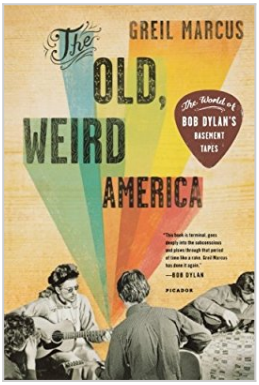

The Old, Weird America: The World of Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes

By Greil Marcus

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A Special Edition with a New Introduction and an Updated Discography

This is Greil Marcus's acclaimed book on the secret music made by Bob Dylan and the Band in 1967, which introduced a phrase that has become part of the culture: "the old, weird America." It is this country that the book maps?the "playground of God, Satan, tricksters, Puritans, confidence men, illuminati, braggarts, preachers, anonymous poets of all stripes" (Luc Sante, *New York* magazine). In honor of Dylan's seventieth birthday, this special edition includes a new introduction, an updated discography, and a cover featuring never-before-seen photographs of the legendary recording sessions.

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Review

“This book is terminal, goes deeply into the subconscious and plows through that period of time like a rake. Greil Marcus has done it again.” ?*Bob Dylan*

“It is the speculative intelligence with which Marcus chases the specters and wraiths of this country's musical past that emerges as the exhilarating feat of [The Old, Weird America] . . . No previous writer has so transportingly or authoritatively revealed Mr. Dylan against receding vistas of American music and culture.” ?*Robert Polito, The New York Times Book Review*

“The year's best work of criticism, hands down . . . Marcus draws bold freehand loops around Dylan's music, loops so wide and loose that they take in not just the breadth of American folk music, but huge chunks of American history as well. This is the best kind of history book, one that acknowledges that mythology is sometimes the truest kind of fact.” ?*Stephanie Zachareck, Newsday*

“Marcus has always been set on discovering how much a performer can bring to bear on his or her material, and how much a critic can bring to bear on those performances . . . He offers his readers a breathtaking sense of freedom.” ?*Charles Taylor, Salon*

“Nearly everyone will be dazed at one point or another along the mystery trip that Marcus leads, because his desire is not to settle your notions but to vaporize them . . . But Marcus knows where Dylan is at all times, in his absence as well as his presence. That's because, on the haunted back roads of [*The Old, Weird America*], these two elusive old masters, tricksters both, have fully met their match.” ?*Anthony DeCurtis, Rolling Stone*

“Chances are, twenty years from now, [this book] will stand as one of the classics of American criticism.” ?*Mikal Gilmore, The Observer (London)*

“His work is very likely the most imaginative criticism being done, but it's more than that: It's a light in dark times.” ?*Luc Sante, New York*

“Dylan once famously described folk music as 'nothing but mystery.' Here the mystery is thoroughly explored and gloriously deepened.” ?*Ross Fortune, Time Out (London)*

“A poetic encounter with the latent stories of America's manifest dreams . . . Nonfiction novel of the year.” ?*Graham Caverny, Arena*

“The wisest, funniest book about rock since Marcus's own 1975 *Mystery Train*.” ?*Rob Sheffield, Rolling Stone*

“Discussing such virtually unknown singers as Dock Bogs and Clarence Ashley, Marcus lays out a thesis about the authority of radical individualism in American culture. He finds in [their] songs an idea of America as a place where what matters most is not the distribution of goods or the regulation of morality, but rather the way 'people plumb their souls and then present their discoveries, their true selves, to others' . . . This is, in many ways, his most subtle book. Marcus's love for the gnostic of self-creation, of the idea of infinite possibility, is tempered here by a profound awareness of the power of tradition, of the way in which the new makes sense only because of, not despite, the old.” ?*James Surowiecki, Boston Phoenix*

“Marcus finds in the 'Basement Tapes' an unfinished synthesis of free speech and the shaggy-dog story, the two obsessions of [his own] writing, and perhaps finally of American history.” ?*Anthony Miller, New City (Chicago)*

“We owe God a death, and Greil Marcus owed all God's children a lifework on Bob Dylan. And here it is, one heaven of a book . . . What Marcus brings to these songs is a variety of good things: fierce fervor, social convictions, a loving discrimination, never a touch of envy, and an extraordinary ability to evoke in words the very feel (throaty, threatening, thorough, thick with thought) of a man's voice, of this man's voice.” ?*Christopher Ricks, The Guardian (London)*

About the Author

One of America's most original and incisive critics of pop music and pop culture, **Greil Marcus** is the author of *Double Trouble*, *Dead Elvis*, *Lipstick Traces*, and *Mystery Train*. He lives in Berkeley, California.

ONE

ANOTHER COUNTRY

In the dressing room in London, the guitarist was looking for a melody. He picked tiny notes off the strings until they fluttered, snapping in the air. The singer turned his head, caught the tune, the title flashing up: sure, “Strange Things Happening Every Day,” Sister Rosetta Tharpe, when was it, 1945? Closing in on Tharpe’s own guitar line, the guitarist felt for the syncopation in the rhythm, and the song came to life in the singer’s mind.

On that last great Judgment Day
When they drive them all away
There are strange things happening every day

She was shameless, the singer remembered: purer than pure when her mother was alive, backsliding after that. She came onto the Lord’s stage in a mink; she had a way with a guitar few men could touch. She was the black church in the Grand Ole Opry—she’d even recorded with Pat Boone’s father-in-law, Red Foley, Mr. “Old Shep” himself. On the other hand, Red Foley had recorded “Peace in the Valley,” hadn’t he, the spiritual the Reverend Thomas A. Dorsey had written as the Second World War began? The sainted gospel composer, in earlier days known as Georgia Tom, who’d put his name on dirty blues? The singer shook his head: why was he remembering all this? His memory raced ahead of him. For some reason he remembered that “Strange Things Happening” had topped the black charts the same week Hitler killed himself. It was April 30, 1945; the singer was a month short of four, Sister Rosetta Tharpe was thirty. “There’s something in the gospel blues,” she would say years later, “that’s so deep the world can’t stand it.” Now he heard the song as if the war had ended yesterday, as if it were the first time he’d heard it, wherever that had been—off some road he’d never remember anything else about, like waking from a dream you had to get up and live through.

If you want to view the crime
You must learn to quit your lyin’
There are strange things happening every day

The guitarist was beginning to mumble the words, faking them, getting only the title phrase. The singer grinned as he made for the door. “‘Strange things happening every day,’” he said. “She got that right.”

* * *

Bob Dylan walked out of his dressing room in the Royal Albert Hall. It was May 26, 1966; for two weeks

he'd been up and down England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales. Two days before he'd crossed the English Channel to celebrate his birthday onstage in Paris, dropping a huge American flag as the curtains opened for the second set, the crowd going mad with rage as if he were throwing America's war in Vietnam in their faces—come on, hadn't they started it?—then taking in the headline in *Le Figaro* the next day: "LA CHUTE D'UNE IDOLE." It was kind of a quiet night, actually, compared to … he'd been in control. It wasn't usually like that, not this month, when the whole previous year felt like it was packed into a bomb that wouldn't stop exploding. Most nights abuse came raining down as if he could bring the weather with him, as if hate were the wind at his back, the storm waiting in every next town.

He walked out of his dressing room. He knew that when he sang his folk songs—most of them no more folk songs than a Maytag washing machine, except unlike a Maytag washing machine they didn't rely on electricity—a few older numbers, to please the crowd, or tease it, but mainly those long, odd songs that no longer made anyone laugh, "Visions of Johanna," "Mr. Tambourine Man," "Desolation Row," when he stood still, picked strings, and appeared as any singer might have appeared in the years or centuries before him, the people in the audience would show respect, even approval. He knew that when he finished that set, left, and came back with the Hawks—the piano player on one side of the stage, the organist on the other, the bass player and the guitarist at his sides, the drummer on a riser behind them—the trouble would start; the problem was, he never knew just when it would start. "How do you get your kicks these days?" an interviewer asked him a few months before. "I hire people to look into my eyes, and then I have them kick me," Dylan said. "That's how you get your kicks?" "No," Dylan said, "then I *forgive* them. That's where my kicks come in." It wasn't that easy, though; once the second set began, it was as if the two sides—the six on the stage, those in the crowd who had set themselves against them—were trying most of all to drown each other out.

"Dylan questions the comparisons drawn between charity rock events like Live Aid and USA for Africa and the student activism of yesteryear," a reporter wrote in 1985, then let Dylan speak: "The big difference between now and the sixties is that then it was much more dangerous to do that sort of thing. There were people trying to stop the show any way they could … Then, you didn't know which end the trouble was coming from. And it could come at any time." He could have been talking about politics, in the narrow sense that the reporter was framing the issue; he could have been talking about the kind of politics that in 1966 occurred whenever he opened his mouth. And it was so stupid. Almost every night, the music lifted off the stage, so strong it was like a body, and there were moments when he couldn't believe he couldn't take his hand off his Fender Stratocaster and touch it. It was hard to hear, and hard to believe anything could ever be better. And then, at just that instant when the timing between a group of musicians was life itself, when the smallest mistake, the mistake you knew could never happen, would throw the world off its axis, when a physics no scientist would ever understand was all there was, the shouting would start, as if the audience that understood nothing understood one thing: ambush. A note, a chord, the start of a rhythm, and, then, "COCKSUCKER."

On May 26, 1966, at the Royal Albert Hall, they were just about to move into "Leopard-skin Pill-box Hat"—a yet-to-be-released *Blonde on Blonde* tune that after a month or so on the road had turned into a big, noisy, vulgar Chicago blues carrying hilariously sneering lyrics ("I saw you making love with him / You forgot to close the garage door")—when it started. The tape that survives from this night doesn't register the crowd; you can't hear what Bob Dylan is hearing, but by now his senses are strung so tightly any discord is painful, and even as you might imagine him standing straight to face the crowd, three decades later you can hear him sag. "Oh, God," he says, like someone who has seen this too many times; the good lines that took him out of the dressing room, that great beat, are out of reach. The one shout he'd caught from the crowd is already growing, the once-timid now screaming: TRAITOR. SELLOUT. MOTHERFUCKER. YOU'RE NOT BOB DYLAN. And then laughter. "Are you talking to me?" Dylan says, theatrically; you can feel him strike a pose. There are more shouts; you can't decipher them, but he can. "Come up here and say that," he says, and the great hall falls away. It is gone. We're in a bar in a town whose name you didn't catch when you drove in and won't remember to notice when you drive out, and in this bar "Ballad of a Thin Man" is all that is left.

In the fall of 1965, as the last song on the first side of the just-issued *Highway 61 Revisited*, the performance was almost laconic. Dylan's hipster piano, all reverb and menacing languor, led a high, ghostly organ sound,

but mostly the music communicated distance, cool, disregard. There was more of the Midwest in Dylan's voice than in anything else on the disc—more dust. The singer has seen it all before. You can't surprise him. Bearing down just slightly for the chorus, repeated again and again without change—"You know something is happening, but you don't know what it is"—on record Dylan found an instant catchphrase for the moral, generational, and racial divisions that in this moment found Americans defining themselves not as who they were but as who they were not, and he also found a commercial hook. *"You know something's happening, but you"*—you could hear it everywhere over the next months, out of anyone's mouth. By definition, if you knew the song, you knew what was happening. If you wanted to know what was happening, or appear as if you did, you had to buy the album. Before the year was out, *Highway 61 Revisited* was only two places short of the top of the charts.

But on this tour, in May of 1966, up and down the British Isles, it is not this "Ballad of a Thin Man" that raises the bar it finds you in. Now it has become the most bitter, unstable song; with Dylan turning to the piano for this single number, it is also the song that is somehow most alive to the particular ambience of any given night, the weather, the frame of the hall, the mood of the crowd, sucking it up and using it like a karate fighter turning an opponent's strength against him. Some tunes in the set Dylan offers with the Hawks—"Tell Me, Momma," "Baby Let Me Follow You Down," "One Too Many Mornings," "I Don't Believe You"—fly or they don't, but formally they are always the same. "Ballad of a Thin Man" is always different, always changed by the crowd, then moving as if to change it in turn.

The song begins and ends with the oldest, corniest beatnik cliché: the square. Some poor sap, well dressed, well heeled. As a listener, in the crowd, you're set up to imagine him as whoever you're not. The song puts him through the wringer. Always at home in the streets of his town, he is now trapped in a demimonde, in an after-hours club where he is neither welcome nor permitted to leave. He's heard about the kind of people who inhabit these places: drug addicts, homosexuals, Negroes, intellectuals, homosexual Negro intellectuals like the funny-looking man with the beret and the popeyes. The square has seen the man's picture in the papers; he's even seen his like, men and women, black and white, in the streets. They used to live in the shadows; now they appear in public, as if the town is theirs.

The square watches as a man in high heels kneels at his feet and smiles up at him like a snake. He's taken into a room where everyone is shouting slogans, the kind of slogans the square has seen on the protest placards people carry on their marches, but here the slogans are in a different language, if it is a language at all: "NOW," they say blankly; "YOU'RE A COW." The square wants to run but he doesn't even know where he is—and by now whoever is listening is beginning to recognize his or her own dim shape in the song. Whoever is listening is beginning to flinch.

The walls of the Albert Hall rise up again, the noise from the crowd stays constant, but seated at the piano Dylan starts the music. The song is a blues, no more, on some nights the biggest blues anyone has ever heard, with Garth Hudson's organ finding a mode so mocking it is sadistic, a whirlpool opening and then laughing at your fear as it closes, with Robbie Robertson's first guitar notes enormous, Godzilla notes, so big they throw the audience back, daring anyone to say the first word—but not this night.

On this night, the last night but one of these weeks in the United Kingdom, the last time but one this music would ever be played, no one is thrown back. Instead wounds are exposed, and the ugly sight quiets the crowd. "Are you sure?" Dylan asks Robbie Robertson, just three weeks past twenty-two; Bob Dylan is an old man, twenty-five years and two days. The crowd can't hear the singer whispering to the man at his side as if he's never been less sure of anything, but they can feel the way he's hovering, or tottering, and the sight is a kind of violence, a terror, a negative, a nothing.

Here it is: nothing. Here you are, all of you. It will take four thousand holes to fill the Albert Hall, and four thousand times nothing is nothing.

* * *

Even as recorded on *Bringing It All Back Home* and *Highway 61 Revisited*, the songs Bob Dylan began offering in 1965, most with rock 'n' roll accompaniment rattling and grand, took shape as treasure maps, and the treasure toward which they pointed was a still-undiscovered sound. By the spring of 1966 the songs had become the treasure. The tale of how this transformation came about is inseparable from the tale of how the music was received. In 1965 and 1966 Bob Dylan's music made a social drama, a drama that resisted all the charms of resolution.

It began at the Newport Folk Festival without any plan. On June 16, in New York City, Dylan had recorded "Like a Rolling Stone" with a band that included New Yorker Al Kooper on organ and Chicagoan Mike Bloomfield, of the Paul Butterfield Blues Band, on lead guitar; meeting up with the two in Rhode Island on July 24, the day "Like a Rolling Stone" went into the charts, the notion of a festival surprise seemed irresistible. Electric music had never been played at Newport, but the Butterfield band was itself set for a blues workshop; the equipment was there. Completing a pickup band with pianist Barry Goldberg, plus Butterfield's drummer Sam Lay and his bassist Jerome Arnold, Dylan rehearsed through the night and showed up the next day, on Newport's main stage, ready to experiment. Pete Seeger, the paragon of the folk revival, the man who represented all of its compassion and nobility, who as the son of the revered folk scholar Charles Seeger embodied a whole, people's enactment of an American folk century, had begun the evening by playing a recording of the cry of a newborn baby. He asked that everyone in the audience sing to the baby, that they tell it into what sort of world it had been born—and "he already knew," wrote Jim Rooney, a mainstay of the folk scene in Cambridge, Massachusetts, "what he wanted others to sing. They were going to sing that it was a world of pollution, bombs, hunger, and injustice, but that PEOPLE would OVERCOME." That was the call. Then Bob Dylan took his turn.

Watching the film of this night, one can see eager young men—Dylan and Mike Bloomfield in particular—taking their cues straight from *High Noon*, or the one-on-one shootouts that throughout their teenage years opened and closed almost every episode of *Gunsmoke.* Cheers greeted a simpering introduction by Peter Yarrow of the folk trio Peter, Paul & Mary, which two years before had made Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind" a huge national hit and a touchstone of the era—"The person who's coming up now, is a person who has, in a sense, changed the face of folk music, to the *large American public*, because he has brought to it, the point of view of a *poet*"—but as the band took the stage and commenced tuning up the crowd was quiet.

Dylan's cry of "Let's go!" is like a leap out of a plane. He leans back on his bootheels, as if daring gravity, an erotic nimbus of certainty and pleasure around his face. Bloomfield crouches low, holding his guitar as a rifle with bayonet fixed, lunging for the sound with crackling noise every time Dylan takes a breath. Dylan is shouting out the caustic black humor of "Maggie's Farm" without range, without any need for it, as if he's just discovered that as a singer he can stomp his foot through the boards. Everything in the music is percussive, a beat building on itself. What began as blues careens into rock 'n' roll a few steps past anything else then abroad in the land.

Backstage Pete Seeger and the great ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax attempted to cut the band's power cables with an axe. Peter Yarrow and singer Theodore Bikel blocked them until a full guard could be rounded up, and the band moved into the slow, stately introduction to "Like a Rolling Stone"—which immediately regressed almost to its studio beginnings as a waltz. The song has a spine that's hard to find, and the band can't find it. As if to compensate Dylan puffs himself up with the declamatory intonations of Humphrey Bogart at the end of *The Maltese Falcon*, Mary Astor in his arms but spurning her pleas for deliverance: *"I won't because all of me wants to."* The rhythm is lost. Then "Phantom Engineer," an early version of what on *Highway 61 Revisited* would be called "It Takes a Lot to Laugh, It Takes a Train to Cry," and again the music is running. With Dylan singing a barbed Plains States drawl and his rhythm guitar pressing for speed, Bloomfield jumps the train and drives it: "I remember," said Sim Webb, Casey Jones's fireman when the Illinois Central 638 smashed into a freight train near Vaughn, Mississippi, on April 30, 1900, "that as I jumped from the cab Casey held down the whistle in a long, piercing scream." Bloomfield gets that sound. "Let's go, man, that's it!" Dylan calls; he left with the band. The sound was harsh at the beginning and it was harsh at the end, and not as harsh as the sound coming from the other side of the stage. From the crowd there were rolls of boos, shouts of derision and contempt, some applause, and the vacuum of people sitting on their hands. Or so it seemed at the time—the so-called booing, many who were there would later claim, was merely a protest against a muddy sound system. Or it was the people in the back, in the cheap seats, who were booing—having misunderstood the well-meant complaints the elite of the folk movement were making in the front, the people in the back not wanting to appear unhip. Within a year, Dylan's performance would have changed all the rules of folk music—or, rather, what had been understood as folk music would as a cultural force have all but ceased to exist. The train was leaving the station, and who wanted to admit he hadn't had a ticket all along? From notes scribbled in the moment by critic Paul

Nelson, a friend of Dylan's since 1959, when they were part of the folk scene in Dinkytown, the bohemian enclave near the University of Minnesota: "There followed the most dramatic thing I've seen: Dylan walking off the stage, the audience booing and yelling 'Get rid of the electric guitar,' Peter Yarrow trying to talk the audience into clapping and trying to talk Dylan into coming back"—"He's going to get an *acous*tic guitar," Yarrow said, unctuously pursing his lips around the middle vowels—"Dylan coming back with tears in his eyes singing 'It's All Over Now, Baby Blue,' a song that I took to be his farewell to Newport, an incredible sadness over Dylan and the audience finally clapping now because the electric guitar was gone." "In penance—in penance!—Dylan put on his old Martin and played," Mike Bloomfield said years later. "To the folk community, rock and roll was greasers, heads, dancers, people who got drunk and boogied. Lightnin' Hopkins had made electric records for twelve years, but he didn't bring his electric band from Texas. No, sir, he came out at Newport like they had just taken him out of the fields, like the tar baby."

"Were you surprised at the first time the boos came?" Dylan was asked at a press conference four months later. "You can't tell where the booing's going to come up," he said, taking in the twenty-five shows he'd played since Newport, from Carnegie Hall to the Hollywood Bowl, from Dallas to Minneapolis, Atlanta to Seattle. "Can't tell at all. It comes up at the weirdest, strangest places, and when it comes it's quite a thing in itself." But "Newport," Dylan said with great amusement, as if looking back on a childhood prank that by some twist of fate got him on national TV and made him a hero to all his friends, "well, I did a very crazy thing. I didn't know what was going to happen, but they certainly booed, I'll tell you that. You could hear it all over the place. I don't know who they were, though," he said—as if, the next time he had the chance, he might see if he could find out.

With Newport behind him Dylan went back to New York City to finish recording *Highway 61 Revisited.* That done, he set about assembling his own band. For two weeks prior to a scheduled appearance at the fifteen-thousand-seat Forest Hills Stadium in Forest Hills, New York, he rehearsed new songs and old with Al Kooper, who had traded organ for electric piano, bassist Harvey Brooks, and guitarist Robbie Robertson and drummer Levon Helm of Toronto's Hawks—a foursome that would last through only one further performance before Dylan made common cause with all five of the Hawks—but if Newport was a spark, Forest Hills was a wildfire.

Fans of Dylan's recent Top 40 hits—"Subterranean Homesick Blues" from the spring of 1965, the new "Like a Rolling Stone"—were there, outnumbered by longtime followers. Appearing first alone, with acoustic guitar and harmonica, Dylan was introduced by hysterical Top 40 disc jockey Murray the K, "The Fifth Beatle" (some said the sixth): "It's not rock, it's not folk, it's a new thing called Dylan! There's a new, swingin' mood in this country, and I think perhaps Bob Dylan is the spearhead of this new mood! It's a new kind of expression, a new kind of telling it like it is, and Mr. Dylan is definitely"—he had to get in his signature phrase, though he sounded almost embarrassed by it—"what's happening, baby." Murray was roundly booed, but Top 40 disc jockeys introducing concerts expected nothing less. Dylan came on, sang songs mostly from *Bringing It All Back Home,* drifting songs of love and transcendence performed in a familiar way. As he almost always did, he included a song the audience had not heard before—in this case "Desolation Row," which would close the still-unreleased *Highway 61 Revisited*: a funny, tense, graceful eleven-minute parable of Utopia as absolute exile and twentieth-century culture as the *Titanic.* The crowd cheered.

When buttoned-down Top 40 disc jockey Good Guy Gary Stevens appeared to introduce the second half of the show, he was booed off the stage almost before he could open his mouth, and with amplifiers and a drum set now waiting in plain sight, these were not the good-natured boos that had greeted Murray the K. This was mean, and just a warm-up. Dylan and his band launched themselves into "Tombstone Blues"—like six of the nine songs in the set, from *Highway 61 Revisited*—and suddenly, from the crowd, not the stage, the sound is that of someone being torn to pieces. People are screaming. Boos like cheers are now only occasional. Instead, in song after song, in instants that seem brought on by nothing in the music, it is as if some barely detectable gesture, somewhere in the audience, momentarily turns factions or merely clumps of bystanders into greater bodies. Again and again a violent shudder passes through the crowd. What one hears on tape thirty years later feels like a riot, or a panic, Forest Hills Stadium now the Odessa Steps, and part of the audience alive with the chance to drive everyone else down them.

The music couldn't keep up with such a frenzy, and in any case it was straight, one-dimensional, with only

flashes of worry or lift, sometimes stiff, sometimes lumbering—sometimes shining, as if in spite of a distracted sound, with the light of its own lyricism. Dylan was not yet singing from inside a band, just fronting one; only on “Ballad of a Thin Man” or the rockers “Tombstone Blues” and “From a Buick 6” was he even able to reach for anything he hadn’t already done in a studio. Al Kooper’s piano caught a trashy streak in “From a Buick 6,” showcasing the purest rock ’n’ roll of the day, Dylan’s fierce and exultant delivery of “I need a steam shovel, mama, to keep away the dead”—a line that brought laughter and applause through a hole in the sheets of demented noise that upended other songs, less drowning them out than, inside the crowd, shattering them.

This sound had been heard before, in the years leading up to this performance—but not in such a setting. The shouts and cries of individuals merging into a sound far more ugly and cruel than any one person could produce was the sound of white men and women, girls and boys, addressing nine black teenagers as they walked for the first time, and the second, and the third, into the halls of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957; it was the sound of white students rioting, and killing, as Federal troops brought black student James Meredith to the campus of Ole Miss in Oxford, Mississippi, in 1962; it was the sound of white men in the Greyhound bus station in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1961, beating Freedom Riders—black and white Americans who had determined to travel together through the South as if the Constitution guaranteed their right to do so—to the edge of death, leaving unconscious bodies scattered like trash on the benches and the floor. And it was partly this sound that, just after the Forest Hills concert, led folk singer Phil Ochs to say what many other people were thinking—something Al Kooper was thinking as he bailed out of Dylan’s band one show after Forest Hills, contemplating two scheduled dates in Texas: “Look what they did to J.F.K. down there.”

It wasn’t the first time Kooper had such a thought. Since they lived nearby, he and Harvey Brooks had driven to Forest Hills themselves and parked in the regular parking lot. With the show over and Kooper filled with thoughts of the moment when people rushed the stage and he was knocked off his piano stool, of the shouts of “fucking scumbag,” of how for “Ballad of a Thin Man” Dylan, at his own piano, had tried to quiet the crowd by playing the opening notes again and again, for minutes, until finally he gave up and finished the song—after all that, Kooper and Brooks realized that to get to their cars they were going to have to walk through the crowd.

It sounds funny; it wasn’t at the time. “I was scared,” Kooper, a tall man with presence and authority in the way he moves, said in 1995. Going back, he is all strategy: “We realized they would recognize us. It was best we walked straight ahead, close together. I didn’t know if we were going to get out of there alive.”

Phil Ochs had the nerve to say it out loud, in print, at the time:

I wonder what’s going to happen. I don’t know if Dylan can get on the stage a year from now. I don’t think so. I mean the phenomenon of Dylan will be so much that it will be dangerous … Dylan has become part of so many people’s psyches—and there’re so many screwed up people in America, and death is such a part of the American scene now.

These were not idle words, and for reasons that go beyond the fact that Bob Dylan would not be on a stage a year from the time Ochs spoke, just as he would not appear again at the Newport Folk Festival for thirty-seven years. Ochs’s scared, awkward language might have been that of anyone honestly attempting to acknowledge the awful current that had begun to run through public life in America. It was a current that had already left not only John F. Kennedy but Medgar Evers and Malcolm X assassinated; that in a few years would claim not only George Lincoln Rockwell, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy, but Andy Warhol; a current that as it diffused throughout the land as serial murder and the now commonplace one-day mass murder story of “MAN KILLS FAMILY/COWORKERS,SELF” would touch as well George Wallace in Laurel, Maryland; Marcus Foster in Oakland, California; Gerald Ford in Sacramento and San Francisco; Alberta Williams King—Mrs. Martin Luther King, Sr.—in Atlanta, and Larry Flynt in Lawrenceville, Georgia; Leo Ryan in Jonestown; George Moscone and Harvey Milk in San Francisco; Vernon Jordan in Fort Wayne, Indiana; Allard Lowenstein and John Lennon in New York City; Ronald Reagan in Washington, D.C.; Alan Berg in Denver; and Selena Quintanilla Perez in Corpus Christi, Texas. It is possible that for a time Bob Dylan took a place in that line, and even traced it—for a moment, by the intensity of his performance and the breach that performance opened up in his particular cultural milieu, extended it.

* * *

His milieu was that of the folk revival—an arena of native tradition and national metaphor, of self-discovery and self-invention. Here one sought and expected to take people as they appeared to be. It was a place of the spirit, where authenticity in song and manner, in being, was the highest value—the value against which all forms of discourse, all attributes inherited or assumed, were measured. One could make oneself up, as Bob Dylan did—creating a persona that caught Charlie Chaplin, James Dean, and Lenny Bruce in talk and gesture, Woody Guthrie and the French symbolists in writing, and perhaps most deeply such nearly forgotten 1920s stylists as mountain balladeer Dock Boggs and New Orleans blues singer Rabbit Brown in voice—but only if, whatever one's sources, the purest clay was always evident, real American red earth.

The folk revival, the historian Robert Cantwell wrote in 1993, looking back on a milieu that had disappeared, "made the romantic claim of folk culture—oral, immediate, traditional, idiomatic, communal, a culture of characters, of rights, obligations, and beliefs, against a centrist, specialist, impersonal, technocratic culture, a culture of types, functions, jobs, and goals." Folk chronicler Robert Shelton, writing in 1968, still believing he was part of a movement whose future remained to be made, set forth this argument not as argument but as wish, as faith:

What the folk revivalists were saying, in effect, was: "There's another way out of the dilemma of modern urban society that will teach us all about who we are. There are beautiful, simple, relatively uncomplicated people living in the country close to the soil, who have their own identities, their own backgrounds. They know who they are, and they know what their culture is because they make it themselves"… Long before the Kennedy Administration posited the slogan, "The New Frontier," the folk revivalists were exploring their own new frontier, traveling to the country, in actuality or imagination, trying to find out if there was truly a more exciting life in America's continuing past.

Thus when Bob Dylan sang the antebellum song of runaway slaves, "No More Auction Block" (or "Many Thousands Gone"), or when he took its melody to fashion his own tale of repression and resistance, "Blowin' in the Wind," a tale for the present and the future, he symbolized an entire complex of values, a whole way of being in the world. But while he symbolized a scale of values that placed, say, the country over the city, labor over capital, sincerity over education, the unspoiled nobility of the common man and woman over the businessman and the politician, or the natural expressiveness of the folk over the self-interest of the artist, he also symbolized two things more deeply, and these were things that could not be made into slogans or summed up by programmatic exposition or romantic appreciation. As Bob Dylan sang—like Joan Baez, Pete Seeger, or any of hundreds of other folk singers, but more powerfully, and more nakedly—or as he was heard, he embodied a yearning for peace and home in the midst of noise and upheaval, and in the aesthetic reflection of that embodiment located both peace and home in the purity, the essential goodness, of each listener's heart. It was this purity, this glimpse of a democratic oasis unsullied by commerce or greed, that in the late 1950s and early 1960s so many young people began to hear in the blues and ballads first recorded in the 1920s and 1930s, by people mostly from small towns and tiny settlements in the South, a strange and foreign place to most who were now listening—music that seemed the product of no ego but of the inherent genius of a people—the people—people one could embrace and, perhaps, become. It was the sound of another country—a country that, once glimpsed from afar, could be felt within oneself. That was the folk revival.

As an art movement, the folk revival was rooted in the nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century song collecting—in England and Scotland, in Appalachia, in the Deep South—of Francis Child of Harvard, Cecil Sharp of London, John Lomax of Mississippi and Texas, Bascom Lamar Lunsford of North Carolina, and many more. As a social movement it emerged out of the aggressively defensive Americanism of the American Communist Party, the ideology of the Popular Front, and the vast and fecund art projects of the New Deal. As a fact, the folk revival was brought to life for the public at large in 1958 by the Kingston Trio's "Tom Dooley"—a hearty (perfect for singalongs), insistently mysterious performance of a traditional, quite local Appalachian murder ballad, with allusions to barely described characters and unspoken motives drifting into dark hollows and disappearing in the woods' surround. What *is* this? the radio almost asked every time the tune came on. It was, it turned out, a true-crime fable about the 1866 killing of one Laura Foster by her ex-lover Tom Dula and his new lover Annie Melton—an event that, depending on how you look at it, took ninety-two years, or just over the six months from the time of the disc's release, to travel from an unmapped corner of the national psyche to number one, from Wilkes County, North Carolina, to every

town and hamlet in the Great Forty-eight.

For all this, though, there is a reason why, in the annals of American history, the folk revival is only a footnote, if it is that. More than its own art movement, its own social movement, or its own fact, the folk revival was part of something much bigger, more dangerous, and more important: the civil rights movement. That is where its moral energy came from—its sense of a world to rediscover, to bring back to life, and to win. The two movements were fraternal twins, for the civil rights movement was also a rediscovery, a revival: of the Constitution.

The folk revival reached its height in the summer of 1963, at the Newport Folk Festival and the March on Washington, the latter an event that itself entered into American folklore as the occasion of the speech by Martin Luther King, Jr., that ended with crescendos of "I HAVE A DREAM." At Newport on July 26, the festival closed with Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Pete Seeger, Theodore Bikel, Peter, Paul & Mary, and the Freedom Singers—the stars white, the white-shirted Freedom ensemble black—singing Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind," then linking arms and holding hands for the old Baptist hymn "We Shall Overcome," now the anthem of the civil rights movement. Symbolically, they spoke for the nation, or their nation; three weeks later, King spoke for and to the nation directly.

All who stood on the stage at Newport were present on August 28 when three hundred thousand people from all over the country gathered before the Lincoln Memorial. Some were black preachers and civil rights workers from Louisiana and Alabama who had left their fire-bombed churches and bullet-riddled communal homes to travel to the capital by bus or in old cars; some were affluent white college students who had flown in from California. They took their places in the Washington sun as the nation watched on television, as George Washington watched as pure abstraction from his monument in the distance, and then they called upon the sitting administration, the Congress, the courts, their own governors, their own legislators, their mayors, councilmen, school boards, sheriffs, police chiefs, and the people at large to honor themselves by honoring their national charter, to reaffirm the credo of equal justice under the law.

Bob Dylan like everyone else was there to hear King replace the Old Testament jeremiads of Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address with a New Testament sunburst that, so many years later, still sounds like a miracle unfolding, a waking of the dead. Speaking little more than a month before the surrender of the South, with John Wilkes Booth and his accomplices present in the crowd, Lincoln had taken the country back to the foreboding piety of its Puritan founders.

The Almighty has His own purposes. "Woe unto the world because of offenses! for it must needs be that offenses come; but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh!" If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South, this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a Living God ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bondman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn by the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

With the rolling cadences of the trained orator, yet picking up the burrs and cracks of the Reverend J. M. Gates, the most famous black preacher of the 1920s, whose recordings of thrilling sermons sold in the hundreds of thousands, King invoked the Declaration of Independence, the Gettysburg Address, and "My Country 'Tis of Thee." He made them his own—and anyone's. Again and again he evoked the call and response of the black church, as the people nearest him turned themselves into an Amen Corner and answered his rhetoric with eager hosannas. And then, with all metaphors assembled, ranging across the continent from mountaintop to mountaintop, in one of only two American political speeches that can be compared to Lincoln's, he reached the peroration that shocked the nation with its eloquence. One could almost believe, listening then—or, worse, now—that the debt finally had been paid.

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, and the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.

That was the faith of the folk revival. This was its platform—the promise it made to the nation—and in the early 1960s the Newport Folk Festival was, for those who took part, a national convention, less a counter to the merely quadrennial conventions of Republicans and Democrats than a rebuke. Here were brought together the privileged and the forgotten, white students from the finest colleges and their academic elders along with rediscovered and reclaimed singers and musicians from the past, unheard for thirty, for forty years, black guitarists and white banjo players who now stood together on stage, gathered for photos, as they never had in the official America: Skip James of Mississippi, Buell Kazee of Kentucky, Mississippi John Hurt, Eck Robertson of Arkansas, Son House of Mississippi, Dock Boggs of Virginia, Clarence Ashley of North Carolina, legends all, now addressing an audience, a society in miniature, a country in fantasy, they could hardly have imagined existed. Their authenticity was in their hands and faces and it could not be questioned; as authentic beings they sealed the words and airs of those who now, Bob Dylan first among them, sought their many pieces that together made their one true voice.

Even as a folk singer, Bob Dylan moved too fast, learned too quickly, made the old new too easily; to many he was always suspect. From 1963 at Newport there is a photo that sums it up, a picture of graffiti scribbled on an ad, for sportswear, apparently: over bare legs and a pair of shorts someone has written "Bob Dylan doesn't know his ethnic musicology." *"That's the point!"* someone else has written; someone else has crossed out the last part of "doesn't" so that it reads "does"; and a fourth person, as if to seal this whole discussion (though for all one knows, in the archaeology of graffiti, this hand began it), has written "ASSASINS" in the biggest letters of all, though someone else has thoughtfully added the missing *S.* Still, as at the March on Washington Bob Dylan sang "The Ballad of Medgar Evers" (later released as "Only a Pawn in Their Game"), or shared a phone call with President Kennedy in "I Shall Be Free," or laughed at George Lincoln Rockwell in "Talkin' John Birch Paranoid Blues" (the "one man," he said of the head of the American Nazi Party, "who's really a true American"), his wit and passion—his ability to dramatize—overrode most doubts. Here he entered a kingdom where suffering and injustice, freedom and right, were the coin of the realm, and he spun injustice into right, straw into gold: this is where "With God on Our Side," "Blowin' in the Wind," "The Times They Are A-Changin'," and "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall"—the songs that took him past his contemporaries—came from.

These songs were embraced as great social dramas, but they were not really dramas at all. Whether one hears them ringing true or false, they were pageants of righteousness, and while within these pageants there were armies and generations, heroes and villains, nightmares and dreams, there were almost no individuals. There was no room for them in the kind of history these songs were prophesying—and certainly none for the selfish, confused, desirous individual who might suspect that his or her own story could fit no particular cause or even purpose. These songs distilled the values of the folk revival better than any others, and what they said was that, in the face of the objective good that was the Grail of the folk revival, there could be no such thing as subjectivity. Could anyone imagine Pete Seeger demanding a world organized, even for a moment, according to his foibles and perverse desires? Could anyone even imagine him having foibles or perverse desires? In the folk revival such a subjective demand on the world was all but indistinguishable from nihilism—the nihilism, in Manny Farber's words, "of doing go-for-broke art and not caring what comes of it"—and that was because of a fatal confusion in its fundamental notion of authenticity, at its heart the philosophy of the folk revival, its idea of the meaning of life.

Art was the speech of the folk revival—and yet, at bottom, the folk revival did not believe in art at all. Rather, life—a certain kind of life—equaled art, which ultimately meant that life replaced it.

The kind of life that equaled art was life defined by suffering, deprivation, poverty, and social exclusion. In folklore this was nothing new. "Thanks to folksong collectors' preconceptions and judicious selectivity, artwork and life were found to be identical," historian Georgina Boyes writes in *The imagined village.* "The ideological innocence which was the essence of the immemorial peasant was also a 'natural' characteristic of the Folk and their song." A complete dissolution of art into life is present in such a point of view: the poor are art because they sing their lives without mediation and without reflection, without the false consciousness of capitalism and the false desires of advertising. As they live in an organic community—buttressed, almost to this present day, from the corrupt outside world—any song belongs to all and none belongs to anyone in particular. Thus it is not the singer who sings the song but the song that sings the singer, and therefore in performance it is the singer, not the song, that is the aesthetic artifact, the work of art. In a perfect world, in

the future, everyone will live this way.

That is a leftist translation of what began as a genteel, paternalistic philosophy; it is a version of socialist realism. In 1966 folklorist Ellen J. Stekert saw it alive in the folk revival, and traced it to Communist folk music circles in New York in the 1930s. Woody Guthrie and Aunt Molly Jackson, she wrote, celebrated as great artists by their sponsors, were not even good artists, judged either by the traditional standards they were seen to embody or by the urban standards of their primary, political audience, which embraced them for political reasons—because the singers brought authenticity to the politics. "It was a pitiful confusion," Stekert wrote. "It was monstrous for urbanites to confuse poverty with art." When art is confused with life, it is not merely art that is lost. When art equals life there is no art, but when life equals art there are no people. "The tobacco sheds of North Carolina are in it and all of the blistered and hurt and hardened hands cheated and left empty, hurt and left crying," Woody Guthrie himself wrote of Sonny Terry's harmonica playing. He didn't say if Sonny Terry was in it.

This, finally, is what Bob Dylan turned away from—in the most spectacular way. In September 1965, as the furor over his replacement of object with subject was growing, he tried, at a press conference in Austin, Texas, site of his first performance with the Hawks, to explain. He argued, it seems, that in a profound sense his music was still folk music, though that was a term he would refuse soon enough: "Call it historical-traditional music." Despite the phrase, it was as if he saw traditional music as being made less by history or circumstance than by particular people, for particular, unknowable reasons—reasons that find their analogue in haunts and spirits. One can hear him insisting that the songs he had been writing and performing over the previous year were those in which events and philosophies with which one could identify had been replaced by allegories that could dissolve received identities. Such songs as "Desolation Row," "Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues," "Bob Dylan's 115th Dream," "Highway 61 Revisited," "Tombstone Blues"—somber or uproarious songs populated by Beethoven and Ma Rainey, Ophelia and Cleopatra, Columbus and Captain Ahab, Poor Howard and Georgia Sam, Abraham and Isaac, Mexican cops on the take and the fifth daughter on the twelfth night—carried the tradition in which he had taken his place. "What folk music is," he said, it's not Depression songs … its foundations aren't *work*, its foundations aren't "slave away" and all this. Its foundations are—except for Negro songs which are based on that and just kind of overlapped—the main body of it is just based on myth and the Bible and plague and famine and all kinds of things like that which are nothing but mystery and you can see it in all the songs. Roses growing right up out of people's hearts and naked cats in bed with spears growing right out of their backs and seven years of this and eight years of that and it's all really something that nobody can really touch.

But this sort of talk was simply one more allegory. It quieted no one's anger and calmed nobody's despair. For when Dylan turned away from the equation of life and art, when he followed where his music led him, he turned away not just from a philosophical proposition but from an entire complex of beliefs and maxims that to so many defined what was good and what was bad. Thus when he appeared before them holding a garishly shaped and colored electric guitar and dressed in a bizarre tight suit that looked like a single piece of checkered cloth, like some medieval court fool's costume bought on Carnaby Street, he signified no mere apostasy, but the destruction of hope. As he stood on the stage he was seen to affirm the claims of the city over the country, and capital over labor—and also the claims of the white artist over the black Folk, selfishness over compassion, rapacity over need, the thrill of the moment over the trials of endurance, the hustler over the worker, the thief over the orphan. In the crowd, many would clench their fists and gather their breath in anger and disgust, feeling, if not quite picturing, whole dramas of despoliation: coal companies stripping eons of natural wonder and centuries of culture off the southern highlands where the treasured old ballads were still sung; police beating peaceful black teenagers bloody and even to death; the whole planet convulsed by hydrogen bombs.

Dylan's performance now seemed to mean that he had never truly been where he had appeared to be only a year before, reaching for that democratic oasis of the heart—and that if he had never been there, those who had felt themselves there with him had not been there. If his heart was not pure, one had to doubt one's own. It was as if it had all been a trick—a trick he had played on them and that they had played on themselves. That was the source of the betrayal felt when Bob Dylan turned to his band, and he along with Danko and Robertson turned to face the drummer, who raised his drumstick, the three guitarists now leaping into the air and twisting off their feet to face the crowd as the drummer brought the stick down for the first beat. That

was the source of the rage.

* * *

When they landed on their feet before the crowd they realized it had become like a play, with the audience, having learned its part, now the performers, and the performers now the audience, there to react to the sound of the crowd.

The noise led Levon Helm to quit in doubt and despair by the end of November ("Everyone who wasn't telling Bob the combination was wrong for him," Robertson said years later, "was telling us it was wrong for us"), but by then the sound had caught up with the crowd. And the crowds were not all the same. In Berkeley, in early December of 1965, people fidgeted in their seats during the first, acoustic, solo half of the show. Despite a "Desolation Row" that brought laughter and a still-unfinished version of "Visions of Johanna" that was like a bad dream the singer had the power to end at will, a power he refused to use, this was something to wait out before the promised shock and tumult. As Ralph J. Gleason so memorably put it in the *San Francisco Chronicle* a few days later, when the curtains opened for the second set "Dylan's band went over like the discovery of gold."1

It was as if the people there desperately wanted the performance to be as good as it was, as if they wanted it to be the best they'd ever seen. It was the best I ever saw. There was rattle and crash in an opening "Tombstone Blues," and a momentum, a charge over the next hill, that the earlier combos had not touched. Overwhelmingly loud, the sound had room in it. "It Ain't Me, Babe" was cut to a slow cadence, almost a march, on the verses; on the chorus Robbie Robertson threw out a flurry of notes like tiny firecrackers, and Dylan's singing shifted from certainty to wail. The arrangement was dark, gloomy, creating an ambience that made the listener feel trapped and implied the musicians held the key; there was happiness in the performance, and cruelty too. In a long break in the middle of the song, Robertson is contemplative, sure, mathematical; then it's as if, by accident, he chances upon a loose thread in the piece, so he pulls, the song unravels, it falls apart in your hands, but in his hands, on the stage, the song is suddenly whole again, and moving on. "I Don't Believe You," "Ballad of a Thin Man," and "Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues" don't have the careening, desperate cast they would take on a few months later in the United Kingdom—there was no need for it. Time after time Dylan turned to Robertson, their guitars just inches apart, his face cracked by a smile that didn't close: there was pleasure all over the music. The one song that did carry over into the last weeks in the British Isles was the one least burdened by the signs and portents fans heard in Dylan's music, or piled onto it: "Baby, Let Me Follow You Down." It was an old folk song, with a good guitar line; on Dylan's first album, where he carefully credited Eric von Schmidt, the man from whom he'd learned the tune, as folk singers were supposed to do ("I met him one day in the green pastures of, uh … Harvard University"), the music had a mournful tinge, the regret of a man coming on too strong. But now the music was an insistence that anything could be transformed and that there was no such thing as coming on too strong. As he would until that closing night in London, with this number Dylan drew the breath of the audience as one for the force he put into the sliding, then leaping harmonica notes that, with Rick Danko counting off the beat, spun the circling song into the air. Line by line, each verse grew in fervor and hilarity:

I'll buy you a ball of twine
Honey, just to see you climb
I'll do anything in this godamighty world
If you just won't again drive me out of my mind

In America, this music was, in a way, prophetic. At the very least the sound and its reception prefigured an America that, soon enough, for everyone, would be all too familiar: a country split in half over race and war, with battles in the streets, guns fired on college campuses, ghastly riots in cities across the nation, leaders falling to assassins as if on a schedule set by public fantasy, screamers driven from meeting halls with clubs, common citizens driven from their streets with gas and bullets. But in the United Kingdom, where after eight months on the road the ensemble had likely reached the limits of their capacities, and reveled at the fact, the hatred for Dylan's new music and for what he had become was somehow more abstract than in the United States, and more impersonal—uglier. It was as if he had betrayed not simply the Freedom Singers, or Woody Guthrie, or the fan who was now shouting, but the Folk immemorial, the mystic chords of memory, the very instinct that history contained identity and one could claim it. In any case the response now made the controversies of the past seasons fade into their own abstraction. In the music Dylan and the Hawks sent off

stages in May of 1966, absurdity wars with terror, terror with exultation, exultation with loathing. It was all too much; it couldn't last, and it didn't.

Again and again, it is as if the whole of the drama is contained in a single incident. There is that famous moment in Manchester, at the end of the show. Dylan and the crowd have been fighting, sparring. Many in the audience clap slowly, in unison: *rap … rap … rap …* The sound defeats any other rhythm. Against a flurry of shouts Dylan begins to mumble what is apparently a story into the microphone, but as gibberish, until finally the crowd quiets out of simple curiosity: *What* is he saying? The music this night is overwhelming. "Tell Me, Momma," a song that emerged on the tour, opens every show, and there are never any boos for this one. It's too strong, it comes on too fast. Dylan rides the roar of movement the band throws up around him like a surfer in the pipeline, his only way home a wish to absorb every bit of energy in the physics of the instant and then add more. A snide, funny, baffled, empathetic set of lyrics seems no more than an excuse to prove this is the best band in the world. Garth Hudson seems to be playing a blast furnace, Rick Danko a monochord, Robbie Robertson a guitar yet to be invented. Listening to the way each musician seemingly plays off of every other's barely unfulfilled desire rather than whatever movement he has in fact made makes it impossible to believe that six people could ever know each other better. Yet all that comradeship will be burned off by the crowd as the night goes on; the chord Robbie Robertson gets to open "Ballad of a Thin Man" could not be more shocking, bloodier, and the crowd shuts down. And then, as if he had been waiting, well informed as to the precise order in which Dylan played his songs, 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," he 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. A band member can feel the night beginning to crumble: "C'mon, man," he says helplessly. Dylan turns back to the band: "Play fucking loud." They dive into the last song, "Like a Rolling Stone"; there were no encores at these shows.

"Come on, Bob, SING!" roared a man out of a cold and growing hubbub in Sheffield; it's a wonderful sound, warm and coming from deep in the chest, but on the official and unofficial recordings of the tour it is unique. People rose from their seats and walked out en masse. People brought protest signs into the halls, including "STOP THE WAR"—not the war in Vietnam, but this one. The music grew in violence, in extremism. In Liverpool, in the midst of "Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues," a song about being in a place where you don't belong, the pressure increased with every verse. At Forest Hills, in Berkeley, across the United States, the performance of this song clung to its beginnings on *Highway 61 Revisited* as a lament, a twist of Marty Robbins's "El Paso" into the Coasters' "Smokey Joe's Cafe," a certain south-of-the-border who-cares dragging at the song's heels. But not anymore. Now every word is loaded, its delivery sounding alarms, the musicians ignoring them. Too much pressure—until you feel that if not the musicians, or the audience, then the characters in the song are about to burst from it—until finally the six on the stage are so caught up in the music they become mere figments of it. With only the thinnest gravity holding the performance together, a sound comes up from Hudson's organ, like the footsteps of a monster, a dragon bursting from its cave beneath the stage where it has slept for a thousand years, a roiling sound, the sound of a power beyond the ability of anyone on the stage or in the crowd to master, a genie out of its bottle for good. At just that instant when it seems the image can no longer hold, Dylan gives a long, high, wordless cry—a cry of delight. This is what it was for, that right to disappear, to be transfigured, to return an instant later as a being you yourself no longer recognize.

The same energies were sometimes at play in the first, acoustic half of the concerts, where, in false respect and false appreciation, the crowds conducted a kind of silent war, a phony peace. In Leicester Dylan began "Mr. Tambourine Man," and it would take him nine perfect minutes to find an ending in the song he could accept. As he sings his words are clipped, his diction almost effete, as if each word can and must be presented as if it means exactly what it says. But very quickly this odd speech becomes its own kind of rhythm, and paradoxically it releases the burden Dylan has seemingly placed on each word, and each word along with every other floats, and the song becomes a dream of peace of mind. You cease to hear the words.

For nine minutes what you hear are two long harmonica solos, each pressing well past two minutes—solos that sway, back and forth, back and forth, a cradle rocking in their rhythm, until without warning the sound rises up like a water spout, hundreds of feet in the air, the cradle now rocking at its top, then down again, safe in the arms of the melody. "Who'll rock the cradle, who'll sing the song?" sang Dock Boggs of Norton, Virginia, in 1927, in "Sugar Baby," a record Bob Dylan loved, and Boggs answered himself, all menace, like a killer offering his victim the last words she will ever hear: "I'll rock the cradle, I'll sing the song / I'll rock the cradle when you gone." But there is nothing like that here, now; that comes in the second half of the show. "Nobody has any *respect*," Dylan shuddered in the midst of "Ballad of a Thin Man" in Birmingham, the word shredding, as if it contained all the evil in the world and could not hold it, the crowd now flinching in its turn at what its rancor, what its hatred, what its bigotry had revealed.

* * *

On that night, then, in the Royal Albert Hall, "Ballad of a Thin Man" began slowly, as if all the motive in the song was suspended between each note of the first phrase, which itself seemed suspended, pressing against a freeze. The guitar began a theme but didn't shape it. The piano came in, as if it would rather have been anywhere else. The bass sealed the moment, for lack of anything better to do. The result was creepy—and simultaneously clandestine and public, inaccessible to anyone outside the group of six on the stage, yet as always beckoning, a secret language anyone could understand, that could break the code you used to hold yourself in place. The performance turned the wheel of its lassitude, and then without warning the wheel went off its track. "You *know* something is happening," Dylan screamed from the piano. "And it's happening without you!"

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One night, in Cardiff, Wales, Dylan greeted Johnny Cash backstage. As caught by D. A. Pennebaker's camera, Cash is thin, his face scarred. At thirty-three he looks like cancer.

The two men sit down at a piano and begin searching for the melody in Cash's "I Still Miss Someone," a lovely, seemingly traditional ballad. Dylan bangs the keys with leaden fingers, and together he and Cash reach for the first line: "At my door—" They miss. "At my doooooor…" They stop. They're too tired, or too wasted, to find the song they're looking for. It's the simplest song in the world and they can't touch it. Cash punches Dylan in the chest. "Oh my God!" Dylan says, trying not to laugh. "You wouldn't do that to your best friend!" They turn back to the piano and stumble to the end of the chorus: "And I still miss someone." "You sing it," Dylan says, "I'll sing harmony." "At my *door*," Cash groans, then, "at my *doooooor*," lifting the last word. The piano begins to ring. Something begins to come into focus, then it's gone.

With everything coming out of their mouths a drunken slurring, the notes on the piano now begin to gong. Each note is separate, standing alone. You can hear one note fade completely into the air before the next note begins; the theme is all in pieces. Cash follows the broken line Dylan is drawing like a man trying to negotiate a DUI test on the side of a highway, but Dylan is on another road. His piano is stately now, full of silences and room for visions; the gonging has turned to chiming, and the chiming makes the ratty backstage into a church. As Cash begins to ride the melody, Dylan presses for a rhythm the country song won't give up. The notes come faster, hitting each other as they rise and fall, and the song itself begins to play. Its door opens, its leaves fall, its singer stands gazing out over his garden, or a prairie, or a river. He looks out across the landscape of his life, and all he sees are those blue eyes: "I see them everywhere." But the piano stops: "… the melody," Dylan says thickly, "I can't remember this." Cash mutters through a fog too deep to penetrate, as if from the far side of sixty. "That's the greatest song I ever heard," says Dylan, suddenly bright and eager, sounding at least seventeen.

They try again; Dylan picks up the pace slightly, takes the song, his voice raw and high, with Cash just a burr, the rhythm of his fatigue countering the rhythm of Dylan's reach for notes he can't hit, notes that seem to be straining as hard toward him as he is toward them. They go on; they fall short again.

"At my doooooor," Cash tries once more, then stops. "No, no," he says to Dylan, "let's do it your way." "Oh, my way," Dylan says, as if this is the best joke of the night, "my way *sucks*." "If I do it too," Cash says, unsteadily but warmly, like an older brother, "it'll make you look good." The best joke of the night is now a better one. "Well," Dylan says, "I'm not known for looking good—Don't you dare! I've—" (there are words that can't be made out), "I—" (or that never quite got made), "Why, I'll mystify this whole *room!*"

They banter for a moment more, Cash leans back, and then without a pause Dylan hits the keys hard.

Coming directly off the last words of the conversation (“You didn’t know I was a piano player, did you?” “Yeah, I did too”), a theme far more suggestive than any found in their earlier palavers comes up. Dylan opens his mouth, and wind and rain come out. The lights in the room seem to dim. Even if he is making it up out of the air, the song he’s now singing feels older than the grandparents of anyone in the room and more familiar than anyone’s own face. There are a few words, and a scattered blues melody—“I bought me a ticket, for a one-way train,” Dylan sings, completely and happily lost, utterly alone even as Johnny Cash comes in for the next line, “I bought me a ticket, for a one-way track”—and as the film runs out in the camera Dylan disappears into the tunnel of the song. When he finally comes out on the other side he is in another country: the U.S.A., to be sure, though for the moment this is an America that exists only in the basement of a big pink house, a country that no one has exactly inhabited before. “Lo and behold!” he exclaims. “Lo and behold!”

Users Review

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