

## Explaining Pictures to a Dead Hare: Looking Back on Bob Dylan

All song lyrics by Bob Dylan are copied from the texts available on the Bob Dylan website:

<http://www.bobdylan.com>

### 1. In The Year(s) of Bob Dylan ...

Early one morning  
the sun was shining  
I was laying in bed

I woke up one morning, maybe it was back in 2005, and with no special announcement, no special occasion, and no clear evidence of planning it seemed to be the Year of Bob Dylan. It was not even clear when it began. The calendar now reads 2008 and it is not clear when it will end. Like a movie already in progress, I came in to find the theater dark and images flashing on the wall. At this point in time, I don't even remember the order in which the images appeared.

The order matters less than the sudden glut of availability. What was not there for so many decades is now on the market. As a result, the past is present in ways it had not been for decades. A collective Old Man was re-playing his past, talking to his collective Self. *Do you remember?* these pieces of evidence seem to ask. Do you want to try to understand, do you want to see what it looked like and hear what it sounded like? And for those of you who couldn't possibly remember a time before you were born, do you want to know where this collective Self came from?

I was 15 years old, standing in the music store after a trumpet lesson, waiting for a ride home, staring at the poster pinned to the wall advertising new releases from Columbia Records. There's a picture of a skinny young man standing on a stage with his harmonica rack and guitar under the title *Bob Dylan In Concert*. The announced recording was never released. And then the piece of evidence disappeared.

Then one morning, there it was. *The Bootleg Series Vol. 6: Bob Dylan Live 1964, Concert at Philharmonic Hall*, a full concert recording from a period that previously existed only in the memory of the audience that saw Dylan in those three short years when he was the Wunderkind folk singer of Greenwich Village. Who was waiting to hear this evening? Who wanted to read Sean Wilentz, now a Professor of History (slash American Studies) at Princeton University, whose family ran the Eighth Street Bookstore a few blocks north of

Washington Square, describing the event? Sean Wilentz's father and uncle ran the store, co-published a series of poetry books with LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) under the name Totem/Corinth, books that in retrospect seem like gems of early work by great American poets – Philip Whalen, Paul Blackburn, Gary Snyder, Edward Dorn – who all led or still live long and complicated lives.

I am thinking about The War on a spring afternoon in 1969 during a weekend foray into the Village from the Westchester suburbs. I walk past the NYU houses of Henry James' Washington Square to the Eighth Street Bookstore to find *Planet News* from Allen Ginsberg.

I walk into Village Voice, the English-language bookstore in Paris, and there is an enormous book titled *Dylan's Vision of Sin*. Many books proposing to tell the story of Dylan's life or the meaning hidden in his songs had appeared before, but this one seemed to be different. The biographical note about the author, Christopher Ricks, informs the reader that "in 2004, he was elected the Oxford Professor of Poetry". Christopher Ricks is a man who has edited the work of Alfred Lord Tennyson, A.E. Housman, T.S. Eliot and written books on John Keats and Samuel Beckett. His attention span had previously covered the Romantics to the Early Post-Modern. Now he was extending himself into the Contemporary. If this man was writing about Bob Dylan's songs – and that was the sole subject of his book – then these songs must be English literature.

All this confluence of back-filling the past and literary analysis might have been sheer coincidence if, on what seems like the very same morning, *Chronicles, Volume One* had not also appeared. Dylan himself was writing about his past, creating a memoir about how he became the character that wrote and performed the songs for which he is now well known. The writing makes it clear that in his seventh decade he has very clear memories. He maintains tremendous authority and control over these memories, in much the same way he maintains control over his recordings, films, paintings, and private affairs, and uses them to some purpose. The chronology of the narrative is both precise and fragmented, leaping across decades to describe both an origin and a process. The weather visible out the window of an apartment on a particular evening is quite clear. Exactly what preceded or followed that meteorological event is not. The books pulled by an autodidact from a friend's library, a blend of Classical Greek history and German military technique, are described in some detail. The subject of the narrative is the creation of a persona, an account of the influences he wove to create a body of work that continues to tour the world in the form of

Christopher Ricks,  
*Dylan's Vision of Sin, Ecco/*  
*Harper Collins, 2005*

Bob Dylan,  
*Chronicles: Volume One, Simon*  
*& Schuster, 2004*

Bob Dylan,  
*The Bootleg Series, Vol. 6: Bob*  
*Dylan Live 1964 - Concert at*  
*Philharmonic Hall, notes by Sean*  
*Wilentz, Columbia Legacy (CD),*  
*2004*

a performance artist and inhabit the minds inside a million heads.

The momentum continued as a decade-nostalgia for the hopeful revolutionary 1960s began to spread (it is interesting to note how we like to remember revolutionary times as hopeful rather than desperate). With a sense of timing that could only have been organized by an adroit book editor, Greil Marcus' extended essay, *Like A Rolling Stone, Bob Dylan at the Crossroads*, appeared to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of Dylan's anomalous popular single. Marcus does his best to recreate this summer of 1965 event – the recording, release, and ascent to the top of the American pop music charts of “Like A Rolling Stone” where it still resides, firmly lodged in the granite edifice of Classic 60s Rock playlists. Marcus paints a portrait of a long poem, a text neither he nor anyone else has ever seen (another piece of evidence withheld), confronting a recording session with ambitious young musicians trying to discover what they should sound like, a play managed by those invisible directors of creation, the session producer and artist's manager who, like the publisher-editor or the gallerist and art critic, illuminate and insinuate their presence into what we see as the final work.

The foundations of this past were more firmly established when *No Direction Home* was broadcast in the US and England and quickly published on DVD. The documentary tells the story of Bob Dylan's life from childhood in Minnesota to his time in New York's Greenwich Village music scene to his electric band tours that ended in 1966. So once again we are presented with a wrap-up that ends with a year an even number of decades (four) in the past. Dylan appears in interviews, looking like he does in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, describing this carefully circumscribed part of his past. He is forcefully supported by footage of performances, press conferences, and the brilliantly captured moments in parties, hotel rooms, and limousines filmed by D.A. Pennebaker. His current reflections on the past are remarkably cogent and clear. The same can be said of all the people who participated in this conventional exercise in oral history, from Dave Van Ronk to Susie Rotollo to Paul Nelson to Tony Glover to Joan Baez to Allen Ginsberg to Izzy Young to John Cohen to Bob Neuwirth. Everyone was there and, unlike certain Presidents of the United States, all have a clear memory. Everyone knows what part of the drama they witnessed.

*No Direction Home*, made in 2005 and broadcast in 2006, is the past framed by the future. Allen Ginsberg had died in 1997, Dave Van Ronk in 2002. The interview footage must have been carefully gathered for over a decade by Bob Dylan's organization. Martin Scorsese is credited as director

Greil Marcus,  
Like a Rolling Stone:  
Bob Dylan at the Crossroads,  
Faber & Faber, 2005

Martin Scorsese,  
Bob Dylan - No Direction Home,  
Paramount, 2005

and David Tedeschi as the editor. No one is given credit for writing the script.

On the money side, the film's release is prominently sponsored by the iPod creationists of Apple Computer, eagerly seeking to become the earphone conduit to everyone's musical consumption. The executive producer lineup includes Paul G. Allen, the other person who made an enormous fortune from Microsoft Corporation. Allen's personal interests include enshrining Jimi Hendrix, creating the Experience Music Project – the museum in Seattle that displays his collection of famous guitars – and most recently bankrolling private space travel while morphing the extra space in his Frank Gehry building into The Science Fiction Museum and Hall of Fame.

This frame does not intrude into the picture itself. The documentary sucks you in again and again with wonderful leaps from historical footage to concerts, surprising monologues confronting television broadcasts. Scorsese's direction resulted in a documentary with a wonderful momentum and edgy style.

It's success has spawned the appearance of more video evidence. In 2007, Murray Lerner's *The Other Side of the Mirror: Bob Dylan at the Newport Folk Festival* in 2007 appeared, to fill in the pieces that did not make the Scorsese cut of Dylan performing in Newport in the early 1960s. A second DVD release of Pennebaker's *Don't Look Back* now includes concert footage omitted from the original film. Recordings and films of Bob Dylan's performance in the 1960s is more available now than it was forty years ago.

Murray Lerner,  
The Other Side of the Mirror:  
Live at Newport Folk Festival  
1963-1965, Sony, 2007

D.A. Pennebaker,  
Bob Dylan - Don't Look Back  
(1965 Tour Deluxe Edition),  
New Video Group, 2007

## 2. ...Sifting The Evidence...

Christopher Rick's *Dylan's Vision of Sin* is made up primarily of long discursive essays about individual songs. He tends to focus on the way Dylan uses words – rhyme, rhythm, allusion – with frequent descents into the enormous etymological well of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and often enough this is informative. He goes on for several pages about the phrase “Times change”.

Times change

The times change

The times are changin'

The times are a-changin'

The times they are a-changin'

For the times they are a-changin'

To which he adds, “The acorn has grown into a royal oak” (260). When the song was popular I can't recall anyone asking why Dylan used this odd archaic sounding language. Why does the clipped ending of *changin'*

seem more authoritative than the full pronunciation of the word? Why add another vowel before it? Why add this pronoun? If you think about it too long, it sounds like some immigrant who thinks in his mother tongue and puts the thought into English – “For the dinner, she’s a-ready”.

The major value of Ricks’ book lies not in his erudite thesis of medieval sins and virtues. This thesis is used primarily to structure his own language play built upon Dylan’s lyrics. The great value is in his second chapter, “Songs, Poems, Rhymes”. He does an illuminating job of covering the value of rhyme – a topic all but absent in most discussions of American poetry – and he does it from a completely Brit Lit point of view. So the continuum of John Milton, John Keats, Robert Burns, Alfred Tennyson, and Gerard Manley Hopkins with the writing of Dylan is something he can acknowledge rather than construct. He simply finds it in the language. He does not have to provide a trail of influence, though he does his best to cull what he can from Dylan’s interviews.

The interview published in newspapers and magazines, transcribed from radio or television, had been the only text to refer to outside the song lyrics before the Year of Bob Dylan began in earnest. Professor Ricks must have had to rely on his own collection of copies and clippings. The bound collections followed his work, if not his thesis – *Younger Than That Now: The Collected Interviews with Bob Dylan* edited by James Ellison in the same year (but too late to be cited by Ricks), followed by *Bob Dylan the Essential Interviews* edited by Jonathan Cott in 2006.

The only thing I remember about the interviews when they were happening early in Dylan’s career was his answer to the question “can you tell me what the song ‘Desolation Row’ is about?” To which Dylan replied “About fifteen minutes.” I am quoting that from memory and might have it wrong. The evasion seemed masterful at the time, and belongs to another subject, his ability to play with people’s expectations. I don’t recall anyone asking him about rhyme. Ricks manages to point out that Dylan mastered the art of writing songs and songs are made from words organized into patterns held together by rhythm and rhymes.

Rhymed poetry had disappeared from serious American verse by the beginning of the Modern. Whitman had left it, Dickinson had dispersed it, and both were appreciated as precursors, prophets of what was to come. Ezra Pound dismissed Amy Lowell for using it. Modern masters from W.C. Williams to Charles Olson and Robert Creeley had explored a different way of making verse – tuned to an irregular music, one part rhetoric and one part speech. Pound found music in Provencal, Williams in American speech, Olson in

Hesiod and Creeley in pure tension. Allen Ginsberg began with the same retro-rhyme his father, Louis Ginsberg, had used and then fused biblical and jazz rhythms into a music of emotional thought rhetoric, an imitation of spontaneous language, what you thought your thoughts might sound like if you could hear them.

All these techniques were different from the music of songs. Ricks largely ignores the possibility that Dylan learned how to master song writing from the not-at-all literary oral traditions of America. Because of this, his book is not particularly accurate but he is refreshing. His readings provide a means to appreciate the subtlety of how Dylan uses internal rhyme, the surprising juxtaposition of end rhymes, in combination with bursts of syllables to stretch or shrink a line within a repeating form.

His essay on “Love Minus Zero / No Limit” (1964) displays most of his own virtues and vices. This song-poem he classifies under the virtue of Temperance. He tells us that W.H. Auden once said there were two kinds of poems: the ones whose titles you could guess and the ones whose title was a surprise. This is one of those songs whose title could not be guessed by reciting the lyrics.

My love she speaks like **silence**,  
Without ideals or **violence**,  
She doesn’t have to say she’s faithful,  
Yet she’s true, like ice, like **fire**.  
People carry roses,  
Make promises by the **hours**,  
My love she laughs like the **flowers**,  
Valentines can’t **buy her**.

The opening rhyme is a strong one, and the listener starts off with a quiet shock of contradictions. While *silence* and *violence* are a complete rhyme, their meaning offers a remarkable juxtaposition. Ricks finds echoes in a gently rocking verse by William Blake (*Silently, invisibly*) and a couplet in Robert Lowell’s translation of Racine’s *Phèdre*.

In the dime stores and bus **stations**,  
People talk of **situations**,  
Read books, repeat **quotations**,  
Draw conclusions on the **wall**.  
Some speak of the *future*,  
My love she speaks softly,  
She knows there’s no success like *failure*  
And that failure’s no success **at all**.

He notes an important part of Dylan’s technique, visible in the way clear end-rhymes are marked in **bold** above, along with an irregular use of front alliteration rhyme marked in *italic*. We have one case (future, failure) which combines

James Ellison,  
*Younger Than That Now: The Collected Interviews with Bob Dylan*, Da Capo Press, 2004.

Jonathan Cott,  
*Bob Dylan the Essential Interviews*, Wenner 2006.

both techniques. An unrhymed end word (softly) stands out in the patterns woven by the verse. He notes the way the poet carefully defines “my love” in negative terms, by what she does not do or is not, and he finds echoes in the drama of Cordelia unable to speak about the love she has for her father in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. He quotes from the *Book of Daniel* to recount the narrative which is source to the common phrase “the writing on the wall” and points out this Biblical allusion in the uncommon “draw conclusions on the wall”.

The cloak and dagger **dangles**,  
Madams light the **candles**.  
In ceremonies of the horsemen,  
Even the pawn must hold a **grudge**.  
Statues made of match sticks,  
Crumble into one **another**,  
My love winks, she does not **bother**,  
She knows too much to argue or **to judge**.

The bridge at midnight **trembles**,  
The country doctor **rambles**,  
Bankers’ nieces seek perfection,  
Expecting all the gifts that wise men **bring**.  
The wind howls like a hammer,  
The night blows cold and *rainy*,  
My love she’s like some *raven*  
At my window with a broken **wing**.

The puzzling and seductive logic of the verses seem to rapidly move from one frame of reference to another. But Ricks stays fixed on the *Book of Daniel* and uses it to add a conjectured double meaning to the “wise men” allusion. The gifts that wise men bring would first bring to mind the Three Magi. So wealthy children (banker’s nieces) expecting to be treated like the baby Jesus carries a certain feeling of profane materialism. But in *Daniel* the wise men are the false prophets of the Babylonian king, unable to read the Hebrew letters on the wall. Yet when it comes to resolving the powerful unrhymed “hammer” and the closing image of the raven, his certainty dissolves.

This is another of the occasions in my experience of Dylan [...] when I don’t know what to think, or what to feel, or quite how to argue and to judge. For there is at the end of the song what feels like a curious rounding on the woman. She has been evoked throughout the song in a way that is on the face of it incompatible with her being like a raven with a broken wing. Why is she like some raven with a broken wing? Because she has now been hit by a hammer? (300)

At which point Ricks slips from wings of a raven to Henry James and *Wings of the Dove*. Now, when I think about the

wind howling like a hammer, I can hear hammering rain and raining blows and echoes of Pete Seeger’s “If I Had A Hammer” hammering out justice. And for any American who had to read Edgar Allan Poe through years of English classes, there is only one raven at a window. Dylan lived in Poe’s old neighborhood, literally if not figuratively. And literally, if not metaphorically, the raven is a very impressive North American bird, a dark giant you might encounter in the woods or on a deserted highway, the trickster of the Pacific Northwest. A raven is black, as in raven hair. But no matter what you hear or think, you are always left with a raven – not an eagle or an angel – with a broken wing. It also happens to be the only time Dylan ever used the word raven in a song. And that’s how the movie ends.

There is no real value in trying to correct Ricks’ selection of associations. There is real value in letting his technique open up your mind and see how the machinery of a Dylan song works. I can describe one verse of one song – “Tangled Up In Blue” (1973) – the one that came to mind when I began this essay, using this Ricksian appreciation of rhythm and rhyme.

Early one **mornin’** the sun was **shinin’**,  
I was **layin’** in **bed**  
Wond’rin’ if she’d changed at all  
If her hair was still **red**.

Her folks they said our lives together  
Sure was gonna be **rough**  
They never did like Mama’s homemade dress  
Papa’s bankbook wasn’t big **enough**.

And I was standin’ on the side of the road  
Rain fallin’ on my **shoes**  
Heading out for the East Coast  
Lord knows I’ve paid some **dues** gettin’ **through**,  
Tangled up in **blue**

Without understanding who is speaking, where the speaker is, or what he is doing, the rhymes communicate a meta-structure, a high-level shape offered to memory and apprehension. *Mornin’* is *shinin’*, something is *red*. Its *rough* and something’s not *enough*. These *shoes* have paid *dues* to get *through* in *blue*. The listener (or the memorist or singer trying to re-create the song) hears the internal and end rhymes first. Then, the rhymes are pushed and pulled by the elastic rhythms. The third lines have the same four-stress rhythm packed into or pulled from a range of syllables. The first of the third-line structures is compressed by reducing three syllables (won-der-ing) to two (won-drin) and by slurring

two words into a single stress (if-she). The second is elongated by stressing a two syllable word (Ma-ma's) followed by a two syllable unstressed word (home-made). The third is tightened even further with single syllables for each stress and nothing between East and Coast.

This technique had been mastered ten years before. Look how the tuneless rhythms of "Subterranean Homesick Blues" (1964) are intricately pieced together:

Johnny's in the **basement**  
Mixing up the medicine  
I'm on the **pavement**  
Thinking about the **government**

The man in the trench coat  
Badge out, **laid off**  
Says he's got a **bad cough**  
Wants to get it **paid off**

This is LANGUAGE poetry.

Basement=pavement=government; laid off=bad cough=paid off. The words are the thing itself. They take up the space, they bounce, they grow from some mysterious activity.

At the same time, it is a syncopated 4-4 waltz rhythm: 1-3-4, 2-3-4. Then, without a breath of warning, in comes a refrain you haven't even heard yet:

Look out **kid**  
It's somethin' you **did**

And the 4-4 LANGUAGE waltz continues, this time with a new rhythm of end rhymes: 1-2-4, 2-4.

God knows **when**  
But you're doin' it **again**  
You better duck down the alley way  
Lookin' for a new **friend**

The man in the coon-skin cap  
In the big **pen**  
Wants eleven dollar bills  
You only got **ten**

Where Ricks excels at riffing on the literary dimensions of verse, Greil Marcus has a true gift for describing music with words. He does his best to generate flashes of insight by mixing the waters of American history and the oils of popular culture. He reminds us that before the success of "Like A Rolling Stone" no one in show business would have imagined an audience listening to a pop song that went on for more than six minutes. I had the pleasure to listen to Marcus read a selection from the book, his description of Michael Bloomfield's guitar playing. Marcus' prose conveys the sharp, speeding energy Bloomfield brought to the moment captured

in the recording. But ultimately he is not able to reveal any new dimension of the song/recording itself. It was a turning point in a never-ending series of turning points, neither the high point nor the low point of a literary and musical career that has insinuated itself into so many corners of so many rooms that events in this particular recording studio do not stand out against the sky for very long. Perhaps it is a testimony to Dylan's own sense of taste that the longer piece of writing the song lyrics were drawn from has not been published in a manner similar to Eliot's pre-edited "Waste Land", Ginsberg's typescript of "Howl", or Rimbaud's unaltered notebooks.

But Marcus had already made the greatest contribution to the Year of Bob Dylan almost ten years before it began. Dylan's withdrawal from performance in 1966 generated a curious form of intellectual larceny, the bootleg recordings. His audience began to publish and circulate unauthorized copies of anything they could get their hands on. If he wouldn't sell it to the love-hate audience, they knew how to steal it. His desire and ability to repel and attract his audience was another dimension of his art. The most compelling of these unauthorized recordings was known as *The Basement Tapes*.

In 1997, Marcus published *Invisible Republic, Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes* (later retitled *The Old Weird America*), a remarkable blend of music criticism and social history. The subject was the time (then thirty years before) when Dylan had recorded a group of songs in a basement studio, away from the commercial music business, for purposes that must have included recreation, therapy, and selling them to other groups to record. The book was about the secret history of the musical sources Dylan built on, the recording of various styles of popular ethnic music in the 1930s, and the transmission of that music to a new generation. The vehicle of that transmission had been a set of LP recordings, published in New York in the 1950s, themselves culled from discarded commercial 78 recordings found in second-hand record stores. The year *Invisible Republic* appeared, Smithsonian Folkways re-released, now as a set of six CDs, *The Anthology of American Folk Music* edited by Harry Smith containing this major source for Dylan and the musicians he had come of age with in New York. Harry Smith's role as a counter-folklorist was handsomely and profoundly revealed, further enhanced by thoughtful essays published with the new Smithsonian package. Marcus' book created an audience for the music, and the music helped explain the book. A few years before this (1992-93), Dylan produced two excellent collections of folk songs, ending what

Greil Marcus,  
*Invisible Republic, Bob Dylan's  
Basement Tapes, Owl Books/  
Henry Holt & Co., 1997*

Various Artists,  
*Anthology of American Folk  
Music (Edited by Harry Smith),  
Smithsonian Folkways, 1997*

I will judgmentally call the weakest period of his musical career. He demonstrated that he was really good at singing songs from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. He could convincingly sing the songs of Stephen Foster, Mississippi John Hurt, and Blind Willie McTell. Perhaps that re-emergence of Bob Dylan in the persona of a folk singer, inspired Marcus to investigate. I have no special knowledge of why these things happened. Don't let my sentences fool you into thinking that any one of these events caused the other.

### 3. ... Seen From Where We Are Now ...

What Dylan did in the 1960s was to use American folk music – which includes story ballads, talking monologues, country music, rhythm & blues, popular songs transmitted on vinyl and radio – as a vehicle for profound poetry. That seems obvious enough now, but what is not so obvious is why this was so radical, and why we should continue to think it was profound then or is profound today. At the time he began his work, songs were thought of as culture only by folklorists, musicologists, and anthropologists – and anthropologists who sought the meaning of human interaction did not study Euro-American culture. Franz Boas and his disciples, who did such a remarkable job recording Native American language, story and song, did not study the people who were displacing them. There was nobody to study as there was nothing to be lost. Nobody wrote folk music. Folk music was created by Anonymous Tradition. Poetry was made by individual poets.

At the height of his 1960s career, at a time when one did not need a magnifying glass to read the text used to package recordings, Bob Dylan published poetry and prose on his album covers, but this form of writing did not have a great impact. What had enormous impact was his ability to channel the language and rhythms and narrative strategies of all forms of American music into poetic psychodramas. Like any dramatic form, these songs happened in the space between the performer and the audience. The achievement was made of many parts: what the performer said, how he said it, how he charmed and challenged the audience's ability to understand what he was saying. The audience he played to began as college students in the Midwest and evolved into tourists and urban voyeurs in New York's Greenwich Village. What Dylan was singing was remote and mysterious to all of them, yet he rapidly seduced them into feeling they were listening to a hidden part of themselves, their own hopes, conscience and fears. The connection between the song subjects and the audience was illusive. Why would anyone who had grown up in urban post-war America care about a

lonesome train whistle (did trains make people lonesome)? A lover sailing across the sea (sounded romantic)? The sound of a workman's hammer (sounded biblical)? A boxer from Cuba (sounded frightening)? A woman who took out the garbage (had we seen her)? The illusive romance of these images was inextricable woven into an image of the performer, a boy-man, representing the present incarnation of the unexperienced – and so unremembered and mysterious – past. That might have been enough, but for reasons of his own, reasons Bob Dylan doesn't feel shy about describing today, he felt compelled to shock this same audience out of their reverie. As the success of the illusion closed around him, he quickly added another dimension to his art – the ability to change his image each time the audience developed an image of who he was.

In a few short years, his audience convinced itself that he was many things: a folk singer from the Midwest, a poet of the Civil Rights movement, a prophet of the American generation born after the Second World War. In retrospect, it is not clear who convinced who – we can now see that he was capable of playing all of these roles when it suited his temperament and art form.

Bob Dylan was and is a song writer, an art form that is poorly understood. We think we understand what a playwright does: write plays that groups of people can perform for groups of people who suspend their disbelief to enjoy the play. There is a passage at the end of *Chronicles* where Dylan describes watching the audience during the performance of Brecht/Weill songs at the Theater de Lys in the West Village. He was at the theater to meet his girlfriend, not to see the play, but nonetheless he was seeing how Lottie Lenya's performance of Marc Blitzstein's English translation of Brecht's *Pirate Jenny* drew everyone in and then left them squirming in their seats.

[Brecht's songs] were like folk songs in nature, but unlike folk songs, too, because they were sophisticated. [...] Later, I found myself taking the song apart, trying to find out what made it tick, why it was so effective. I could see that everything in it was apparent and visible but you didn't notice it too much. (273, 275)

It is a wonderful moment of revelation. Brecht wrote plays, but it was the songs that *survived* the plays being performed. Bobby Darin and Louis Armstrong could entertain audiences with *Mack The Knife* and no one had to see the *Three Penny Opera* or ponder the political implications of the lyrics. And while they were entertaining, the songs were disturbing. The Bob Dylan who had learned how to make people listen to songs but not yet learned how to write them saw this. He knew that he wanted to do *that*.

You could almost say he wanted to learn how to make his audience feel *uncomfortable*, but that would focus on the means rather than the end. He wanted to make his audience notice that they were wrong, that they didn't know what to think, that a song could entirely undermine their pre-conceptions about who they were, how they felt, and what they wanted to do next. These people in the audience didn't know who he was, and he was going to show them that they didn't even know what that meant.

When Bob Dylan rose to fame, his audience didn't have to know why railroad men drink up your blood like wine to feel what his song wanted them to feel. They were happy to think that whatever *railroad men* were, they must be a metaphor for something dangerous, just as a *mojo* was a metaphor for something sexy. In the Folk Scene at the time there were hundreds of people who were singing these songs with coded messages created by working-class English-speaking people in America during various periods, and no one knew where they came from or what they really meant. We had collectively forgotten all our history in part because it wasn't actually *ours*. A majority of the US population in the 1950s came from families that had not been in America before the Civil War. No one was teaching the social history of the last 100 years. We learned the story of the American Revolution in school, saw an idealized Wild West on TV every night, and all the movies were about World War II. I learned *Jump Down, Turn Around, Pick A Bale of Cotton* in Roosevelt Elementary School in New Rochelle, New York. No one in the school had ever seen a cotton plant or knew what a bale was or had the slightest idea what it felt like to pick one up.

And a few years later, Jimi Hendrix could perform *All Along The Watchtower* (1968) and no one had to know the *Book of Isaiah* or hear the formal structure of an Appalachian ballad or have read Allen Ginsberg to be impressed.

Isaiah, 21:6-10, Masoretic Text:

For thus hath the Lord said unto me:  
Go, set a watchman;  
Let him declare what he seeth!  
And when he seeth a troop, horsemen by pairs,  
A troop of asses, a troop of camels,  
He shall hearken diligently with much heed.  
And he cried as a lion: 'Upon the watch-tower, O Lord,  
I stand continually in the day-time,  
And I am set in my ward all the nights.'  
And, behold, there came a troop of men, horsemen by pairs.  
And he spoke and said:  
'Fallen, fallen is Babylon;

And all the graven images of her gods are broken unto the ground.'

O thou my threshing, and the winnowing of my floor,  
That which I have heard from the Lord of hosts,  
The God of Israel, have I declared unto you.

Allen Ginsberg, "Holy Ghost On The Nod Over The Body Of Bliss", *Planet News*, 1968:

Is this the God of Gods, the one I heard about  
in memorized language Universities murmur?  
Dollar bills can buy it! the great substance  
exchanges itself freely through all the world's  
poetry money, past and future currencies  
issued & redeemed by the identical bank,  
electric monopoly after monopoly owl-eyed  
on every one of 90 billion dollarbills vibrating  
to the pyramid-top in the United State of Heaven –

Dylan, 1968:

"There must be some way out of here,"  
said the joker to the thief,  
"There's too much confusion,  
I can't get no relief.  
Businessmen, they drink my wine,  
plowmen dig my earth,  
None of them along the line  
know what any of it is worth."

"No reason to get excited,"  
the thief, he kindly spoke,  
"There are many here among us  
who feel that life is but a joke.  
But you and I, we've been through that,  
and this is not our fate,  
So let us not talk falsely now,  
the hour is getting late."

All along the watchtower,  
princes kept the view  
While all the women came and went,  
barefoot servants, too.  
Outside in the distance  
a wildcat did growl,  
Two riders were approaching,  
the wind began to howl.

By the time the same audience was presented with symbolic characters whose names echoed numerous folk lyrics – "you say that I'm an outlaw and you say that I'm a thief" (Woody Guthrie) – they were accustomed to not knowing with their conscious mind what was going on in this or any other story.

Everyone in urban-suburban and many parts of rural America was experiencing the fact that an enormous infrastructure had been built for diffusing popular music. This same engine was not pushing out poetry. Record companies, radio stations, television programs, cinema – all these businesses were pushing out music. The music store had instruments lining the walls, bins of LPs with listening booths for playing them, racks of current 45s, and piles of Top 40 hit lists distributed each week by the local radio station. There was a radio in every car. There was a television in every house – and in the prosperous households of 1960s suburbia a television in every room – movie theaters in every town, and concerts at every college campus. This was where we received our culture, mediated by the weekly magazines that fell through the front door mail slot, the images we emulated and imagined from. This infrastructure was run by Disney and CBS and NBC and RCA and Columbia Records and Warner Brothers and 20th Century Fox and Time Magazine. It may have been 1961 when Dylan arrived in New York, but it was still the conformist 1950s – decades always last about five years into the next one.

So after “studying” folk music in Minneapolis and Greenwich Village for two years, Bob Dylan figured out how to write songs made from this mysterious language that everyone was singing. He channeled Robert Johnson (who had channeled Son House) and Woody Guthrie and Hank Williams and Dave Van Ronk (who with a dry and sophisticated wit was already channeling a dozen other singers) and Charlie Chaplin. He read the rhyme and music of Edgar Allan Poe and Enid Starkie’s translations of Arthur Rimbaud. He started changing the words, writing different words with similar phrases to similar tunes, changing the stories to relate to things that were happening at the time, a technique Woodrow Wilson Guthrie had already refined into a popular art.

In the same stream of consciousness that fingers Brecht’s dramatic art, the memorist of *Chronicles* describes the impact of receiving a vinyl pre-release of *Robert Johnson: King of the Delta Blues Singers* during a visit with John Hammond at Columbia Records. Dylan describes playing it for Van Ronk, whose musically educated ear heard the imitation of the earlier blues singers – Johnson’s recordings were made in 1936-37, late in the period that defined Delta Blues. But Dylan, a young man without a sense of linear time, an ear attuned more to intensity than originality, hears something quite different and feels “like I’d been hit by a tranquilizer bullet.” He hears a synthesis, a mastery of language and delivery, a driving force.

Robert Johnson,  
King of the Delta Blues Singers,  
Columbia Records (LP), 1961

I copied Johnson’s words down on scraps of paper so I could more closely examine the lyrics and patterns, the construction of his old-style lines and the free association that he used, the sparkling allegories, big-ass truths wrapped in the hard shell of nonsensical abstraction – themes that flew through the air with the greatest of ease. I didn’t have any of these dreams or thoughts, but I was going to acquire them. I thought about Johnson a lot, wondered who his audience could have been. It’s hard to imagine sharecroppers or plantation field hands at hop joints, relating to songs like these. (285)

These songs didn’t seem to be aimed at another culture, the farm-hand children and grandchildren of slaves. They seemed to be aimed at him. The lyrics were apocalyptic, cryptic, fluid.

Robert Johnson:

If I had possession  
over judgment day  
If I had possession  
over judgment day  
Lord, the little woman I’m lovin’ wouldn’t  
have no right to pray

...

I have a bird to whistle  
I have a bird to sing  
Have a bird to whistle  
and I have a bird to sing  
I have a woman that I’m lovin  
boy, but she don’t mean a thing

Dylan:

I got a bird that whistles,  
I got a bird that sings.  
I got a bird that whistles,  
I got a bird that sings.  
But I ain’ a-got Corrina,  
Life don’t mean a thing.

Child Ballad #12 (Lord Randall):

“O where ha you been, Lord Randal, my son?  
And where ha you been, my handsome young man?”  
“I ha been at the greenwood; mother, mak my bed soon,  
For I’m wearied wi hunting, and fain wad lie down.”  
“An wha met ye there, Lord Randal, my son?  
And wha met ye there, my handsome young man?”  
“O I met wi my true-love; mother, mak my bed soon,  
For I’m wearied wi huntin, and fain wad lie down.”  
“And what did she give you, Lord Randal, My son?  
And wha did she give you, my handsome young man?”  
“Eels fried in a pan; mother, mak my bed soon,  
For I’m wearied wi huntin, and fein wad lie down.”

Dylan:

Oh, where have you been, my blue-eyed son?  
Oh, where have you been, my darling young one?  
I've stumbled on the side of twelve misty mountains,  
I've walked and I've crawled on six crooked highways,  
I've stepped in the middle of seven sad forests,  
I've been out in front of a dozen dead oceans,  
I've been ten thousand miles in the mouth of a graveyard,  
And it's a hard, and it's a hard, it's a hard, and it's a hard,  
And it's a hard rain's a-gonna fall.

In this little Greenwich Village world, maybe 100 people who all knew one another, Dylan pulled off an original leap of literary form. In a culture steeped in nostalgia for a world that was gone before most of the performers were born, he began to produce new material that sounded old (=authentic, since everything new was false and commercial), was about a psychological now (when everyone was singing about remote mining disasters, ancient murders, blues complaining about a place no one had ever been), and everyone could listen to and relate to it. More importantly, most of the audience could sing it, memorize it, internalize it. He was shy at first, slipping only one of his own songs onto his first recording, but he sensed he was producing songs that everyone wanted to sing.

Bob Dylan, the memorist, gives a long account of why he did this. The way he remembers it, he wasn't inspired or elected – he was driven to it, forced to change his plan to be a folk singer by an evening of listening to Mike Seeger play at a private party.

Mike was skin-stinging. He was tense, poker-faced and radiated telepathy, wore a snowy white shirt and silver sleeve bands. He played on all the various planes, the full index of the old-time styles, played in all the genres and had the idioms mastered – Delta blues, ragtime, minstrel songs, buck-and-wing, dance reels, play party, hymns and gospel – being there and seeing him up close, something hit me. It's not as if he just played everything well, he played these songs as good as it was possible to play them.

...

The thought occurred to me that maybe I'd have to write my own folk songs, ones that Mike didn't know. That was a startling thought. Up 'til then, I'd gone some places and thought I knew my way around. And then it struck me that I'd never been there before. You open a door to a dark room and you think you know what's there, where everything is arranged, but you really don't know until you step inside. (70-72)

This kid who had evaded his family place and business, pretended to be an orphan, escaped from college, eluded any recognizable form of the heritage others might construct around

him, opened a door into a house of mirrors where no one could tell where anything was coming from. Dylan was not alone in what he was doing, but in retrospect he seems to have been alone in his sense of purpose. He set out to harness the mystery of an art form that others were imitating. He was so much better at writing these songs once he started that he was quickly in a class by himself. In one year he went from singing for free to recording for Columbia Records, promoted by television appearances, concerts and the echo of others singing his songs. In a few more years, he was the sought-after performer and favorite song writer of an enormous audience.

In *No Direction Home*, Allen Ginsberg recalls going with Dylan to a concert date in Chicago in 1964 and witnessing the intensity and control of his performance. If Ginsberg had not recorded this beautiful description, it would be one of those “you had to be there” things. In a short time, the audience he drew had gotten over the shock of his style and delivery. John Cohen, who is consistently generous and insightful in everything he says in *No Direction Home*, describes a producer at Vanguard Records rejecting Dylan for being “too visceral”. He was not smooth or melodic at a time when popular folk singers (Joan Baez, Peter-Paul-and-Mary, Judy Collins, Josh White) were both. This voice he created with its harsh twang was less a lack of vocal talent than a reminder of a sound and sensation that we were supposed to forget. His syncopated way of delivering the words was to become an original technique for driving meaning into syllables and bending the language of the songs. The language he had learned to deliver this way combined archaic English phrasing and refrains, Biblical references, blues couplets, surrounded by spontaneous bop prosody emanating from Beat poetry. The combination was disarming in its surrealism. Dylan (circa 1962):

I can't see my reflection in the waters,  
I can't speak the sounds that show no pain,  
I can't hear the echo of my footsteps,  
Or can't remember the sound of my own name.  
Yes, and only if my own true love was waitin',  
Yes, and if I could hear her heart a-softly poundin',  
Only if she was lyin' by me,  
Then I'd lie in my bed once again.

My own true love coexists with the sounds that show no pain. The same voice that can sing about her heart a-softly poundin' can shift to the mental state where he can't remember the sound of my own name.

Dylan (circa 1965):

You must leave now, take what you need, you think will last.  
But whatever you wish to keep, you better grab it fast.

Yonder stands your orphan with his gun,  
Crying like a fire in the sun.  
Look out the saints are comin' through  
And it's all over now, Baby Blue.

The saints *are comin' through* the audience's head without the slightest understanding of what saints are or why they should be marching or why a marching band in New Orleans – that most exotic mix of European, African, Caribbean and American cultures – might play such a song at a funeral. But the snare-drum rim-shots of syllables make the internal and end-rhymes of the previous couplet unforgettable, not only for the imagery but for the way the imagery both hangs from and creates the music.

**YON**der stands your **OR**phan with his **GUN**  
**CRY**ing like a **FI**re in the **SUN**

And then you have internalized it yourself, long before you can even think about the image. What kind of intensity is communicated by this cry?

He was a folk singer who was singing only his own material, which was being written so fast, as Wilentz points out, that if you were familiar with his concerts and recordings, each new performance was always made up of things you had heard before and things you had never heard. In his notes for *Bob Dylan Live 1964*, Wilentz describe that strange sensation the audience felt when they first heard these verses. The call and response happened not at the Amen Bench of the concert church but in the dim spaces of the individual's mind as he or she wandered back to sleep in their private bedroom.

Dylan (“Gates of Eden” introduced as “A lullaby in D minor”, 1964):

Of war and peace the truth just twists  
Its curfew gull just glides  
Upon four-legged forest clouds  
The cowboy angel rides  
With his candle lit into the sun  
Though its glow is waxed in black  
All except when 'neath the trees of Eden

The Audience (Wilentz):

Two hours later, we would leave the premises and head back underground to the IRT, exhilarated, entertained, and ratified, but also confused about the snatches of lines we'd gleaned from the strange new songs. What was that weird lullaby in D minor? What in God's name is a perfumed gull (or did he sing “curfewed gal”)?

Dylan had become, as Ginsberg puts it, one column of breath, his whole body delivering these words that were mesmerizing to listen to coming from this strange foreign voice. This performance art was completely authentic to the audience.

Few people knew what he was imitating, had even heard the music he was translating and transforming into songs unlike anything they had heard coming from that infrastructure, relentlessly flipping channels on the television, pushing buttons on the car radio, seeping from elevators. Returning now to the concert that Wilentz describes hearing at age 13, we can hear the performance artist, who is as he reassures his audience “wearing my Bob Dylan mask”, carefully modulate and interweave the familiar with the unnerving, simultaneously basking in his popularity.

Then there is the moment of rupture when his performance crossed a line. John Cohen, again in *No Direction Home*, gives his own marvelous reaction to that first shocking moment when Dylan, perhaps naively, threw his blossoming rhythm and blues synthesis in the face of the Newport Folk Festival audience in 1965. As Dylan and the electrified band launch into “Maggie's Farm”, Cohen recognizes the echo of a song on the Harry Smith anthology, “Down on Penny's Farm”. He remembers thinking that Dylan had brought it “up to date”.

The Bently Boys (1929):

Go into the fields  
And you work all day  
Deep into the night  
But you get no pay  
Promise you some meat  
Or a little bucket of lard  
It's hard to make a living  
On Penny's farm  
It's a hard time in the country  
Down on Penny's farm

Dylan (1965):

I ain't gonna work on Maggie's farm no more.  
No, I ain't gonna work on Maggie's farm no more.  
Well, I wake in the morning,  
Fold my hands and pray for rain.  
I got a head full of ideas  
That are drivin' me insane.  
It's a shame the way she makes me scrub the floor.  
I ain't gonna work on Maggie's farm no more.

That little transformation, from ancient fiddle and stomp to Michael Bloomfield's electric guitar slashing across tender ears and vibrating the bones above their hearts, turned out to be the most disturbing performance many people in the audience had ever seen. The audience didn't get upset because Dylan had taken a sharecropper's protest against a landlord and turned it into a metaphysical protest against being expected to follow other people's goals. They were

upset because he wasn't acting the way they, the audience, expected him to act.

The Newport Folk Festival audience, people focused enough on folk music to get themselves to a Rhode Island resort town from wherever else they were spending their summer, was there to hear Dylan because their minds and ears had been opened by two important keys. They had heard his songs sweetly interpreted by Peter Paul and Mary (the apparently authentic folk trio created by the man who was also Dylan's manager), so the cornerstone songs that promised prophecy and appealed to conscience – “Blowin' in the Wind”, “The Times They Are a-Changin'” – were already familiar. This whining singer had been introduced to unsuspecting thousands by Joan Baez, a woman who's melodic powers had charmed everyone. These two acts – and they were both major actors, molding the expectations of their considerable audiences with their appearance, their choice of songs, their choice of political causes – opened the door for Dylan's art, willingly, with great conviction, and with their own high expectations.

In the summer of 1962 at the YMCA auditorium in Pittsfield, Massachusetts I heard this voice coming from a scruffy kid dressed in farm-hand overalls at what I thought was a Joan Baez concert – that was the experience the audience had paid for – and I thought he sounded horrible. I was one month shy of my own thirteenth birthday, two years before Professor Wilentz experienced his. When I recognized that this kid was singing “Blowin' in the Wind” in that whiny voice – a song that was played on Top 10 radio that summer by Peter Paul and Mary – I distinctly remember leaning over to the person sitting next to me and saying “If the person who wrote that song hears him singing it like that, he'll kill him.” But before Baez returned to save the evening, I also remember being drawn in and intrigued by a song that seemed to be about the murder of Black Civil Rights leader Medgar Evers, yet it seemed to say something sympathetic about the White people who killed him. That was a complex thought for an almost thirteen-year-old mind to catch, but Dylan communicated it. You didn't have to understand him or like him to find him intriguing.

Today it is wonderfully ironic to see Peter Yarrow (whose family also arrived in America from the same far-away Ukraine as Dylan's grandmother) nervously introduce Dylan's line-crossing performance in Newport in *No Direction Home*. The wonder boy who gave his contemporaries such good material had certainly succeeded in putting them in an uncomfortable situation.

Dylan's audience was very big by then, and for all the people who hated what he was doing because it crossed their evil-commercialism line, there were also many who learned to love hearing this synthesis coming through the broad channel of popular music and didn't know or care about the line at all. The animosity is captured on a recording that was circulating in the early 1970s as a bootleg album and in 1998 had become *The Bootleg Series Vol. 4, Bob Dylan Live 1966*. Here we have the audio record of the love-hate tug of war that went on between the artist and the audience, as he delivered musical messages in Manchester England to people who thought they knew the difference between folk music and pop music. In *No Direction Home* we see more of this fight between transmitters and receptors in footage that Pennebaker shot for a film Dylan decided not to release. The Complainers are easier to capture on film, and louder, than the Bewildered and Content. And the artist who set out to make his audience uncomfortable seems engaged in a dialog with that part of the audience trying to make him uncomfortable back. “Play it fucking loud” Dylan famously instructs his group before starting into “Like A Rolling Stone”, as if the intensity of the sound and the blinking of his eyes would hold back the conflict he'd created.

And, in a way, he was right. Not that playing it louder would resolve the conflict but that blinking his eyes, he could make it change direction. *No Direction Home* makes another contribution to this vision of a man in love with his own word power. We watch a sequence of Bob Dylan gazing at the signs on a pet shop somewhere in England. He reads the language on the signs:

We will  
collect  
clip  
bath &  
return  
your dog  
KN1 7727  
cigarettes  
and  
tobacco  
Animals  
& birds  
bought  
– or –  
sold on  
commission

Then he begins to re-arrange it into rhythmic and increasingly surreal assertions. He is blasting the cameraman,

Bob Dylan,  
*The Bootleg Series, Vol. 4: Bob Dylan Live, 1966: The “Royal Albert Hall Concert”*, notes by Tony Glover, *Columbia Legacy (CD)*, 1998

faster and funnier each time the film starts rolling.

I'm lookin' for a place  
that's gonna animal my soul  
knit my return  
bathe my foot  
and collect my dog  
[cut]  
commission me  
to sell my animals  
to bird my clip  
and buy my bath  
and return me back to the cigarettes

Then the scene cuts to a London concert in 1966 during the final months of his year of touring. By 1966, he could make songs out of anything. This level of formal sophistication had been achieved in about four years of study, analysis, and performance. There were chord changes, tunes, and musical arrangements behind it all. But like the larger theatricality they established, the music survives only in memory, if you've heard it, and most certainly when you've heard it over and over and over again – this repetition is the very nature of popular music – and only portions of it survive when it is all reduced to the words on the page. But if it had not been written, banged out on a typewriter, carefully prepared and memorized, it would not have been performed.

#### 4. ...In the Hall of Mirrors

*Chronicles* is the memoir of an elusive man. Its author directs a great deal of wit and bile towards the people who criticized him for not being the public persona they wanted him to be. Then he devotes just as much care to guarding what he's defined as his private life from view.

The entire narrative is very precise in the way the memoirist does *not* describe his family or his religious background or beliefs. He recalls the names and appearance of many people he knew in Minnesota and New York in the years leading up to 1965, and he has a way of sketching each one with an emotional aura and physical details. But all the members of his own family are unmentioned or, if mentioned, invisible. A daughter-in-law is cooking something good for dinner, but only the scent of her cooking is described. A wife accompanies him on a motorcycle ride into the Louisiana countryside, and the only glimpse we catch of her in the prose is when she puts down her John Le Carré novel to apply some eye shadow, signaling that it is time to leave the country store where they stopped. His reminiscences of childhood includes advice from a one-legged

pipe-smoking grandmother who had “come to America from Odessa”, and this is the only suggestion of an ethnic background beyond the recollection of growing up in the Iron Range region of northern Minnesota.

We have an entire chapter devoted to how our hero set out to destroy his audience's fixation with the image that brought him fame. Like the description of how he was forced to become a songwriter, the purpose of this campaign is clear: “Liberty for myself and my loved ones had to be secured.”

I went to Jerusalem, got myself photographed at the Western Wall wearing a skullcap. The image was transmitted worldwide instantly and quickly all the great rags changed me overnight into a Zionist. (122)

This is the only reference to Judaism in the entire book. The only other subject that approaches religious belief is a description of not eating pork, inspired by a sermon he heard on the radio where Malcom X pointed out that pigs are related to rats. Just where that places him on the Judeo-Christian-Islamic spectrum seems intentionally ambiguous, as if to say why should there be anyplace to stand.

The question everyone wants to ask him is “what do you believe in?” The answer, repeated in the songs many times, appears in a-chronological observations that employ a distinctly Protestant biblical language to cast judgment on a present nostalgic for a past. Dylan's summation of mankind in the final verse of “Blind Willie McTell” (1983) is my personal favorite.

Well, God is in his heaven  
And we all want what's his  
But power and greed and corruptible seed  
Seem to be all that there is  
I'm gazing out the window  
Of the St. James Hotel  
And I know no one can sing the blues  
Like Blind Willie McTell

Supreme beings and the need for justice are one with a reflection of human imperfection (I almost used the un-Christian term *hopelessness*) coupled with the need to resist and draw strength from the past. This free society, or society of free men, is not an open-minded world. Power is in the hands of The Authorities, and no one seems too interested or capable of changing it. That situation continues to the present day, set in the flood plain of the Mississippi delta. “High Water (for Charley Patton)” (2001):

Well, George Lewis told the Englishman, the Italian and the Jew  
“You can't open your mind, boys  
To every conceivable point of view.”

They got Charles Darwin trapped out there on Highway Five  
Judge says to the High Sheriff,  
“I want him dead or alive  
Either one, I don’t care.”  
High Water everywhere

Dylan’s persona began as a boy-prophet preaching to the Protestants. Over forty years he has evolved into a passing stranger quoting Old Testament to the Black Baptists.

There is no mention in *Chronicles* of the period in late 1970s when he outraged and alienated much of his audience by professing evangelical Christianity and performing an entirely new repertoire of original Gospel songs. An interesting preface to *The Year of Bob Dylan* was the release in 2003 of *Gotta Serve Somebody, The Gospel Songs of Bob Dylan*. This anthology collects ten of the songs from that period, performed by gospel singers and ensembles. With Dylan’s persona removed, you can hear just how well he also mastered *this* particular form of American songwriting. Compared to the ballad, blues or love song, the gospel song presents the songwriter with more limited set of problems to express and resolve. For every problem encountered – fear, insecurity, pride, unworthiness, despair – there is only one Answer.

When the subject of material vanity was set as a blues, Memphis Slim described it this way in “Mother Earth” (1950):

You may own half a city  
Even diamonds and pearls  
You may buy that plane, baby  
And fly all over this world  
Don’t care how great you are  
Don’t care what you worth  
When it all ends up  
You gotta go back to Mother Earth

Dylan shifts the argument from material vanity to spirituality, and doubles the line, magnifying the comparisons in each couplet in “Gotta Serve Somebody” (1979):

You may be a construction worker working on a home,  
You may be living in a mansion or you might live in a dome,  
You might own guns and you might even own tanks,  
You might be somebody’s landlord, you might even own banks  
But you’re gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed  
You’re gonna have to serve somebody,  
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord  
But you’re gonna have to serve somebody.

Who else could rhyme *tanks* and *banks*? It sounds even more impressive coming out of Shirley Caesar’s mouth. To make it clear that his own involvement in the project is unambigu-

ous, he finishes the collection of gushing devotional songs with an un-smooth and to my ears very un-gospel-sounding duet with Mavis Staples. For the package he is presented as a photo of the current pencil-thin moustache lonesome gambler.

Jean Genet demonstrated in his novels and plays that crime is a conspiracy involving both criminals and police. Each needs the other to prove their existence. Bob Dylan’s art is a similar conspiracy between himself and his audience. He created himself in an image he sensed all around him, yet his audience often felt that only he was able to imagine what this image should be. Few individuals have ever gotten to shape and control their own history this way even once. Dylan has managed to do it repeatedly.

That he succeeded at creating a kind of art that did not exist before him is self-evident. Yet as much as his art reaches into the hearts and minds of an audience that dwarfs the readership of most contemporary writers, the meaning of his work remains mysterious. Perhaps what people respond to most is being challenged and surprised by what they think they hear. We could make the same observation about any great art.

On November 26, 1965, when Dylan was performing his electric psychodramas at concert halls across America, sometimes to the hushed and awed and sometimes to the hostile, all of them straining to find their own personal meaning in his lyrics, Joseph Beuys was performing a solo action at an art gallery in Dusseldorf, West Germany. The year Dylan was born in Duluth, Minnesota, Beuys was a bomber pilot on the Russian front serving the Masters of War. Twenty-four years later, he was launching a career of art actions and monumental sculptures. For the moment, there were no crowds to cheer or jeer at him. The gallery was closed to the public and Beuys’ actions were witnessed only by the photographer Ute Klophus and a television crew. The title of the piece was “How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare”

Beuys sat on a chair in one corner of the gallery, next to the entrance. He had poured honey over his head, to which he had then affixed fifty dollars worth of gold leaf. In his arms he cradled a dead hare, which he looked at steadfastly. Then he stood up, walked around the room holding the dead hare in his arms, and held it up close to the pictures on the walls; he seemed to be talking to it. Sometimes he broke off his tour and, still holding the dead creature, stepped over a withered fir tree that lay in the middle of the gallery. All this was done with indescribable tenderness and great concentration. (135)  
He *seemed* to be talking to a dead animal. I carry this picture

Heiner Stachelhaus,  
Joseph Beuys, *Abbeyville Press*,  
1987.

Various Artists,  
Gotta Serve Somebody, The  
Gospel Songs of Bob Dylan,  
Columbia (CD), 2003.

in my head today, thanks to Klophus' collaborative art, imagining the language coming from his lips. Like Dylan, Beuys was often confronted by interviewers, both sympathetic and hostile, wanting him to explain the meaning of his work. Unlike Dylan, he was a teacher and an advocate of social action. He was not shy about discussing meaning. Beuys:

This seems to have been the action that most captured people's imaginations. On one level this must be because everyone consciously or unconsciously recognizes the problem of explaining things particularly where art and creative work are concerned, or anything that involves a certain mystery or questioning. The idea of explaining to an animal conveys a sense of the secrecy of the world and of existence that appeals to the imagination. Then, as I said, even a dead animal preserves more powers of intuition than some human beings with their stubborn rationality. (105)

Perhaps Dylan continues to perform a similar kind of action, dressed in various disguises at State Fairs, Minor League Baseball stadiums, and concert halls around America, performing songs that seem to explain some of the world's mystery. His popularity and impact continues now into a third generation, even as he continues to perform what has become a blend of forty years of material. This fame gives him plenty of space to publish and release more old and new materials. But beneath the current fame, which will disappear as it did before and will again, is the nature and extent of his achievement. Perhaps because he chose songwriting and performance as his primary art form, a medium well below the radar of most intellectual discourse, we have not been able to see how his work is among the great literary achievements of American culture.

Caroline Tisdall,  
Joseph Beuys, *Thames & Hudson, 1979*



Abb.: Mladen Bizumic, Kristleifur Björnsson, Noah Fischer, Gregoire Paultre