A black and white close-up portrait of Bob Dylan, looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. His curly hair is prominent. Overlaid on the image is the name "Bob Dylan" in a large, bold, white serif font with a thick orange drop shadow.

Bob Dylan

*a brief, subjective guide to his work
by Reid Belew*

+

*The original essay, "Bringing Us All
Back Home: A Love Letter to Bob
Dylan" by
Eli Nichols*

email for talking

Table of Contents

- A Specific Disclaimer to Start Everything or “Yeah But He Sucks At Singing and Can’t Play Guitar”

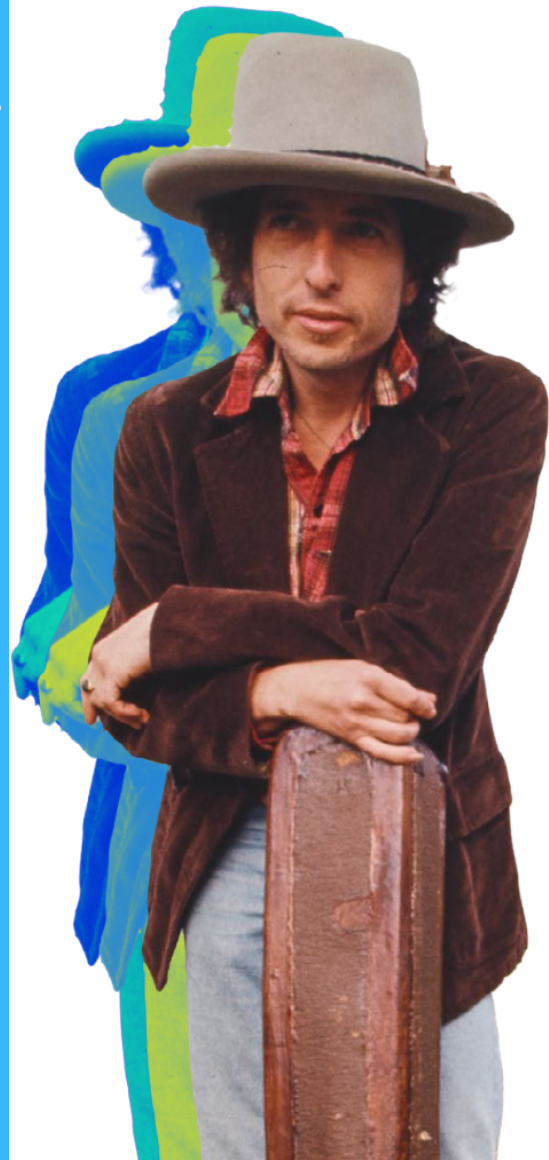
- Origin Story

- Key Records

- 25 Essential (read: not the best, the most important, or the most influential - - just ones you’ve gotta hear) Dylan Songs Down to the Specific Version (in no particular order).

- Selected Lyrics

- The original essay, “Bringing Us All Back Home: A Love Letter to Bob Dylan” by Eli Nichols



A Specific Disclaimer to Start Everything or “Yeah But He Sucks At Singing and Can’t Play Guitar”

It seems only right that a guide to Bob Dylan addresses the most common critique of Dylan. It doesn't take the form of a specific statement, but I believe it's often presented as a jab at Dylan's talent. Some even get the courage to say "overrated." I think many people hear Dylan and think "that's not so hard" or "the lyrics don't make sense."

There's a certain type of person (me, circa 2011) who loudly and frequently takes aim at cultural megaliths simply because they are cultural megaliths. It's easy, low hanging fruit. It's a formula:

" (something beloved by millions) is so (unspecific, negative adjective) !"

Except that's not really what that person means. What I always meant was something closer to:

"I have amazing tastes, and it's because of that that I don't easily like extremely popular things. I'm saying this out loud disguised as a vague critique so that the phrase 'Wow, they really must know a lot about (this topic)' sticks in your brain and becomes a key part of how you think of me when we meet again."

Oftentimes, these critiques are attempted to be bolstered by cookie-cutter sentiments that are so vague that they can't really be pushed against. I'd recommend this method of critique if you don't care for something, but are afraid that saying "It just isn't for me" paints you as uninteresting (it doesn't, by the way. It paints you as honest).

Bob Dylan gets this sort of heat a lot from people who have only ever seen Post Malone's cover of "Don't Think Twice, It's Alright" or can hum along to "Mr. Tambourine Man." Typically, they'll chide Dylan's voice or mock his guitar style.

The most important American musician is not what anyone would call a good singer. Many folks can sing "better" than Dylan. The quality and timbre of one's voice is the one part of singing we don't have a lot of control over, and the parts we do have control over: dynamics, melody-crafting, phrasing, a sense of rhythm, enunciation, and harmony creation--Dylan had these gifts in spades. These are the aspects of singing that we never think about, because many of us hold this notion that singing is just something you do. The vast majority of us do not have any experience in working on a melody for days or weeks on end trying to find

the right combination of notes. This is all hidden, unseen work, but it is part of being a singer.

He *is* one of the most gifted singers in history, and yes, the quality of his voice is untraditional, especially given the polished, rehearsed era he achieved fame during. Few can create hypnotic, memorable, endearing melodies like Dylan.

And I would suggest that it's precisely because of Dylan's voice that we find his songs so accessible. He's just like all of us: not a professional singer.

Except that he is and we aren't.



Origin Story

Robert Allen Zimmerman was born on May 24th, 1941, in Duluth, Minnesota to Abram Zimmerman and Beatrice "Beatty" Stone. The Zimmerman family lived in Duluth until Bob was 6 years old. His father contracted polio, and the family moved to Hibbing, Minnesota to be near Beatty's family.

Bob was a voracious radio-listener. Blues and country stations out of Shreveport, Louisiana were his favorite. Bob was pushed forward by his love for Jerry Lee Lewis, Elvis Presley, and Little Richard. In high school, Bob joined and started many rock and roll bands, most notably the Golden Chords, and a band Bob fronted under the stage name "Elston Gunn."

While attending college at the University of Minnesota, Bob began performing at local cafes and coffee shops under the name "Bob Dillon." It's often said that Bob took on the "Bob Dylan" moniker after the Welsh poet, Dylan Thomas. Originally, Bob styled his stage name as "Bob Dillon" after Matt Dillon in "Gunsmoke." Fearing it too obvious, Bob chose to write his last name like Dylan Thomas' first name. So it came from Gunsmoke, but is styled after the poet. Just a small clarification.

Dylan spent his college years transitioning from

rock and roll to folk music. Later in his life, Dylan talked about this change and said:

"The thing about rock'n'roll is that for me anyway it wasn't enough ... There were great catch-phrases and driving pulse rhythms ... but the songs weren't serious or didn't reflect life in a realistic way. I knew that when I got into folk music, it was more of a serious type of thing. The songs are filled with more despair, more sadness, more triumph, more faith in the supernatural, much deeper feelings."

Dylan dropped out of college his senior year to pursue music in New York City, though music wasn't his only hope for New York City. Dylan's idol was Woody Guthrie, and Woody Guthrie was on his deathbed with Huntington's disease at Greystone Park Psychiatric Hospital. Dylan said he was going to become Guthrie's "greatest disciple," and even visited Guthrie in the hospital.

Dylan settled into the famous Greenwich Village folk music scene, being mentored by Dave Van Ronk and Liam Clancy of the Clancy Brothers. Clancy once told a nervous Dylan before a performance, "No fear. No envy. No meanness," which Dylan cites as an important moment in his career.

Dylan eventually secured a 2-week residency at Gerde's Folk City, opening for John Lee Hooker. As fate would have it, The New York Times' Robert Shelton was in the crowd for one of those performances and promptly wrote a rave review of Dylan. Shortly after, Dylan was invited to play harmonica on Carolyn Hester's third record, where he caught the ear of famous record producer John Hammond, who signed Dylan to a record deal with Columbia records. In 1962, Dylan released his self-titled debut record, which sold 5,000 copies with only 2 original songs.



May your hands always be busy

May your feet always be swift

May you have a strong foundation

When the winds of changes shift

May your heart always be joyful

May your song always be sung

May you stay forever young

Forever young, forever young

May you stay forever young

Key Records

The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan

What a power move! First, Dylan releases his debut record, which featured only 2 original songs. Just over a year later, Dylan releases *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, a record that flipped the script to the tune of only 2 non-original songs. Dylan, being an ardent disciple of the folk tradition, a la Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, began writing his own lyrics to traditional chord progressions and melodies.

Dylan, for the first time, flexed his poetic and lyrical sensibilities, his words infused with the political and social tumult around him. The songs from *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* were birthed in the rumblings of the Civil Rights movement and general, persistent fear of nuclear war breaking out. The urgency and temporality of the world is baked into these songs. It's no wonder that tunes like "Masters of War," "Blowin' In the Wind," "A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall" were written. Surrounding these songs are other classics and important pieces of the Dylan story such as "Don't Think Twice, It's Alright," and "Girl From the North Country."

For Dylan, TFBFD is the record that transformed his public perception from being one of the many folk singers traveling the country, to the "voice of a generation," a title that Dylan has rebuffed and pushed against his entire adult life. One critic said it plainly: "In barely over a year, a young plagiarist had been reborn as a songwriter of substance, and his first album of fully realized original material got the 1960s off their musical starting block."

For fans of folk music, they had found their new hero. Here was a young, promising artist who paired the flair and talent of literary giants with the social and political yearnings of the present day. The timeliness of the record and the method by which it addresses the concerns of young Americans made it an overnight sensation, reframing the world in fresh, appropriate eyes. Dylan became an international superstar after this record, grabbing the attention of the Beatles and others. *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* proved that there was a mainstream appetite for serious, pressing, complex concerns.



Bringing It All Back Home

Bringing It All Back Home is Dylan's first of many career departures. Gone are the acoustic songs filled with angst and grief concerning the state of the world, and in come the romantic, surreal, (mostly) electric ballads.

As you likely know, Dylan being backed by an electric band alienated him from the fans he won over from his explosion onto the scene via *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*.

These two elements together, that of the composition and focus of his lyrics with a new style of instrumentation, signaled a clear break from the folk singer troupe Dylan was so embedded in. Dylan was charting a new course, one that was less concerned with protest and social awareness but filled to the brim with expression, love, and artistry. Dylan leans hard into the blues elements that would become career staples to come. Of course, *Bringing it All Back Home* features two of Dylan's finer masterpieces, "Mr. Tambourine Man" and "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue."

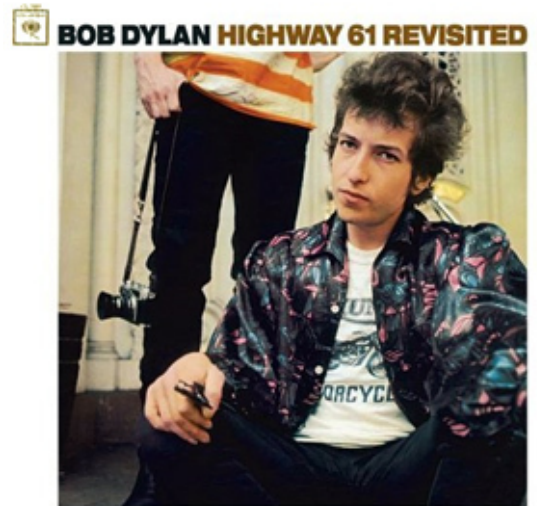


Highway 61 Revisited

Not but 5 months after *Bringing it All Back Home* was released, Dylan released *Highway 61 Revisited*, cementing the career path he began on BIABH. Save "Desolation Row," every song on *Highway 61 Revisited* is a proper rock and roller. The record features the song "Like a Rolling Stone," which is considered by some rock critics to be the greatest rock song in history. Some go so far as to say it's the greatest song ever, period.

If you were to ask a wide swath of Dylan fans which record you should listen to, were you to only listen to one Dylan record, it's likely the majority would point to this record. It is Dylan at the height of his powers. Rock critic Michael Gray wrote "[*Highway 61 Revisited* is] revolutionary and stunning, not just for its energy and panache but in its vision: fusing radical, electrical music ... with lyrics that were light years ahead of anyone else's; Dylan here unites the force of blues-based rock'n'roll with the power of poetry. The whole rock culture, the whole post-Beatle pop-rock world, and so in an important sense the 1960s started here."

Highway 61 Revisited is important to the American music story for many reasons, the least of these not being that it gave rockers license to create thoughtful lyrics, compelling melodies, and sensitive stories that were still built on top of the familiar blues-based sounds of the era. Critics point to *Highway 61 Revisited* as a turning point in music, as it helped jumpstart a trend of treating albums as holistic pieces of art, instead of 2 radio-ready singles surrounded by filler.



BOB DYLAN HIGHWAY 61 REVISITED

Blonde on Blonde

Blonde on Blonde is the 3rd member of Dylan's "going electric" trio of records (*Bringing It All Back Home*, *Highway 61 Revisited*, *Blonde on Blonde*). *Blonde on Blonde* was released in June of 1966. Sessions originally took place with The Hawks (later known as The Band) in New York, but Dylan wasn't feeling the vibe, so he took the recording operation down south to Nashville, TN. The only individuals involved in the New York sessions that came with Dylan to Nashville were keyboardist Al Kooper and guitarist Robbie Robertson.



The record is often cited as one of the greatest records of all time, similarly to *Highway 61 Revisited*. Astute listeners may notice a different sound to this record in comparison to its predecessors. This is largely due to the sound and arrangement of Columbia Studio B in Nashville. Upon arrival, Dylan asked that the sound baffles between instruments be removed. Doing so lets the musicians see each other, and microphones pick up more of the sound of the room and other instruments, instead of a more isolated sound for instruments.

So far as Bob Dylan's career is concerned, *Blonde on Blonde* is significant for two primary reasons. Firstly, Dylan is quoted as saying the sound he hears for his songs in his mind most closely resembles the sound of *Blonde on Blonde*. He said: "The closest I ever got to the sound I hear in my mind was on individual bands in the *Blonde on Blonde* album. It's that thin, that wild mercury sound. It's metallic and bright gold, with whatever that conjures up."

Secondly, the record caps a trilogy of records that represent an unmatched achievement in popular music history. Dylan recorded 3 records in a 2 year period, and all of them are considered some of the most important western music ever made. This type of output in such a short timespan is a key part of understanding the "genius" label applied to Dylan.

Dylan biographer Richard Shelton wrote that *Blonde on Blonde* was "a hallmark collection that completes his first major rock cycle, which began with *Bringing It All Back Home*...[*Blonde on Blonde*] begins with a joke and ends with a hymn; in between wit alternates with a dominant theme of entrapment by circumstances, love, society, and unrealized hope ... There's a remarkable marriage of funky, bluesy rock expressionism, and Rimbaud-like visions of discontinuity, chaos, emptiness, loss, being 'stuck'."

New Morning

Though it does not share the same holy perches of Dylan's electric trio, *New Morning* is the first instance of something Dylan would do a handful of times in his career: return to form. Released in 1970 after the trio of "country croon" style records of *John Wesley Harding*, *Nashville Skyline*, and the highly polarizing *Self Portrait*, *New Morning* showcased a more mature Dylan returning to his patented nasally singing style.

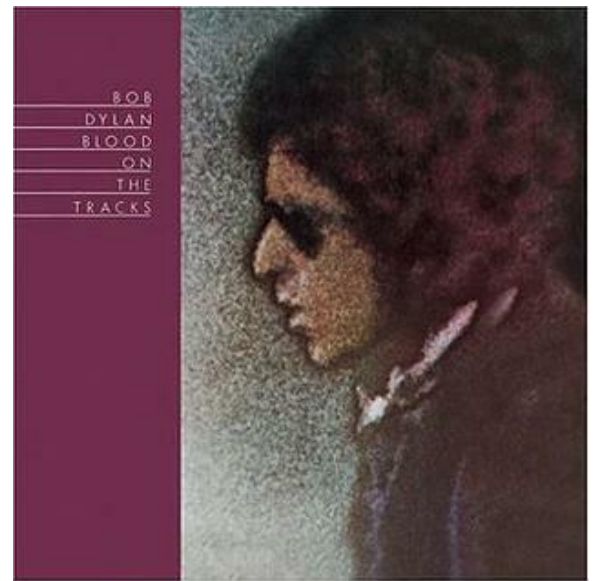
New Morning is not Dylan's most critically acclaimed or commercially successful record, but it gave context to Dylan's shapeshifting abilities, reminding his fans that when he makes stylistic changes ("going electric" and the aforementioned country croon), the same Dylan that captured everyone's attention doesn't leave.

The album is generally considered to be a great record but falls short of being in Dylan's top-tier body of work. In this way, *New Morning* is sometimes characterized as a brighter spot after and before 3 records that are considered less satisfying. Between 1967 and *Blood on the Tracks* in 1975, *New Morning* stands the tallest. *New Morning* showcases Dylan as he relishes in domestic life with stand-out songs such as "New Morning," "The Man In Me," and "If Not For You."



Blood on the Tracks

Blood on the Tracks is the great Dylan comeback record. After 1970's *New Morning*, Dylan released *Pat Garrett & Billy the Kid*, *Dylan*, *Planet Waves*, and *Before the Flood*, the first being a film soundtrack, the second being a compilation of outtakes that was poorly received, the third being originals that received muted but positive reception, and the fourth being a live record. Dylan had been without a bonafide commercial and critical explosion for 5 years. Many thought he had lost the ghost somewhere and would never return to form.



Not so. *Blood on the Tracks* was recorded partially in New York with bonafide studio musicians, and partially in Dylan's home state of Minnesota with local players. The record, though consistently denied by Dylan, chronicles the falling out of love story between Dylan and his longtime wife, Sara.

To many, this is some of the best music Dylan has made. *Blood on the Tracks* showcases Dylan, once again, returning to his roots in folk and acoustic music, but using the medium to explore themes such as love, passion, and the ways those forces fade away. Dylan successfully showed that the folk form was not exclusive to political and socially conscious protest or even artistry. It is also a medium for love, redemption, loss, and romance. Dylan's recording history is often segregated into two categories: before and after *Blood on the Tracks*.

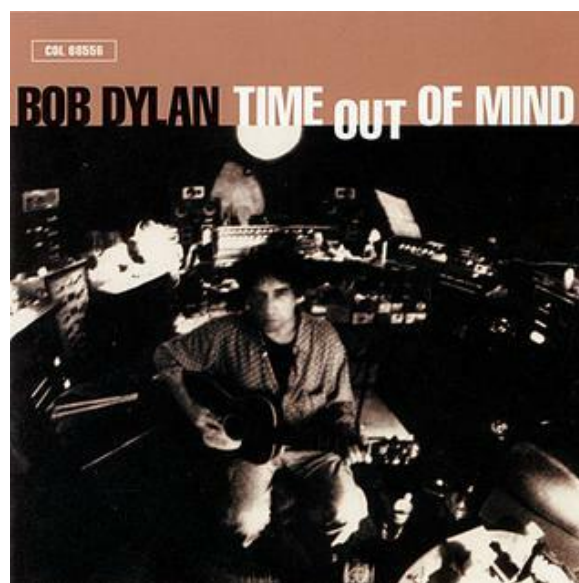
One critic wrote: "*Blood on the Tracks* is his only flawless album and his best produced; the songs, each of them, are constructed in disciplined fashion. It is his kindest album and most dismayed, and seems in hindsight to have achieved a sublime balance between the logorrhea-plagued excesses of his mid-1960s output and the self-consciously simple compositions of his post-accident years."

Time Out of Mind

Many have been led to believe, incorrectly, that Bob Dylan had a slump all through the 80s and 90s. I was one of these people. Dylan's *Time Out of Mind* should stop any listeners of a similar persuasion from believing the same. *Time Out of Mind* was Dylan's second record with famous producer, Daniel Lanois, a musician known for twinkling, big, atmospheric layers of sound that invoke a sleepy Phil Spector or perhaps 10 guitars playing the same thing underwater at the same time.

Time Out of Mind features some of Dylan's very best songwriting, largely focusing on love lost. Lanois production is a perfect compliment, and the combination leaves us with a record that is hard to forget and without compare. Other Lanois-produced records showcase his signature style, but none of them feature Bob Dylan's songwriting. Dylan admires Lanois' style, but ultimately thought it wasn't the right choice for *Time Out of Mind*, despite huge critical and commercial success.

This is one of the more unique Dylan records, having a feel and space that is distinct from every other record.



***Well, the emptiness is
endless, cold as the
clay,***

***You can always come
back, but you can't
come back all the way.***

25 Essential (read: not the best, the most important, most influential Just ones you've gotta hear) Dylan Songs Down to the Specific Version (in no particular order), Written In First Person

- 1. Just Like a Woman - Royal Albert Hall** - The special feel of this song is immediate. You can hear how quiet the crowd is, inside one of the world's most famous venues. It's quiet enough that you can hear the natural reverb. Like many live tracks, they capture the sacred much better than a studio.
- 2. Blowin In the Wind** - In some ways, along with #3 and #18 on this list, these are the iconic Bob Dylan songs. Those are the 3 that basically every American citizen has heard. So it has to be on this list.
- 3. Mr. Tambourine Man** - For my personal, subjective, money, this set of lyrics is as good as songwriting has ever been.
- 4. Dark Eyes** - I hope I don't soon forget the first time I heard this song. We were driving home from a backpacking trip. It was late at night, and we were more tired than tired. This might be my favorite Dylan song.
- 5. Idiot Wind - Take 6** - I prefer this version to the record version. It's got more of a gooey sense of tempo and rhythm that is easy to swim in. I think it fits the lyrics well. I think Bobby sings with a bit more emotion in this take, and that's half the makings of a good recording right there.
- 6. Simple Twist of Fate - Take 3A** - I don't think this is better than the original version, but I also do. Dylan is so skilled at totally retooling songs, changing the music and lyrics and time signature as much as he pleases. Sometimes those efforts flop, but I think the loungey, groovy, spacey take on this staple is a good move.
- 7. Mississippi - Oh Mercy Outtakes Version** - Similarly to #5 and #6 on this list, this redux of 'Mississippi' is the first version of the song I ever heard, and I think the blues-inspired framing is compelling, especially given the title of the song. It invokes the delta in a way the studio version does not.
- 8. Every Grain of Sand - 1980 Demo** - I don't know who is singing with Dylan in this version, but I assume it's Joan Baez. After hearing the dog bark 2-3 times in the background, the picture comes into view. They're at a piano in a living room somewhere, singing some of Dylan's most underrated lyrics. Hard to beat stepping into that.
- 9. Sweetheart Like You** - Dylan's records in the 80s were pretty polished and put together, as opposed to most of his music which is typically more squishy and less precise. Does this song contain my favorite guitar solo on a Bob Dylan track? Yes. Yes it does.
- 10. Precious Angel** - I know how bad it sucks to wade through all of Bob Dylan's music from his born again era, but there are some gems in there. This one has a great guitar lead line, and a fun melody. It'll just get stuck in your head.

- 11. Tangled Up In Blue** - I think there's a lot of people who would consider this to be a certified Dylan masterpiece. That's why it's on this list.
- 12. What Good Am I?** - Though Dylan doesn't seem to like the sound of his records that Daniel Lanois produced, I love them. Dylan exploring the existential is a treat, and this song always brings me down to earth.
- 13. Knockin On Heaven's Door** - Do you want to wrap your arm around your friend and sing the night away? Start with this one. One of his most covered songs.
- 14. It's All Over Now, Baby Blue** - In my head, this song is (perhaps illogically) tied to 'Desolation Row'. Both of them are memorable acoustic ballads. The strumming pattern Dylan uses with the high-volume singing give the song a driving energy that's hard to do when you're just a man and a guitar. One of his best melodies, in my humble opinion.
- 15. Tonight I'll Be Staying Here With You - Live at Montreal Forum** - An absolutely show-stopping tour de force, I don't know another Dylan song like this one. This is rock and roll. Everyone is on cocaine. The bass player is channeling the gods of yore, and Bob is scorching hot. I don't know what's going on with the pedal steel, but it's some truly asinine stuff. I've never heard a pedal steel do this in my life. Would love some clarity on these sounds.
- 16. Desolation Row** - This is classic "what is he talking about?" Dylan, which I find very endearing, since I get the impression he popularized that type of songwriting.
- 17. Like a Rolling Stone** - And this right here is the song that broke the world wide open, changed forever, never the same.
- 18. Don't Think Twice It's Alright** - No, this isn't a Post Malone song.
- 19. Standing In the Doorway** - I hope the next time your heart hurts, you'll listen to this song and sit with the hurt for just a little bit and let it soften you up. Then you'll stand up and we'll all be better for it.
- 20. Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands** - We celebrate great poetry around these parts. Dylan wrote this one late one night at a typewriter, and the band is playing it for one of the first times on the studio recording. Apparently, they thought the second chorus was the last chorus. Boy, were they wrong.
- 21. Shelter From the Storm** - If you've felt the good kind of love, you'll feel this one.
- 22. Not Dark Yet** - Again, I think Daniel Lanois captured the essence of Dylan's songs better than anyone. I'm sorry. I don't think that take is that hot. If it is, I'm sorry. If it isn't a hot take, then please disregard.
- 23. One of Us Must Know (Sooner or Later)** - I love the passion you can hear in Dylan's voice. It rivals that of the drummer. That sweet, powerful drummer.
- 24. Born In Time - Oh, Mercy Sessions** - It's not often that you hear the power of Dylan's voice after the mid-90s. I love it here.
- 25. Boots of Spanish Leather** - This is one of the very first Dylan songs I ever heard, and I heard it while traveling. It's a great love/loss story.

*Oh, the gentlemen are talking, and the midnight moon is on the riverside.
They're drinking up and walking, and it is time for me to slide.
I live in another world, where life and death are memorized,
Where the earth is strung with lovers' pearls and all I see are dark eyes.*



Selected Lyrics

Just Like A Woman:

*"Yes, I believe that it's time for us to quit
But when we meet again, introduced as friends
Please don't let on that you knew me when
I was hungry and it was your world"*

Every Grain of Sand:

*"Oh, the flowers of indulgence and the weeds of
yesteryear
Like criminals, they have choked the breath of
conscience and good cheer
The sun beat down upon the steps of time to light
the way
To ease the pain of idleness and the memory of
decay
I gaze into the doorway of temptation's angry
flame
And every time I pass that way I always hear my
name
Then onward in my journey I come to understand
That every hair is numbered like every grain of
sand"*

Mr. Tambourine Man:

*"And take me disappearing through the smoke
rings of my mind
Down the foggy ruins of time
Far past the frozen leaves
The haunted frightened trees
Out to the windy beach
Far from the twisted reach of crazy sorrow
Yes, to dance beneath the diamond sky
With one hand waving free
Silhouetted by the sea
Circled by the circus sands
With all memory and fate
Driven deep beneath the waves
Let me forget about today until tomorrow"*

Sweetheart Like You:

*"They say that patriotism is the last refuge
To which a scoundrel clings
Steal a little and they throw you in jail
Steal a lot and they make you king
There's only one step down from here, baby
It's called the land of permanent bliss
What's a sweetheart like you doing in a dump like
this?"*

Dark Eyes:

"Oh, the gentlemen are talking and the midnight moon is on the riverside,

They're drinking up and walking and it is time for me to slide.

I live in another world where life and death are memorized,

Where the earth is strung with lovers' pearls and all I see are dark eyes"

Mama, You've Been On My Mind:

"When you wake up in the mornin', baby, look inside your mirror

You know I won't be next to you, you know I won't be near

I'd just be curious to know if you can see yourself as clear

As someone who has had you on his mind"

Visions of Johanna:

"Ain't it just like the night to play tricks when you're tryin' to be so quiet?

We sit here stranded, though we're all doin' our best to deny it

And Louise holds a handful of rain, temptin' you to defy it

Lights flicker from the opposite loft

In this room the heat pipes just cough

The country music station plays soft

But there's nothing, really nothing to turn off

Just Louise and her lover so entwined

And these visions of Johanna that conquer my mind"

Not Dark Yet:

"Well, my sense of humanity has gone down the drain

Behind every beautiful thing there's been some kind of pain

She wrote me a letter and she wrote it so kind

She put down in writing what was in her mind

I just don't see why I should even care

It's not dark yet, but it's getting there"

Mississippi:

"Well my ship's been split to splinters and it's sinking fast

I'm drownin' in the poison, got no future, got no past

But my heart is not weary, it's light and it's free

I've got nothin' but affection for all those who've sailed with me

Everybody movin' if they ain't already there

Everybody got to move somewhere

Stick with me baby, stick with me anyhow

Things should start to get interesting right about now

My clothes are wet, tight on my skin

Not as tight as the corner that I painted myself in

I know that fortune is waitin' to be kind

So give me your hand and say you'll be mine

Well, the emptiness is endless, cold as the clay

You can always come back, but you can't come back all the way

Only one thing I did wrong

Stayed in Mississippi a day too long"

Most of the Time:

*"Most of the time I'm clear focused all around
Most of the time I can keep both feet on the
ground
I can follow the path, I can read the signs
Stay right with it when the road unwinds
I can handle whatever I stumble upon
I don't even notice she's gone
Most of the time"*

Talking World War III Blues:

*"Well, now time passed and now it seems
Everybody's having them dreams
Everybody sees themselves
Walkin' around with no one else
Half of the people can be part right all of the time
Some of the people can be all right part of the
time
But all of the people can't be all right all of the
time
I think Abraham Lincoln said that
"I'll let you be in my dreams if I can be in yours"
I said that"*

She's Your Lover Now:

*"Pain sure brings out the best in people, doesn't it?
Why didn't you just leave me if you didn't want to
stay?
Why'd you have to treat me so bad?
Did it have to be that way?
Now you stand here expectin' me to remember
somethin' you forgot to say"*

Subterranean Homesick Blues:

*"Oh, get born, keep warm
Short pants, romance
Learn to dance, get dressed, get blessed
Try to be a success
Please her, please him, buy gifts
Don't steal, don't lift
Twenty years of schoolin'
And they put you on the day shift
Look out kid
They keep it all hid
Better jump down a manhole
Light yourself a candle
Don't wear sandals
Try to avoid the scandals
Don't want to be a bum
You better chew gum
The pump don't work
'Cause the vandals took the handles"*

Tangled Up In Blue:

*"She was workin' in a topless place
And I stopped in for a beer
I just kept lookin' at the side of her face
In the spotlight so clear
And later on as the crowd thinned out
I's just about to do the same
She was standing there in back of my chair
Said to me, "Don't I know your name?"
I muttered somethin' underneath my breath
She studied the lines on my face
I must admit I felt a little uneasy
When she bent down to tie the laces of my shoe
Tangled up in blue"*

***Bringing Us All
Back Home: A
Love Letter to
Bob Dylan***

by Eli Nichols



"What is the meaning of life? That was all--a simple question; one that tended to close in on one with years, the great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead, there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark; here was one." - Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*

It's a scary thing gazing into the abyss of an empty page--let alone a page you're supposed to be filling about our lord and savior, Bob Dylan.

To say that Dylan's legacy is vast is to basically be saying nothing. Which is something I have just done. At our disposal, we have nearly two dozen biographies, two self-authored books, a sizable filmography and a mountain of rock criticism that covers Dylan's life and prolific career, the majority of which is aiming to crack the case wide open on one of pop culture's most enduring questions: Who the hell is Bob Dylan?

I've gone down this rabbit hole many times: Is he a genius? A shaman? A snake-oil salesman? A blank slate for us to project our interpretations onto? After all, the man's worn quite a few different clothes. There's Protest Dylan; Folk-Poet Dylan; Rock Troubadour Dylan; Born Again Dylan; Carnival Barker Dylan; We are the World Dylan; Whiskey Salesman Dylan; Santa Claus Dylan. Just to name a few.

Dylan is well aware of all of his contradictions and seems to think them virtuous. He has caught us off guard by trying on and casting aside musical genres, social movements, political and religious ideologies, people and identities for more than 60 years. He moves through everything like it's water. Nothing seems to stick. How do we put all of these fragments together to formulate a consistent identity?

In Martin Scorsese's documentary, *No Direction Home*, he offered us small glimpse:

"I just don't feel like I had a past. I couldn't relate to anything I was doing other than the present time and it didn't matter to me what I said. Still doesn't, really."

He also shoots us straight on the first song on his latest record, *Rough and Rowdy Ways*: "I drive fast cars, but I eat fast foods. I contain multitudes."

Wow. We're all pretty tired these days, aren't we? Pinning the tail on the donkey is an outdated game and it's time we all admitted it.

This reminds me of a Raymond Carver short story called "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love." It's about a pair of couples who get incredibly deep into a bottle of gin and go round-robin telling stories about their past and current lovers. They each try to describe love in an objective sense, but all they're really doing is repackaging their own personal experiences and selling them as definitive. This satisfies no one. They give up the hunt, sit in drunken silence and listen to each other's hearts beat as night falls upon the room.

To put Dylan in a petri dish is to miss the point entirely. What matters most is the music and what it evokes in the listener. There are no right reads, there are no rules. Like all of the great mysteries, we access truth by way of the personal.

With that in mind, all I can offer is my own story on why he matters to me and hope that it represents a point of view that other fans or new listeners can respect. And isn't that what we're all after, anyway? Not the trail that leads to the one great bonfire, but the spark that lets us take our own flame into the darkness.

I grew up in a small town in the Ozarks. Think less Netflix series and more *Winter's Bone*. It wasn't that cinematic, except for after everything had shut down for the night and I'd drive the 10 miles from my country home to prowl downtown's deserted streets and the surrounding country roads.

Bruce Springsteen wrote, "You can ride this road til dawn without another human being in sight." I've always taken comfort in this sentiment. I think these night drives helped me dress up my loneliness as romantic or existentially meaningful. It also happened to be where I did my serious music listening. Behind the wheel of my '98 Dodge Ram was where all the big stuff happened for me.

A few months after I started driving, my cousin got me Bob Dylan's *Bootleg Series Vol.6, 1964* as a Christmas gift. We would always make certain that our family's Secret Santa game was rigged in order to draw each other's name, partially to reinforce our relationship as close friends and confidantes, but mostly because we knew we'd get good presents.

This gift confused me, though. At that point, I'd never even listened to Dylan's music and didn't know who he was. Was the new *Taking Back Sunday* CD out of stock at Walmart?

On my drive into town later that night I warily opened the album, slipped it in, and my life changed.

What first captured me about this album, and what continues to pull me in, is its transportive quality. Great live albums have the tendency to take you there. The *Bootleg Series Vol. 6, 1964* is a recording of a Dylan solo Halloween show at the Philharmonic Hall in Manhattan, and it offers a glimpse into a young Bob Dylan and of NYC in the 60s, a place where I imagined every person in the city having their own fascinating subplot. I saw all of the Greenwich Village poets and performers, people in the cafes on fire for political revolution, for poetry, for life itself; I saw a world where every moment mattered; where things moved slow and everyone lived fast; where you needed to wear your coat indoors because the rooms were insufficiently heated.

Guided by Dylan's poetry and storytelling, my mind was awakened to possibility all around me.

On the surface, the album captures a young songwriter who had reached tremendous acclaim as a singer of folk music but who was already ascending beyond its confines. He was right on the cusp

of "going electric" by embracing rock music. He played a song lamenting a boxer's death in "Who Killed Davey Moore?," and another that dressed down the Red Scare in "Talkin' John Birch Paranoid Blues." He played to a genteel crowd who would listen in silence or break into canned applause when they recognized a popular song. I interpreted the thin, hollow quality of the live recording as a transmission from antiquity. I memorized his crowd banter as he tuned his guitar and recited to myself his witty song introductions.

I marveled at some of the best songs I had ever heard.

"To Ramona," "Gates of Eden," "It's Alright Ma," "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carrol," "Mr. Tambourine Man." These are now some of my oldest friends.

Mr. Tambourine Man was one of the newer songs he debuted. As that audience listened to it in 1964 for perhaps the first time, I too listened for the first time, a million lightyears away. It was as if I'd been plucked by the divine hand and pulled from the periphery of my immediate experience.

Listening again to this version as I write, I can't help getting emotional. Just as he first transported me into the heart of the 1960s, he is transporting me back to that time of my life--of the moment where everything clicked, where I finally knew what I wanted and who I wanted to be.

Hey, Mr. Tambourine Man, play a song for me

I'm not sleepy and there is no place I'm going to

Hey, Mr. Tambourine Man, play a song for me

In the jingle jangle morning I'll come following you

I have no one to meet

And the ancient city street's too dead for dreaming

I'm ready to go anywhere

I'm ready for to fade

Into my own parade

Cast your dancing spell my way

I promise to go under it

And take me disappearing through the smoke rings of my mind

Down the foggy ruins of time

Far past the frozen leaves

*The haunted, frightened trees
Out to the windy beach
Far from the twisted reach of crazy sorrow
Yes, to dance beneath the diamond sky with one hand waving free
Silhouetted by the sea
Circled by the circus sands
With all memory and fate
Driven deep beneath the waves
Let me forget about today until tomorrow*

I still count it as one of my very favorite Bob Dylan songs.

Dylan still makes everything feel bigger. His protest songs call upon me to be accountable to the world I inherited. His career that followed challenges me with language beyond my faculties; with characters both allegorical and dripping in realness; with stories adorned with newspaper headlines, mythological landscapes, Balzac quotations, Alicia Keys' origins ("I was thinkin' bout Alicia Keys / But couldn't keep from cryin' when she was born in Hell's Kitchen and I was livin' down the line."). I interpret these as incantations to create the magic of song and as invitations: road signs pointing the way to the good stuff all around me. He continues to pick up the signal, suck it in like a black hole and spit it all out into a collage that stimulates and somehow transcends the intellectual.

Eat your heart out, T.S. Eliot.

That's why Dylan lasts. He grows with you, and he never allows you figure the whole thing out. It's not dissimilar from stepping into a library and feeling the voltage of all that knowledge brimming on the shelf, of understanding of how limited, how ignorant you are, and also how lucky you are to bear witness to that beautiful fact.

His mystery is his legacy, which hovers over his songs and persona like a celestial mirror that reflects and absorbs every perspective. We are all fated to see through a glass, darkly. All we can do is trust in our experience and model ourselves after Dylan's willingness to construct and destroy. To follow the ancient lesson of the Tibetan sand mandala that all things are in flux. To do the hard

work of killing our ego a thousand times over, basking in the heart on fire and inability of the mind to understand.

As he says in a fictitious scene from the *Rolling Thunder Revue*--"It's heart. It's not head. Head will fuck you up."

Appendix / Guidance for the Ambivalent

I get that Dylan's not for everyone. Some hate him for the exact reasons I love him. But I imagine if you're reading through this, you're at least somewhat interested in giving him a shot.

It's important to allow him a lot of grace, similar to watching Russel Westbrook play basketball, listening to Paul McCartney tell the same Beatles story ad nauseum, or hearing your great grandma mutter a racial slur just out of earshot. The man's made plenty of missteps, and like so many overly prolific artists, he's got some real stinkers sitting out there in broad daylight. I encourage everyone to accept and endure what you find unpalatable, because he really does offer it all.

I'll admit, though--it feels good to be honest about what doesn't resonate with me. First of all, I can't stand his harmonica sound, particularly on his early records. It physically hurts my ears. The only justification I can make is that Dylan put a gun to his mixing engineer's head and screamed to make his mouth harp as loud as possible.

Second of all, he's a terrible self-editor. Some of my favorite songs of his are on some of my least favorite albums ("Dark Eyes" on *Empire Burlesque*; "Brownsville Girl" on *Knocked Out/Loaded*; "Every Grain of Sand" on *Shot of Love!*). I also prefer many of his alternate versions ("Mississippi," "When the Night Comes Falling," most of *Blood on the Tracks*). And some of his absolute best songs were left entirely off his studio records. Check out "Up to Me," "Born in Time," "Percy's Song," or "Abandoned Love" at the very, very least.

My favorite Bob Dylan song changes like the weather and it's always nice to check in with myself to see where I'm at. Right now, and probably most regularly, it's "Visions of Johanna," the third song off of his 1966 record *Blonde on Blonde*. The lyrics are framed on my music desk as a source of inspiration and a reminder of what a flagship song can look like.

"Ain't it just like the night to play tricks when you're trying to be so quiet?

We sit here stranded, though we're all doing our best to deny it.

And Louise holds a handful of rain, tempting you to defy it.

Lights flicker from the opposite loft

In this room, the heat pipes just cough

The country music station plays soft

But there's nothing, really nothing, to turn off

Just Louise and her lover so entwined

And these visions of Johanna

That conquer my mind."

email for talking

The end.

Thank you.

