight trains for kicks and got beat up for laughs, cut grass for quarters and sang for dimes.” . . . Bob does what a true folk singer is supposed to do—sing about the important ideas and events of the times. . . . His new best-selling album (the first was “Bob Dylan”) is “The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan.” It features ten of Bob’s own compositions, including the sensational hit, “Blowin’ in the Wind.” Also, songs on subjects ranging from love (“Girl from the North Country”) to atomic fall-out (“A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall”). Hear it and you’ll know why Bob Dylan is the voice of the times.

This ingenious ad copy, complete with Dylan’s tall tales about his past, infiltrated the press coverage. Dylan soon became annoyed at the generalizations, and found himself fighting his own publicity; he denied, for example, that “Hard Rain” depicted a nuclear winter. Even so, he played along with the spirit of the marketing: he later claimed that the song had been a general reaction to the dread of the nuclear age, and to the atmosphere of the Cuban missile crisis in particular. In a widely quoted statement, he said, “I wrote that when I didn’t figure I’d have enough time left in life.” “Hard Rain” had actually been written at least a month before the Cuban crisis began. Before long, he learned not to talk about his songs at all.

“Hard Rain” was a breakthrough in Dylan’s writing, but for a different reason. It’s a small epic, lasting seven minutes, and yet it lacks the sort of blow-by-blow storytelling that sustains the picaresque ballads of folk literature. How does Dylan keep us

interested? One way is through repetition; another is through changes that occur between the first repetition and the last. Almost all of Dylan's songs have a structure of verse-refrain, verse-refrain, and the refrain is almost always a simple-seeming, folkish phrase that tolls like a bell: "Tangled up in blue," "You gotta serve somebody," "It's not dark yet, but it's getting there," "It's a hard rain's a-gonna fall." In "Hard Rain," the first lines—"Oh, where have you been, my blue-eyed son? And where have you been, my darling young one?"—are a nod to the old ballad "Lord Randal," which begins, "Oh, where ha' you been, Lord Randal, my son? Oh, where ha' you been, my handsome young man?" Dylan breaks the symmetrical call-and-response pattern of the original: his blue-eyed son answers not with two lines but with five. The images—"twelve misty mountains," "six crooked highways," and so forth—carry the flavor of the Book of Revelation, with its insistence on exact numbers of bizarre objects ("I saw seven golden candlesticks"). The song hangs on a musical trick of suspension: E and A chords seesaw hypnotically as the number of answering phrases increases from five to seven and eventually to twelve. In the chorus—"And it's a hard, and it's a hard . . ."—Dylan grasps for and finally gets the resolution, which in each verse has moved a little farther out of reach. Coming down the mountain of the song, he starts to sound like a prophet.

Many myths of Dylan's sixties career don't hold up under the evidence gathered in Heylin's books and other Dylanological tomes. Dylan's songwriting is said to have been transformed by a plunge into the drug culture, but he had been using drugs on and off since his Minnesota days. He was said to have been inspired by the Beatles to "go electric," but he had sketched out his folk-rock sound as early as 1962. The first electric shows reportedly provoked universal booing, but on the tape of his famous appearance at the Newport Folk Festival, in 1965, it's difficult to hear boos amid the applause. D. A. Pennebaker, who filmed Dylan's 1966 tour with the Hawks, doesn't recall many confrontations; he says that if there were such incidents the ringleader

didn't appear to be greatly bothered by them. "Dylan was having the best time of his life," he said at a recent symposium on Dylan's tour movie "Eat the Document," at the Museum of Television and Radio in New York. "He was like a cricket jumping around onstage."

Greil Marcus describes the 1965-66 tours differently—as a war against dark reactionary forces. He quotes Al Kooper's reason for not wanting to follow the tour into Texas: "Look what they did to J.F.K. down there." Marcus finds special significance in an exchange that took place between Dylan and the audience in Manchester, England, in May, 1966. In his book "Invisible Republic," Marcus renders this moment as Dylan's ultimate, shattering encounter with the collected forces of Them:

As if he had been waiting . . . a person rises and shouts what he has been silently rehearsing to himself all night. As over and over he has imagined himself doing, he stands up, and stops time. He stops the show:

"JUDAS!"

Dylan stiffens against the flinch of his own body. "I don't believe you," Dylan says, and the contempt in his voice is absolute. As one listens it turns the echo of the shouter's curse sour, you begin to hear the falseness in it, that loving rehearsal—and yet that same echo has already driven Dylan back. "YOU'RE A *liar!*" he screams hysterically.

When Columbia finally released a CD of the show, last year—it had circulated for thirty years on bootlegs—neophytes may have skipped to the end in order to hear the renowned "Judas!" dialogue. They were probably disappointed. What you hear first is

an ordinary lull, during which Dylan tunes his guitar. When the shout of “Judas!” comes, the crowd variously laughs, groans, and applauds. The voice from the back yammers unintelligibly, and others join in. When Dylan responds, he is not screaming hysterically, or, indeed, screaming at all. It’s as if he couldn’t understand what the lads in the back were hollering and therefore supplied the kind of all-purpose non sequitur that he liked to dish out at press conferences.

Marcus implies that there was a conspiracy among folk purists to silence Dylan: the heckler is said to have been “well informed as to the precise order in which Dylan played his songs.” But C. P. Lee, a minor Dylanologist, recently took the trouble to write an entire book about the Manchester show, and after its publication a great discovery was made: the “Judas” shouter was no Pete Seeger-like elder statesman of folk but a confused twenty-year-old university student named Keith Butler. “It was not a premeditated thing,” Butler told the English press after coming forward. (He now works at a bank in Toronto.) “I was swept along by the mood, which was chaotic. I was feeling disappointed and angry.” In other words, two disparate youth cultures—rock-and-rollers and folkies—were jockeying for control of a spokesman who was declining to give a clear message to either of them. Thirteen years later, after all, the rock generation in turn would feel betrayed by Dylan’s gospel songs, and shouts of “Judas!” and “Traitor!” would be thrown at him again. The gospel shows were sometimes no less electrifying than the 1966 concerts, but they happened not to fit the story of a generation.

As Dylan’s tour passed through California, I went to see Marcus, who lives in the Berkeley hills. “The funny thing is that I’m not a *Dylan person*,” he told me. “Many years went by when I didn’t care about him at all.” For Marcus, as for many of the original followers, Dylan disappeared in the seventies and eighties, except for brief comebacks. Marcus’s *Rolling Stone* review of the 1970 “Self-Portrait” began with the

words “What is this shit?” Only when Dylan started recording folk and blues covers in the nineties was he restored to Marcus’s favor. In “Invisible Republic,” which deals with Dylan’s “Basement Tapes,” Marcus makes compelling side trips into older American music—the shrapnel-voiced Dock Boggs and other comical-sinister back-country singers who had been collected in Harry Smith’s celebrated 1952 “Anthology of American Folk Music.” In the eighties, the critic asked to hear “more Dock Boggs” in the singer’s aging voice, and that alchemy more or less happened. Marcus seems to have got inside his subject’s mind, and Dylan indicated as much by providing a blurb for the paperback of “Invisible Republic.”

But there has to be something missing in a reading of Dylan that skips twenty years of his career. What if, as some think, he reached his peak not with the put-ons and put-downs of the sixties but with the chaotic love songs of the seventies? And what if, as Clinton Heylin suggests, he went even further in the eighties, when he fused the personal and the apocalyptic—“Love-sick Blues” with the Book of Revelation? Lester Bangs wrote in 1981, “If people are going to dismiss or at best laugh at Dylan now as automatically as they once genuflected, then nobody is going to know if he ever makes a good album again. They’re not listening now, which just might mean they weren’t really listening then either.”

I was ready to give up on Dylanology until I had tea with Christopher Ricks, a legendary close reader of canonical English poetry. We met in his decorous sitting room, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Although he speaks in the clipped tones of a modern English don, he has a way of plunging into the passive-aggressive dynamic of Dylan’s emotions. “The words constitute an *axis*,” he said to me. “They do not point in one direction.” Dylan says one thing and may mean the opposite. This may seem like irony, but I don’t think it is; irony, strictly speaking, requires a reversal of meaning. Dylan can obtain ambiguity simply by repeating a phrase. “Think of ‘Don’t Think

‘Twice, It’s All Right,’ ” Ricks continued, intoning the refrain. “How many times can you tell somebody not to think twice? You can say ‘It’s all right’ over and over. That’s comforting—but not ‘Don’t think twice.’ I’d start to think.”

I was reminded of some similarly hazy lines from “Meet Me in the Morning,” circa 1974:

Look at the sun, sinking like a ship
Look at the sun, sinking like a ship
Ain’t that just like my heart, babe
When you kissed my lips?

This tangled metaphor—the sun like a ship, the heart like the sun—can spin in any direction. Is the heart glowing like a sunset? Or is it sinking out of sight? And is the ship going over the horizon, or is it just sinking? The less happy implication is that it is in the nature of ships, and of hearts, to sink.

When others have tried to read Dylan line by line, they have usually chased after outside references. (They will say, “He mentioned the Bomb! T. S. Eliot! Joan Baez!”) Talking about “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll,” Ricks begins not with the case of William Zantzinger—a wealthy young farmer who caused the death of a black barmaid at a Baltimore ball and got off with a six-month sentence—but with the rhythm of Zantzinger’s name: a strong beat followed by a weak one. The whole song, he says, is dominated by that loping, tapering rhythm of the name, from which Dylan removed an unsingable “t”:

William Zanzinger killed poor Hattie Carroll
With a cane that he twirled round his diamond ring finger
At a Baltimore hotel society gathering.

It produces a feeling of helplessness, the way each line ends in a weak beat, and this seems to be the point: cry all you want, the gentle suffer. The dominant emotion is not political rage but a quavering sympathy for Hattie Carroll, whose race is never mentioned. This song certainly doesn't raise hopes for judicial reform, and it has not gone out of date, like the cardboard protest anthems of its era. (In 1991, William Zantinger was found to have collected rent from tenants who had been living in extreme squalor in houses that he didn't own. This time, the judge handed down sternly an eighteen-month sentence, in a work-release program.)

"Now's the time for your tears," Dylan sings at the end. Ricks said to me, "He doesn't underscore it—say, 'Now *is* the time.' He doesn't exhort you. Maybe you should have cried before, when Hattie died." (Paul Williams thinks the refrain for the preceding verses, "Now ain't the time for your tears," is actually sarcastic, and that Dylan is saying, "You can't cry because you're a leftist do-gooder who cares only about the legal ramifications." Another axial moment.) Ricks went on to criticize some of Dylan's more recent performances of "Hattie Carroll," in which he pushes the last line a little: "He doesn't let it speak for itself. He sentimentalizes it, I'm afraid." Here I began to wonder whether the close reader had zoomed in too close. Ricks seemed to be fetishizing the details of a recording, and denying the musician license to expand his songs in performance. I had just seen Dylan sing "Hattie Carroll," in Portland, and it was the best performance that I heard him give. He turned the accompaniment into a steady, sad acoustic waltz, and he played a lullabylike solo at the center. You were reminded that the "hotel society gathering" was a Spinsters' Ball, whose dance went on before, during, and after the fatal attack on Hattie Carroll. This was an eerie twist on the meaning of the song, and not a sentimental one.

Still, Ricks's writing on Dylan is the best there is. Unlike most rock critics—forty-year-olds talking to ten-year-olds, Dylan has called them—he writes for adults. But he

has been slow to publish. He has produced only one major essay, for *The Threepenny Review*, and he has been mulling for years over a book-length Dylan study. “I don’t teach Dylan,” he told me. “It’s just an *obsession*.” And he writes, half jokingly, “I need to show that I’m not besotted with the man.” Ricks, like Marcus, might not want to be called a “Dylan person.” Academics who write about Dylan are labelled eccentrics at best. Academe, which is usually so eager to splash around in the pop-culture pool, rejects Dylan because he’s an old white male.

Dylan himself declines the highbrow treatment—though you get the sense that he wouldn’t mind picking up a Nobel Prize. Even in the sixties, he said of those who called him a poet, “Genius is a terrible word, a word they think will make me like them.” He seems to prefer an audience of teen-age Deadheads in a basketball arena. He may occasionally surprise the kids with moody masterpieces, like “Hattie Carroll,” “Visions of Johanna,” and “Not Dark Yet,” or he may teach them a Stanley Brothers bluegrass hymn, but more often he gets them to jump up and down to “Tangled Up in Blue.” This way, he packs in the crowds, and he also makes sure that he cannot be pinned down. Every night, whether he is in good or bad form, he says, in effect, “Think again.”

Duluth, Minnesota. Dylan was born here, in 1941, before moving with his family to the iron-ore town of Hibbing. He has never played Duluth before. The city is moderately excited by his return. He is front-page news for two days running in the *Duluth News-Tribune*. Storefronts downtown are adorned with “Welcome Home, Bob” signs. Duluthans are hoping that he will have something to say to the city; he did, after all, mention Duluth when he accepted the 1998 Grammy for Album of the Year. (“WOW! DYLAN SAID ‘DULUTH!’” ran a local headline.) At the show, a fan tosses onto the stage a paper airplane on which he has written, “Please speak.” It lands upside down. Dylan does not speak. The silence is a little chilly; a few words would have made the

audience ecstatic. Dylan's defense for this kind of criticism is that public speeches are a no-win situation. If he speaks a few words, people say he hasn't said enough. If he speaks at length, people think he's lost his mind. In the end, Minnesotans don't seem too miffed by the episode. I ask one local resident the following day whether he's disappointed. "A little," he replies. "But in the paper it said he smiled a lot."

Discussions of Dylan often boil down to that: "Please speak. Tell us what it means." But does he need to? He had already given something away, during the ritual acoustic performance of "Tangled Up in Blue." This dense tale, which may be about two couples, one couple, or one couple plus an interloper, seems autobiographical; it's easy to guess what Dylan might be thinking about when he sings, "When it all came crashing down, I became withdrawn / The only thing I knew how to do was keep on keeping on / Like a bird that flew . . ." See any number of ridiculous spectacles in Dylan's life. But the lines that he shouted out with extra emphasis came at the end:

Me, I'm still on the road, heading for another joint
We always did feel the same, we just saw it from a different point
Of view
Tangled up in blue.

Suddenly, the romance in question seemed to be the long, stormy one between Dylan and his audience. There's a Ricksian detail that locates this shift in meaning: used as a rhyme, "point" cuts the phrase "point of view" in half, so that the "you" and the "I" are literally looking from different points in space—Dylan being over there and the rest of us over here. And what is the "it" that we're seeing? The thing that comes between him and us—the music. Still, he says, "We always did feel the same." Interpretations are different, feelings are the same. That's a major concession from a man who seems so distant.

Why, night after night, did “Tangled Up in Blue” prove to be the song that brought the audience to life, as if Dylan had dived in and given everyone a hug? You could argue that those generous closing lines did the trick. But from the outset Dylan established an intimacy with the audience: the music did the emotional work for him. The current version of “Tangled Up in Blue” begins, like the original one on “Blood on the Tracks,” with chiming major chords, but the onstage Dylan soon slips into a different scale—into the blues. Dismantling and rebuilding his own song, piece by piece, he bends notes down, inverts the melody, spreads out the pitches of the chords, leans on a single note while the chords change around it, stresses the offbeats, lays triple rhythms on double ones. As the rest of the band holds on to straitlaced harmony and a one-two beat, the song tenses up: opposing scales meet in bittersweet clashes, opposing pulses overlap in a danceable bounce. At some point, the classic radio staple becomes a new animal. By the end, Dylan may be speaking right at you, but you’re probably too caught up in the music to notice.

As I went through my collection of Dylan records and tapes, I realized that in many cases I was only half listening to the lyrics—that the music was giving the words their poetic aura. Often, Dylan’s strongest verbal images occur toward the beginning of a song, and it falls to his musical sense to make something of the rest. In “Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands,” the eleven-minute ballad that closes “Blonde on Blonde,” Dylan fashions some majestic metaphors to capture the object of his affection—“your eyes like smoke and your prayers like rhymes”—and then, in the second-to-last verse, he clouds over: “They wished you’d accepted the blame for the farm.” What farm? What happened to it? Why would she be to blame for it? “Phony false alarm” is the rhyme in the next line, and it doesn’t clear things up. The refrain makes another appearance—“My warehouse eyes, my Arabian drums / Should I leave them by your gate, / Or, sad-eyed lady, should I wait?”—and by this time you ought to be losing

patience with it. What are “warehouse eyes,” and how can one leave them?

Dylanologists beat their heads against such questions. But the music makes you forget them. The melody of the refrain—a rising and descending scale, as in “Danny Boy”—is grand to begin with, but in the fifth verse Dylan makes it grander. As the band keeps playing the scale, he skates back up to the top D with each syllable. He sings on one note as the rest of the harmony moves around him: it’s as if he’s surveying the music from a summit. This is a trick as old as music. In Purcell’s “Dido and Aeneas” the soprano catches our hearts in the same way as she sings, “Remember me, remember me.”

Like Schubert—or Cole Porter or Hank Williams, for that matter—Dylan sharpens the meaning of the lyrics in the mechanics of the music. Take “Mama, You Been on My Mind,” which was long associated with Joan Baez and finally appeared in Dylan’s own voice on the boxed set “The Bootleg Series, Vols. 1-3.” The song begins with a crabbed, somewhat indecipherable image:

Perhaps it’s the color of the sun cut flat
And covering the crossroads I’m standing at . . .

The harmony under these words moves from an E-major chord to a G-sharp seventh and on to C-sharp minor and an F-sharp seventh. It’s an awkward series of changes which matches the baroque images on the page. Our eyes and ears go “Huh?” Then the singer seems to shrug off, with a self-deprecating grin, the attempt to poeticize his emotion—“Or maybe it’s the weather or something like that / But Mama, you been on my mind”—and the harmony gets easier, too, swaying gently from E major to C-sharp minor and back to E. The meaning changes as the chords change.

Dozens of Dylan songs work in the same way. The disturbing gospel number “In the Garden” shows the agony of Jesus in Gethsemane by wandering through ten different

chords, each one like a betrayal. “Idiot Wind,” the centerpiece of “Blood on the Tracks,” channels its universal rage—“Someone’s got it in for me, they’re planting stories in the press”—into a single harmonic convulsion: each verse of the G-major song begins with grinding C minor, which is like a slap to the ear. More often, the chords are mesmerizingly simple. In “Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door,” there are just four of them, but they occur in an unresolved, drooping sequence—a picture of the “long black cloud” that comes down on Billy the Kid.

This is not to say that the music is everything. Dylan does have an original command of the English language. The neat click of the rhymes keeps you interested across all leaps of sense and changes of scene. John Lennon, not long before he died, satirized Dylan as a cynic who rhymed out of a lexicon, but I don’t know of a dictionary that would have generated this couplet:

What can I say about Claudette? Ain’t seen her since January,
She could be respectably married or running a whorehouse in
Buenos Aires.

Dylan also has a knack for tricky enjambments—lines that seem complete in themselves but are subverted by what follows. These are effects for the ear, not for the eye, and Dylan sells them in performance. There’s a tape of him singing “Simple Twist of Fate” in San Francisco in 1980, in which the meaning twirls almost word by word. It’s a heavily rewritten version of the “Blood on the Tracks” song, and the last verse starts this way:

People tell me it’s a crime
To remember her for too long a time
She should have caught me in my prime
She would have stayed with me

Instead of going back off to sea
And leaving me

Dylan slows down, and we may think that the sentence is at an end. But it's not.

To med-i-tate . . .

A grin now creeps into the voice, which had been appropriately wistful before. Dylan's stress on "meditate" tells us that the title refrain is coming around for its final rhyme, but we can't guess how he'll make the leap. His voice fills with pride—pride is one of the great emotions that he can convey—and the tempo picks up again: "*Upon! A! Simple! Twist! Of! Fate!*"

The peculiar solidity of Dylan's lyrics comes in their easy give-and-take with older songs. He has said that the old traditions of folk, blues, spirituals, and popular ballads are his real religion, and his habit of crossing genres may explain his habit of crossing religions. A few years ago, he said, "I believe in Hank Williams singing 'I Saw the Light.'" Dylan has a viselike memory for lyrics of all sorts, and his favorite method is to take a line from an old song and add one or a dozen lines of his own. "As I went out one morning," an old lyric says. "To breathe the air around Tom Paine's," Dylan adds. "Time Out of Mind" is thrillingly Dylanish, because he has returned with a vengeance to the magpie mode of writing. Old song: "She wrote me a letter and she wrote it so kind, / And in this letter these words you could find." Dylan rewrites the second line: "She put down in writing what was in her mind." Old song: "This train don't pull no gamblers, / Neither don't pull no midnight ramblers." Dylan says, "Some trains don't pull no gamblers, / No midnight ramblers, like they did before." There are a dozen or more borrowings in "Tryin' to Get to Heaven"—most of them from the "Spirituals" chapters of Alan Lomax's "Folk Songs of North America."

These buried quotations may be a bit of a joke at the expense of rock critics, who listen to Dylan for news of his love life, mental health, and commercial viability. What happens to their diagnoses of Dylan's misanthropy when it turns out that the lines they quoted come from black spirituals?

"Time Out of Mind" is the first Dylan record in a while which has reached a mass public, but it has confused the diehard fans. Clinton Heylin, for one, rejects it as mere atmosphere; it promises, he says, "depths that aren't there." True, Dylan no longer seems to be writing individual songs: lots of phrases could be moved from one track to another, and everything goes under one dreamy, archaic mood. The album manages to skip the twentieth century: people ride in buggies, trains discourage gambling, there's no air-conditioning ("It's too hot to sleep"), church bells ring, "gay" means "happy," the time of day is measured by the sun, lamps apparently run on gas (and are turned "down low"), and, most of the time, the singer is walking. The wistfulness is intense. The singer is in love with a musical past that's gone forever. You picture him leaning late over his favorite records and songbooks, listening, writing, reading, writing. These are songs about the loneliness of listening: you could add to them "Blind Willie McTell," which was recorded in 1983 and appeared in the "Bootleg" boxed set as a kind of fanfare to "Time Out of Mind." "I'm gazing out the window of the St. James Hotel," he sang. "And I know no one can sing the blues like Blind Willie McTell."

The melancholy could become crushing, but Dylan doesn't let it. The best of the new songs are inexplicably funny: there's a wicked glee in the performance as Dylan manipulates the tatters of his voice, the scatteredness of his inspiration, the paralysis that might arise from his obsession with the past, the prevailing image of himself as a mumbling curmudgeon. And in one song—"Not Dark Yet"—all the flourishes of his songwriting art come together: slow, stately chords, swinging like a pendulum between major and minor; creative tweakings of the past ("There's room enough in the heavens")

becomes “There’s not even room enough to be *anywhere*”); prickly aphorisms (“I can’t even remember what it was I came here to get away from”); and glints of Biblical revelation, not to mention what one Internet expert has identified as a reference to the Talmud (“I was born here and I’ll die here against my will”). If he can’t sing some low notes, he gestures toward them with a slide, so that you feel them. As he did in “Sad-Eyed Lady,” he finds a way to intensify the refrain “It’s not dark yet, but it’s getting there.” The line keeps creeping up, note by note, in the singer’s now limited range. Like Skip James, the cracked genius among Delta-blues singers, Dylan gives a circular form a dire sense of direction.

The sense of arrival in “Not Dark Yet” is enormous. Once again, as Ricks would point out, words turn on their axis and encompass their opposite. The song ends, “I don’t even hear a murmur of a prayer / It’s not dark yet, but it’s getting there.” This couldn’t be bleaker, could it? Bob Dylan stares into the face of death and decay. But as he sings “murmur of a prayer” he lifts the tune yet another step and does a graceful little turn at the top, creating an altogether new melody. And he slips in a triplet—a slight dancing rhythm that someone else picks up on guitar. As the song winds down, it’s not the darkness that lingers but the freshly swaying motion in the music, and that momentary possibility of a “murmur of a prayer.” The man who worships Hank Williams is looking back at “I Saw the Light”—a would-be uplifting gospel number that was really filled with terror. “I saw the light, I saw the light, / No more darkness, no more night,” Hank insisted, in a melody that fell, and you didn’t believe him. Bob declares, with a gallant upward turn, “I don’t even hear a murmur of a prayer.” You don’t believe him, either.

Minneapolis. Dylan has just played in Target Center, downtown. Toward midnight, walking away from the arena, I see a bus and a truck parked by a curb. A group of techies are loading equipment. There is bright electric light from

somewhere—the spotlight of a handheld TV camera, it turns out. People are standing around, smiling sheepishly, as they do in the presence of someone famous. My heart begins to beat a little faster. A man with thick, tangled hair is standing next to the bus, looking awkward as he signs autographs. It's Lyle Lovett, who has just finished playing on the stage around the corner. I walk back to my hotel.

This episode pointed up for me the embarrassment of fandom. I hadn't expected to meet Dylan, but for a moment I thought I was about to see him up close. I felt the bubbling excitement of a fan. I'd been a fan, I suppose, since Dylan's music first hit me, a few years ago, while I was staying in a friend's apartment in Berlin. "Highway 61 Revisited" was one of the few records my friend owned, and after a couple of days I'd fallen for it: the fiercely funny lyrics, the music that was both common and grand, the whole proud, angry, backward take on life. I've since found that my belated conversion to Dylan matches up all too well with the latest research into rock fandom: Daniel Cavicchi, in a disquieting new study, divides fans into categories out of William James's "Varieties of Religious Experience," noting that one kind of fan undergoes a sudden conversion, or "self-surrender," often in a state of isolation or in a foreign land.

Is fandom as foolish as it feels? Or is it the respect owed to the sort of artist who used to be called "great"? Americans have always distrusted the concept of greatness, with its clammy Germanic air. Stardom, the cult of youth and wealth, long ago took its place. Dylan may be many things, but he is not a star: he can't control his image in the public eye. At the same time, he doesn't look, act, or sound like any great man that history records. He presents himself as a travelling musical salesman, like B. B. King or Ralph Stanley or Willie Nelson. He is generally unavailable to the media, but he is in no way a recluse, and reclusiveness is traditionally the zone in which American geniuses reside.

America is no country for old men. Pop culture is a pedophile's delight. What to do

with a middle-aged, well-worn songwriter who gravitates toward the melancholy and the absurd? An “artist,” by contemporary definition, is one who displays himself in art, who shares “felt” emotion and “lived” experience, who meets and greets the audience. (Such was the argument, I think, of “Shakespeare in Love.”) Art becomes Method acting; art, in various senses, becomes pathetic. With Dylan, the emotion has certainly been felt, at one time or another, but it wells up spontaneously in the songs themselves, in the tangle of words and music. Even at his most confessional, he withdraws his personality from the scene—usually by becoming beautifully vague—and lets the music rise. The highest emotion hits late, in the wordless windups of his greatest songs—from “Sad-Eyed Lady” to “Not Dark Yet”—when the band plays through the verse one more time and language sinks into silence. ♦

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