

BOOKS SEPTEMBER 4, 2006 ISSUE

# BOB ON BOB

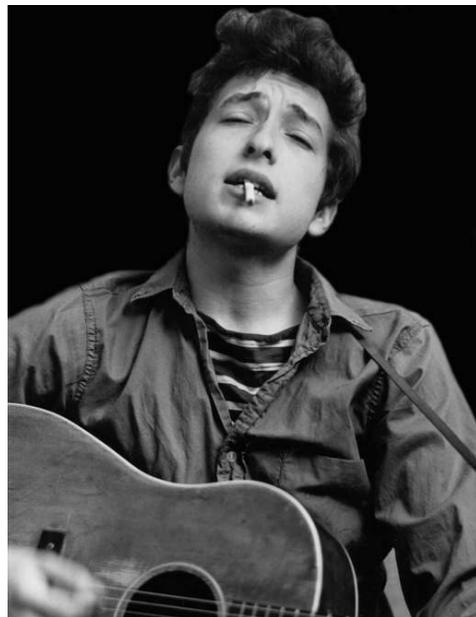
*Dylan talks.*



By Louis Menand

August 27, 2006

“**B**ob Dylan: The Essential Interviews”—I’m not sure those are words that make the heart beat faster. “*Dylan nil a me alienum puto*,” as Terence put it (or would have put it, if he had lived long enough): nothing having to do with Dylan can be alien to me. Still, as an interview subject, Dylan probably ranks a few notches above Elvis, who was one of the all-time worst. The trouble with Elvis was that he had very little to say; he was mainly



*Dylan has said that the records*

concerned about sounding polite. Dylan is rarely concerned about sounding polite, and he says things, but he sometimes makes

*he put out in the mid-sixties come closest to his particular sound.* Photograph from Getty

them up. He also contradicts himself, answers questions with questions, rambles, gets hostile, goes laconic, and generally bewilders. What makes it truly frustrating is that, somewhere in the stream of inconsequence and obstreperousness, there are usually a few nuggets of gold. The nuggets make interviewers think that the other stuff must be a put-on, that Dylan could speak with the tongue of angels all the time if he wanted to, and this makes them press harder, hoping that the next question will break through the misdirection and resistance, and the man in front of them will turn into “Bob Dylan.” Since there is nothing Dylan likes less than being mistaken for “Bob Dylan”—“If I wasn’t Bob Dylan, I’d probably think that Bob Dylan has a lot of answers,” he once said—this is not a productive interview dynamic.

“The Essential Interviews” (Wenner; \$23.95) was assembled by Jonathan Cott, a longtime contributor to *Rolling Stone* and Dylan idolater unabashed. The book collects thirty-one pieces, not all of which are interviews of the Q. & A. type. They include Nat Hentoff’s *New Yorker* Profile of Dylan, from 1964; a precociously observant report by Jay Cocks, for a campus publication, on Dylan’s visit to Kenyon College in 1964; a funny, completely insane piece by A. J. Weberman, the man who is famous for sorting through Dylan’s garbage, which first appeared in the *East Village Other*, in 1971; a selection from Robert Shelton’s biography of Dylan, “No Direction Home,” a work fairly described as sprawling, which came out in 1986; and a deft and atmospheric dramatic dialogue by Sam Shepard, which was published in *Esquire* in 1987. Of the more conventional interviews, seven are from *Rolling Stone* (two of them conducted by Cott), three are from the Los Angeles *Times* (all with Robert Hilburn, the paper’s pop-music editor), and two are from *Playboy*.

The discrepancy between Dylan the interview subject and Dylan the musician is not an artifact of celebrity. It seems to have been part of the deal from the start, and it's almost the first thing that people who knew him mention when they're asked about their initial impression. "I wanted to meet the mind that created all those beautiful words," Judy Collins told David Hajdu for "Positively 4th Street," his delightful group biography of Dylan, Richard Fariña, and Joan and Mimi Baez. "We set something up, and we had coffee, and when it was over, I walked away, thinking, 'The guy's an idiot. He can't make a coherent sentence.'" The first time Joan Baez heard Dylan sing one of his own songs—he played "With God on Our Side" for her—she was floored. "I never thought anything so powerful could come out of that little toad," she said. She proceeded to fall madly in love with him, and bought him a toothbrush.

People who have this experience with Dylan tend to conclude that he is a complicated human being, but the logical conclusion is the opposite one. Shelton, for his biography, interviewed a man named Harry Weber, who knew, and didn't especially like, Dylan in Minneapolis, back in 1959, when Dylan was a student (sort of) at the University of Minnesota. "Dylan is a genius, that's all," Weber said. "He is not more complex than most people; he is simpler." On most subjects that normal people talk about, Dylan seems either not to have views or to have views indistinguishable from the views of everyone else who's hanging around the coffeehouse. His conversation is short and not always sweet. But there is one topic he does like. He is a songwriter. He likes to talk about songs. When interviewers figure this out, the work gets easier.

Of course, many of Dylan's interviewers want to talk about songs, too, Dylan's songs. Often, they try to get him to interpret them, but Dylan does not think that songs were meant to be interpreted, so this line of questioning can lead to some ugly dialectical moments. "What's your new album about?" Dylan was asked during a televised press conference in San Francisco in 1965. "Oh, it's about, uh—just about all kinds of

different things—rats, balloons. They're about the only thing that comes to my mind right now," he said. He was talking about "Blonde on Blonde." It got worse:

*Mr. Dylan, how would you define folk music?*

As a constitutional re-play of mass production.

*Would you call your songs "folk songs"?*

No.

*Are protest songs "folk songs"?*

I guess, if they're a constitutional re-play of mass production.

*Do you prefer songs with a subtle or obvious message?*

With a what???

*A subtle or obvious message?*

Uh—I don't really prefer those kinds of songs at all—"message"—you mean like—what songs with a message?

*Well, like "Eve of Destruction" and things like that.*

Do I prefer that to what?

*I don't know, but your songs are supposed to have a subtle message.*

Subtle message???

*Well, they're supposed to.*

Where'd you hear that?

As the exchange suggests, Dylan was a put-down artist in the early years of his fame. Some of his best songs from the period are put-downs of a scorched-earth type: “Don’t Think Twice, It’s All Right,” “It Ain’t Me, Babe,” “Positively 4th Street,” “Ballad of a Thin Man,” “Like a Rolling Stone,” “Just Like a Woman”—not works that exude the usual pop sentiments. In the infamous D. A. Pennebaker documentary about Dylan’s 1965 British tour, “Don’t Look Back,” Dylan is seen turning poor Donovan into a quivering bowl of Jell-O. You feel that you would not have wanted to get on the wrong side of this guy. The indifference to other people’s sensibilities contributed to the belief, which has shadowed Dylan for much of his career, that he was an opportunist.

**D**ylan started out as an acolyte of Woody Guthrie. He arrived in New York City in the winter of 1960-1961, on a mission, he said, to meet Guthrie, who was by then in a hospital in New Jersey, undergoing a slow death from Huntington’s chorea. Dylan took the bus to visit him frequently, and played songs for him. Dylan was what one Village folkie called a “neo-ethnic”: he sang songs by people like Guthrie and Leadbelly, imitating their voice and their sound. And he enhanced this folk persona by spreading make-believe accounts of his past: he told people (including reporters) that he was brought up in Gallup, New Mexico; that he had travelled through South Dakota, Kansas, Texas, Mexico, and other places, some of which he had never set foot in; that he had run away from home many times; that he had worked on and off for six years in a carnival. It wasn’t until *Newsweek* ran a nasty story on him, in 1963, that the truth began to come out—that he was a bar-mitzvah boy named Robert Zimmerman from a middle-class family in Hibbing, Minnesota, the birthplace of Roger Maris.

Dylan was nineteen and very raw when he began playing in Village coffeehouses. By all accounts, though, he was a fantastically quick study. He picked up songs and

techniques from everyone. By the fall of 1961, he had scored a rave review in the *Times* and a recording contract—not with one of the small labels, like Folkways, where most downtown musicians recorded, but with Columbia, where he was signed by the legendary John Hammond, the man who “discovered” Billie Holiday. His first album, “Bob Dylan,” was released in March, 1962. It sold poorly (though it cost only about four hundred dollars to produce). People at Columbia started referring to Dylan as “Hammond’s folly.” The second album, “The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan,” released in May, 1963, was a different story. “Blowin’ in the Wind,” one of Dylan’s earliest original songs, was on that album. Peter, Paul, and Mary recorded it (their manager, the formidable Albert Grossman, who had created them, was also Dylan’s manager), and they released it that summer as a single. It was one of the year’s biggest hits, and Dylan became famous as a writer of protest songs: “Masters of War,” “Oxford Town,” “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll,” “Only a Pawn in Their Game,” “When the Ship Comes In,” “The Times They Are A-Changin’.”

Protest songs were a natural outgrowth of the folk revival, in the tradition of Guthrie and Seeger’s Almanac Singers. Rock and roll was not. Dylan’s big leap, the stuff of much myth and misinformation, was the one he made in 1965, when he went electric, and released, in a fourteen-month period, three albums without peers: “Bringing It All Back Home” (March, 1965), “Highway 61 Revisited” (August), and the double album “Blonde on Blonde” (May, 1966). The myth—based on stories that audiences booed his electric sets during his British tour in the spring of 1966 and at the Newport Folk Festival the previous summer—is that Dylan betrayed the folk-music movement by switching to a more commercial rock sound. A lot of critical labor has gone into proving that Dylan was not selling out but pursuing the road of musical correctness.

The labor is misplaced, because there is no road of musical correctness. The notion that there is was created by people like Hammond, who believed that American

popular music arose from the untutored self-expression of African-Americans. Hammond's first enthusiasm was jazz, which he considered an essentially African-American musical idiom, and about which he observed, "The best of this art is usually simple, for when technique and virtuosity get in the way of real feeling the result is always dire." Hammond thought that performers like Louis Armstrong and Cab Calloway (because of their "spurious showmanship") and Duke Ellington (because of his detachment from the troubles of what Hammond called "his race and original class") were inauthentic. (Hammond is the subject of a genial and enjoyable new biography by Dunstan Priar, "The Producer: John Hammond and the Soul of American Music"; Farrar, Straus & Giroux; \$27.)

Some fans did boo Dylan in 1965, but the reaction seems to have been a good deal less ideological than it was later taken to be. The problem at Newport, where the Paul Butterfield Blues Band and the Chambers Brothers also played with electric instruments, was largely an inadequate sound system. Dylan and his band played loud, and people couldn't hear the words. In any event, the music he performed wasn't new. "Like a Rolling Stone" had already come out; three weeks after Newport, it went to No. 2. In that month, August of 1965, forty-eight versions of Dylan's songs were produced by other artists. If there was a revolution, it was pretty painless.

The most credible judgment on the change in Dylan's music is Dave Van Ronk's. Van Ronk was a kingpin in the Village folk scene. He was from Queens, a jazz buff who switched to folk before the folk revival was even a gleam in Albert Grossman's eye. Though he never had a big hit, he remained traditional: he stuck with folk music and the blues. Many Village musicians resented Dylan's success; unlike most of them, Van Ronk had a reason to. Dylan stole his arrangement of "House of the Rising Sun," and put it on his first album, before Van Ronk had a chance to record it himself. Van Ronk dropped the song from his set because he got sick of people asking him to play Dylan's

“House of the Rising Sun.” (He noted with some satisfaction that a couple of years later, after the Animals had a hit with the song, Dylan dropped it from *his* set, because people kept asking him to play “that Animals song.”) But Van Ronk was a big spirit, and in his posthumously published memoir, written with Elijah Wald, “The Mayor of MacDougal Street”—a wise and very funny book; in some ways a great book—he had this to say:

I thought that going electric was a logical direction for Bobby to take. I did not care for all of his new stuff, by any means, but some of it was excellent, and it was a reasonable extension of what he had done up to that point. I knew perfectly well that none of us was a true “folk” artist. We were professional performers, and while we liked a lot of folk music, we all liked a lot of other things as well. Working musicians are very rarely purists. The purists are out in the audience kibitzing, not onstage trying to make a living. And Bobby was absolutely right to ignore them.

Nothing that Dylan did to get from Hibbing to “Blonde on Blonde” was scandalous, or even eccentric. He happened to come of musical age at a moment when rock and roll was moribund—Frankie Avalon stuff, songs for high-school sock hops. If you were serious, you played folk songs. And to become a folkie, unless you actually *were* from Oklahoma, you invented a persona. The whole folk revival was make-believe, anyway: it was urban kids trying to sound like hillbillies and sharecroppers. One of the folk-music veterans when Dylan came on the scene was Ramblin’ Jack Elliott, a singer with a cowboy twang who had once hoboed around with Guthrie himself. Ramblin’ Jack was the stage name of one Elliot Adnopoz, a Jewish kid from Flatbush whose father was a prominent surgeon. Cambridge was another center of the folk revival—it’s where Baez got her start, in the coffeehouses around Harvard Square. (She was a B.U.

dropout.) There was a bluegrass group in that scene, composed mostly of college students, who called themselves the Charles River Valley Boys. Artifice was the price of authenticity.

When Dylan left Minnesota, he had no idea that folk was the royal road to anything. If you were a folk singer in New York, you played in coffeehouses and passed around a basket for tips. No one got rich imitating Woody Guthrie. When Dylan cut his first records, though, folk was just becoming the ascendant pop musical genre. Baez's first album, "Joan Baez," had been a huge hit; released in November, 1960, it stayed on the *Billboard* charts for almost three years. Hammond didn't sign Dylan on a whim; he signed him (as Prial strangely neglects to say, but as Hajdu makes clear in "Positively 4th Street") because he had had a chance to sign Baez and lost her to Vanguard. His reputation for picking winners was in jeopardy; folk was hot, and he needed a folk singer.

In the early nineteen-sixties, the Weavers, Pete Seeger, the Kingston Trio, Harry Belafonte, and Peter, Paul, and Mary were heard everywhere. (We had all their records in my house when I was growing up. I'm not sure we could have said what the Rock Island Line *was*, exactly, but we knew that it was a mighty good road. It was the road to ride. We also owned, and regularly consulted, the "Fireside Book of Folk Songs," a big seller.) Guitar sales were running to a million units a year. At the height of the boom, in 1963, more than two hundred albums of folk music were released. The standard folk sound was the Seeger-Baez sound: earnest, reverent, acoustic, and completely sexless, everything Elvis was not. Dylan's music, in this context, had a snarly, disrespectful edge that cut. (We did not listen to Dylan in my house.) Plus, a lot of his songs were funny. Pete and Joan were not about funny. Rock and roll, meanwhile, was nowhere. Elvis was making albums like "Blue Hawaii."

Then, in February, 1964, the Beatles came to America, and rock and roll rose from the

dead. The No. 1 album when the Beatles landed in New York was “The Singing Nun” —a virginal sound from an actual virgin! But, within minutes of the conclusion of the Beatles’ performance on “The Ed Sullivan Show,” the acoustic sound was pop history. The first time Dylan heard the Beatles, he was in a car somewhere and they came on the radio. He almost fell out the window. He loved them, and he must have seen, alert student that he was, what he could do with the electric sound. He pushed ahead, and the Beatles stayed right in step. At the same time that Dylan was putting out his first three electric albums, between March, 1965, and May, 1966, the Beatles released “Help” (August, 1965), “Rubber Soul” (December, 1965), and “Revolver” (August, 1966). It was a good time to be alive.

**D**ylan wasn’t thinking about the direction of popular music in 1964, and he wasn’t thinking about the direction of the Zeitgeist, either. “I had very little in common with and knew even less about a generation that I was supposed to be the voice of,” he says in his remarkable autobiography, “Chronicles: Volume I” (2004), and you believe him. He was, as usual, thinking only about his sound. It is always the sound that interests Dylan about a song, and one of the reasons that he is only semi-articulate in interviews is that you can’t really describe a sound. It was Guthrie’s sound that attracted him, not Guthrie’s lyrics. When he heard Guthrie for the first time, he explains in the autobiography, “a voice in my head said, ‘So this is the game.’” It was a lonesome sound; he knew he could get it. But Dylan also liked the Kingston Trio, ex-college students from California with short hair and peppermint-striped shirts (a taste very much shared by the music lovers in my house). He liked Judy Garland singing “The Man That Got Away” and Frank Sinatra singing “Ebb Tide.” He loved “Stardust” and “Moon River.” He didn’t “come out of” any tradition. He was a magpie. The biggest inspiration for his songwriting was a Kurt Weill song, “Pirate Jenny,” from “The Threepenny Opera.” He heard it when he was waiting to meet his girlfriend,

Suze Rotolo, who was working on a production of the play on Christopher Street. (“The Threepenny Opera” was followed by an anthology production called “Brecht on Brecht,” which may have been the inspiration for the title of “Blonde on Blonde.”)

You can’t find the road that gets you from “Hell Hound on My Trail” and “This Land Is Your Land” through “Pirate Jenny” to “Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands.” Musicians don’t follow roads. Most of them have much more eclectic musical interests than their fans do. Elijah Wald (Van Ronk’s co-author), in his indispensable revisionist history of the blues, “Escaping the Delta,” points out that Muddy Waters had more songs in his repertoire by Gene Autry, the Singing Cowboy, than by any blues musician; that Louis Armstrong’s favorite band was Guy Lombardo’s Royal Canadians; and that Robert Johnson played Bing Crosby songs. “If I had only one artist to listen to through eternity,” Chuck Berry said, “it would be Nat Cole.”

That mid-sixties sound, the sound of “Blonde on Blonde” and “Rubber Soul,” did not last. In 1978, when Dylan had just completed his second great three-album phase—“Blood on the Tracks” (1974), “Desire” (1976), and “Street Legal” (1978)—he was interviewed by Ron Rosenbaum for *Playboy*. Whatever else you want to say about the magazine, *Playboy* did give great interview, a product of stylish interviewers and brilliant editing. Rosenbaum gets off to a dicey beginning—“Besides being a singer, a poet, and now a filmmaker, you’ve also been called a visionary. Do you recall any visionary experiences while you were growing up?”—but, eventually, he gets around to the subject of Dylan’s sound: “The closest I ever got to the sound I hear in my mind was on individual bands in the ‘Blonde on Blonde’ album,” Dylan says. “It’s that thin, that wild mercury sound. It’s metallic and bright gold, with whatever that conjures up. That’s my particular sound.”

*Was that wild mercury sound in “I Want You”?*

Yeah, it was in “I Want You.” It was in a lot of that stuff. It was in the album before that, too.

*“Highway 61 Revisited”?*

Yeah. Also in “Bringing It All Back Home.” That’s the sound I’ve always heard. . . .

*The period when you came out with “Highway 61” must have been exciting.*

Those were exciting times. We were doing it before anybody knew we would—or could. We didn’t know what it was going to turn out to be. Nobody thought of it as folk-rock at the time. There were some people involved in it like The Byrds, and I remember Sonny and Cher and the Turtles and the early Rascals. It began coming out on the radio. I mean, I had a couple of hits in a row. That was the most I ever had in a row—two. The top ten was filled with that kind of sound—the Beatles, too—and it was exciting, those days were exciting. It was the sound of the streets. It still is. I symbolically hear that sound wherever I am.

*You hear the sound of the street?*

That ethereal twilight light, you know. It’s the sound of the street with the sunrays, the sun shining down at a particular time, on a particular type of building. A particular type of people walking on a particular type of street. It’s an outdoor sound that drifts even into open windows that you can hear. The sound of bells and distant railroad trains and arguments in apartment buildings and the clinking of silverware and knives and forks and beating with leather straps. It’s all—it’s all there. Just lack of a

jackhammer, you know.

*You mean if a jackhammer were—*

Yeah, no jackhammer sounds, no airplane sounds. All pretty natural sounds. It's water, you know water trickling down a brook. It's light flowing through the . . .

*Late-afternoon light?*

No, it's usually the crack of dawn. Music filters out to me in the crack of dawn.

*The "jingle jangle morning"?*

Right.

There's not much to add to that.

**V**an Ronk thought that Dylan was sloppy, that he wrote his songs too fast. Even in Dylan's best songs (I know that my life will not be worth much after these words appear in print), there are lines that are truly lame. "And the words that are used/For to get the ship confused/Will not be understood as they're spoken" is not even lyrical, forget about the sense. "Ballad of a Thin Man" does not profit from the verse about the one-eyed midget shouting the word "NOW." ("And you say, 'For what reason?'/And he says, 'How?'/And you say, 'What does this mean?'/And he screams back, 'You're a cow/Give me some milk/Or else go home.'") Maybe it makes some kind of sense as a proto-hip-hop rant.) Dylan's words—he has said as much—are often placeholders, devices to fit the melody and fill out the line, which is why dutiful efforts to extract a message or a meaning are largely beside the point. If you want a message,

buy a newspaper. “Songs are songs,” Dylan says in one of his early interviews. “I don’t believe in expecting too much out of any one thing.”

Sloppy or not, Dylan is astonishingly prolific; he has written more than five hundred songs. Most of them are lovely (or angry or joyous or wickedly sly or all of those things together). Many of them are unforgettable. (A new album, Dylan’s forty-fourth, called “Modern Times,” is being released this month. The songs are simple riffs, with laid-back arrangements, and all feature prominently Dylan’s gorgeous late-period croak. It sounds a little the way “Buena Vista Social Club” might have sounded if Cuba had been the birthplace of the blues.) The only comparable pop songbook from the era is Lennon-McCartney—and there were two of them. Dylan is also, despite the silly things people said about his voice when he started out, one of pop music’s greatest vocalists. His chief weakness is a tendency to shout, particularly in performance (and he is, let us say, an inconsistent performer); but, when he is in control of the instrument, no one’s voice, with that kind of music, is more textured or more beautiful.

Ninety per cent of musicianship is phrasing, and the easiest way to appreciate Dylan’s genius for phrasing is to listen to him, on bootlegs or on the late albums of traditional songs, perform songs that he didn’t write—“Folsom Prison Blues,” or “People Get Ready,” or “Froggie Went A-Courtin’.” He gets it all. When my children were little, we used to have a cassette around the house of songs for kids by pop stars, on which Dylan did “This Old Man” (“With a knick-knack paddywhack, give the dog a bone”). That performance had the weight of the whole world in it. I listened to it a hundred times and never got tired of it. You can refute Hegel, Yeats said, but not the Song of Sixpence. ♦

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