The Uneven Heart

Bob Dylan the Musician

It is easy to be seduced by Dylan's lyrics: *they* were essential when he was nominated for 'Voice of a Generation', and *they* stuck in the fans' throats when he converted to Christianity. Equally easy is it to question his musical abilities: 'He can't sing', 'he can't play the harmonica', 'he only knows three guitar chords', 'his lyrics are good, but I can't stand the voice'. Et cetera... et cetera... But what if it's first and foremost the *music* that has captured one's attention? Or put differently: if one is of the opinion that *what* is being said cannot meaningfully be separated from *how* it is said? That the meaning of a word is its use, as Wittgenstein expressed it, and that this is true to a high degree about Dylan—both as a musician and as a poet.[1] This article is predominantly a survey of certain aspects of Dylan's musical life, and the emphasis on these particular aspects is intended to suggest that some of that which is most appealing about Dylan's art and what creates the impression that what he does and says is significant, is the sense of a direct address, as an expression of a life and a pulse, and that this aspect of his work first and foremost comes to expression through musical means just as much as through the lyrics.

I would like to introduce this theme through two examples. My very first encounter with Dylan's music was not through Dylan himself, but through Peter, Paul and Mary, in a clip which I have later identified as a performance from the Newport festival, taken from the documentary *Festival* (1967). They were singing 'The Times They Are A-Changin'', and it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen or heard. Mary Travers' blonde hair, waving in the wind in the evening darkness of the festival around her powerful face, and the perfect

[1] This seems to be a more unproblematic premise in painting, where how something is painted is usually considered more important than what the painting is *of*.

three-part harmony in the refrain, where one voice remained on the same tone as a pedal point around which the other two would circle, caressingly like a cat around a leg—it impressed me deeply. When I several years later heard Dylan's own version, it was a completely different song. The voice was one thing—I was prepared for *that*—but it was everything else: all harmonical complexity was gone; the guitar may have played some of the tones that used to accompany Mary Travers' hair, but the sensual beauty was not there. The same goes for the rhythm: where the trio had been soaring through the song and the night, with the message: 'We can fly wherever we want to, 'cause the times are a-changin'', Dylan's voice and guitar hammered in, in the most unsophisticated way, the ominous perspective—like a desperate but controlled, calculating man who was likely to stab whoever was blocking up the hall. It was raw and insistent, unpleasant and yet inescapable. All the beauty was gone, but when the loss of the pleasant dream had resided, the experienced remained of something much more real.

This is not to say that Dylan can't fly. But when he does, it is the result of his shimmering, nervous energy, like in the scene from *Eat the Document* (1966) where he's at the piano playing 'Ballad of a Thin Man'—although sitting? no, he is dancing, soaring, jumping, rocking, and his piano is dancing along with him. He can't sit still; he stands up, the fingers on the keys are trembling and his whole body is glowing with a force which one could not have imagined could have lived in the quiet song.

His entire carreer can be described in similar terms: there is a restlessness, a quest for ever new challenges, new genres, new formats, new forms of expression, which is deeply engaging and which makes it an interesting project to follow the process, investigate new aspects and angles, listen to screechy old concert recording and figuring out what to say about them. It is interesting mainly because it all has to do with ways of coupling *meaning* with *sound*, whether it is the sounds of language or of music. Thus, it is not simply a metaphorical description to say that Dylan's and Peter, Paul and Mary's versions of 'The Times' are completely different songs: they *are* different songs. And Dylan's well over a thousand versions of 'All Along the Watchtower' are in a certain sense a thousand different songs, each with different layers of signification.

It would be an exaggeration to say that all these thousand 'songs' are equally exciting—some are clearly of the *day-at-the-office*-kind—but seen in the full perspective, even the unsuccessful days contribute to the image of a heart

beating. Studying Dylan's music over the years is thus the study of a life—that life which comes to expression in the performances, but first and foremost the musical 'life' whose pulse it is one is hearing. This life is not necessarily accessible through a traditional study of genre, influences, and biography, because its life-character resides in a chain of interpretations which—possibly—starts with Dylan himself, but which in any case has one necessary participant: the individual listener.

Sponge Bob (1960–65)

In the film *No Direction Home*, John Bucklen, Dylan's schoolday friend from Minneapolis, talks about Dylan's return to St Paul after his first trip to New York in 1961:

> He was playing at some party or something, and it was like a whole different guy. You hear those stories about the blues men who go out to the crossroads and sell their soul to the devil and come back all of a sudden able to do stuff—Robert Johnson, Tommy Johnson, that whole mythology. It was one of those kind of deals, almost. When he left Minneapolis he was just average, There was five, six other guys doing the same thing. When he came back, he was doing Woody and he was doing Van Ronk and he was fingerpicking, he was playing cross harp, and this is a matter of a couple of months. I mean, this is not like he was gone a year or anything.[2]

It is tempting to do as Bucklen and associate to the Faust myth, especially since Dylan himself in recent interviews and in the same *No Direction Home* has more than intimated that that's how he sees himself: he has made a deal with the Chief Commander:

> Dylan: Well, it goes back to that destiny thing. You know, I made a bargain with it, you know, long time ago. I'm holding up my end.
> Bradley: What was your bargain?
> Dylan: Get where I am now.
> Bradley: Should I ask who you made the bargain with?
> Dylan: Ha, ha ha. With the Chief . . . you know, the Chief Commander.
> Bradley: On this earth?
> Dylan: This earth, and the world we can't see.[3]

[2] Transcribed from *No Direction Home*.
[3] Transcribed from interview with Ed Bradley, *CBS 60 Minutes*, 6 December 2004.

Be it as it may with this 'bargain': during this period, Dylan is frequently referred to as a 'sponge', sucking up any influence he came in touch with. That the development was quick, probably has more to do with hard, insistent work than with spiritual covenants, even though Bucklen's reaction is understandable. Dylan's then girlfriend Bonnie Beecher gives a unique picture of this process. She had bought him a harmonica holder, and Dylan was captivated.

> And my friends would come in and they would just go, 'Uurgh! Who is this geek?' . . . I wanted him to play guitar, which he could play well and which I knew would impress them, but he just wasn't having any of it. He was saying, 'Naw, I wanna get this—hwang! WHwaongg!'[4]

This means that when Dylan left for New York early in the winter of 1961, he already had a certain technical foundation, which, given his ambition and energy, quickly was to be extended when he plunged himself into the creative milieus in Greenwhich Village, and with the circle around Woody Guthrie's sickbed as a second power supply. Hungry, receptive, and with a certain serendipetous luck he had all the prerequisites to take full advantage of his new surroundings.

It is a commonly held attitude that Dylan may have written good lyrics from the beginning, but that as a musician he is hardly more than mediocre. This attitude is, for example, behind the estimation of the guitar track on 'Don't Think Twice' from *Freewheelin'* (1963): it is so good that it *can't* be Dylan himself—it must be somebody else. Clinton Heylin seems to be the originator of the dogma that it is played by Bruce Langhorne. This dogma is repeated here and there, with authoritarian certainty, although nothing supports it—apart from the quality of the playing. [5] Granted: 'Virtuosic equilibrism' has never been an adequate description of Dylan's musicianship, but if one looks beyond the cliché about the hoarse, crudely hammering three-chord musician who mainly has good lyrics, and instead listen to what Dylan is actually doing during these years, the picture one gets is far more positive. First, there is a musician who has mastered certain techniques with the obviousness that only a solid foundation can give. Bucklen mentions his finger-picking, and rightly so. In many of the recordings and live performances from the early years, Dylan uses different variants of the 'clawhammer' technique, where the

[4] Quoted from **heylin:shades**, p. 46.
[5] See 'It wasn't Bruce—a musical whodunnit' (p. ??) for a decisive refutation.

thumb alternates between the three bass strings and the other fingers fill in between the beats, either simply with chord tones, or with more advanced variants where a melody can be indicated—usually syncopated since the strong beats is the thumb's domain—or other figures may get a life of their own. 'I Was Young When I Left Home', which was recorded in December 1961 and circulates as part of the the so-called *Minnesota Hotel Tape*, and which was released as a bonus track together with *'Love and Theft'* (2001), is a good example: the basic technique is simple, but by varying the thumb's patterns and picking out both melodies and counter-melodies with the other fingers, a remarkably full sound is achieved, with constant variations which give a guitar track far more complex than the basic technique alone would accomplish.

On *The Gaslight Tapes*, the recordings which have survived from two concerts at the Gaslight Café in October 1961, at about the same time as the recordings for *Freewheelin'*, the finger picking is perfected. Two of the songs where it is used deserve special mention: 'Rocks and Gravel', and 'Barbara Allen'. In both of the songs, there is a little figure in the upper voice of the guitar which is repeated over and over; one might imagine that it would become monotonous, but it doesn't—the *figures* get under your skin and *become* the song.

They do this together with another important element which features already in the early years: an unfaltering sense of timing and establishment of a longer musical progression. 'Rocks and Gravel' is one of these performances which one finds here and there in Dylan's carreer—songs which ask the question: how long can a tone be held, in one verse after another, before it becomes boring or pathetic? And it turns out that the answer is: exactly *this* long.[6]

In other words: through his persistent sponging, Dylan had gained a solid technique which, joined by his strong musicality, laid a foundation upon which his words could freely play out *their* themes, supported by the music. (If he had jeopardized his soul to get there, I leave that to the theologians to decide). Again, it has little to do with virtuoso technique but with virtuousity in employing as little technique as possible to maximum effect.

[6] See 'The Momentum of Standstill', p. ??.

Perfection and Break (1965–66)

This musicianship was perfected over the following couple of years. One hardly notices it. It's like typography: if you see it, something is wrong. Hence, the one example which best illustrates Dylan's first perfection is the singular performance where something goes wrong. It happens during a magical version of 'It's Alright Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)' from the 'Halloween Show' in October 1964, which (finally!) was released forty years later as *The Bootleg Series, vol. 6*. Dylan is apparently in a very good mood throughout the concert; he jokes and laughs (at his own jokes, mostly), plays wrong here and forgets a verse there. When he presents 'It's Alright Ma' with its full title—'It's Alright Ma, It's Life and Life Only', someone in the audience finds it funny and bursts out laughing, and Dylan replies: 'Yes, it's a very funny song', before he hurls himself and the poor, unprepared audience into the most serious, anything but 'funny', rendition of the song imaginable.

The first three verses are magical. Time and place cease to exist as independent categories, they are subordinate elements under a guitar, a voice, and some words. But in the middle of the fourth verse, he forgets the lyrics, and the enchantment is broken. The mood is still good; he solves it with a quick laugh and completes the song in style, but the song is no longer the same.

And that may be just as good, because without that little mistake, we may have had a performance for the history books, but not this demonstration of how perfect Dylan's stage art was: how with a few simple introductory chords could transform the feeling in the hall completely, from unrestrained hilarity to abysmal seriousness; and how he with purely musical means is able to maintain and develop this mood through five, six, eight, twelve minutes. When this one time he stops in the tracks, it is like an alarm clock which drags one out of the most pleasant dream which one would have loved to remain in; one curses the wrethced clock, but without it one would have just kept sleeping, not even remembering that there ever *was* a dream. For this reason, I value this performance higher than most—perhaps all—of Dylan's live accomplishments from the 60s: because it shows just how good all the others are.

I have already described the music as a landscape. The musical technique which has been perfected consists in the establishing of such a landscape which is even enough for the character and characters of the lyrics to stand out clearly, and still varied and exciting enough in its own right to give the characters an interesting stage set on which to act. The acoustic set which introduced the

concerts in 1965–66 does all this: the dominating impression which remains in the listener, is the impact of the lyrics, which is how it is supposed to be. But when songs like 'Desolation Row' or 'Just Like a Woman' can have the effect they have, it is not the least thanks to the accompaniment which is the background and foundation for the words.[7]

And then it's time to leave. If there is one theme which runs through Dylan's entire carreer, it must be this: *absorb*, *internalize*, and *move on*.

Bringing It All Back Home, the first in the trilogy of albums from 1965–66, has one side which leaves one breathless in all its tremendous greatness: 'Mr Tambourine Man', 'Gates of Eden', 'It's Alright Ma', og 'It's All Over Now, Baby Blue'—is there a stronger side anywhere in the history of recorded music?—and then there is another side (strictly speaking, the first), with electrical instruments and a full band, which... well, what is it really? And what does it do?

Ideologically speaking, it does all the things which ever since the Newport festival in 1965 has accompanied the myth of the electrified Dylan, whether it is interpreted as a goodbye, a sell-out, a betrayal, a result of the increasing power of the almighty manager Albert Grossman—or for that matter a return to the roots: those roots, that is, which in Dylan's childhood in Minnesota were planted firmly in the *other* end of Highway 61 and nourished through the radio. These elements have been amply discussed by others, and can therefore be passed over quite briefly.

What is certain is that the concerts in 1965–66 had the highest sound volume that anyone had heard from a stage, that the ticket prices were higher than the ordinary, and that many felt they had been cheated—also for musical reasons.

Dylan's position as a musician in the new performance situation was more withdrawn. He strums on his new love, the Stratocaster, of course, but he mostly plays the same things and in the same ways as before his electrification: simple flatpicking, frequently with a capo. If he ever became an electric guitarist (which can be doubted), it didn't happen until much later.

[7] Not to forget are Dylan's phenomenal diction and his alertness to the effect each line of lyrics has on the audience. Prime examples are the first live versions of 'Love Minus Zero' and 'Desolation Row', where the reaction—the audience's *and* Dylan's—to lines like 'Draw conclusions ... on the wall is fresh and spontaneous.

But there were also things that didn't make it to the other side. Musically speaking, the transformation from folk-strummer to rock artist most of all represents a radical *simplification*. Subtle nuances in bass progressions and fingerpicking patterns were replaced with powerful effusions from a full rock band where Dylan is no longer in exclusive control—he is still the conductor, the band-leader, the choreographer, ideologist, and power supply, but the full control of the musical expression has been laid partly in the hands of others. Fingerpicking has no place here anymore, neither have bass progressions and licks à la 'Barbara Allen'; and although he did re-tune his guitar from time to time in the beginning, but one can hardly hear it, unless one puts in an effort. All this, which had earlier been such important widgets in Dylan's toolbox, loose their raison d'étre when there is a solo guitarist (and *what a* solo guitarist!) there to do the ornaments; a bass player in charge of the lines in the lower register; and a full band to take care of the variations in sound and register which were previously accomplished through different tunings and capo positions. Even the one element that Dylan does keep for himself, the simple, rhythmical strumming, is strictly speaking redundant: *that* is done better—or at least more forcefully—by the drummer. All the technical elements that were fundamental for the early Dylan fade into the background, and they have barely been heard since.[8] The main function of the guitar was—and has been ever since—iconic, not musical.[9]

The changes I have mentioned so far, have mainly to do with the external sound, but also concerning the harmonical character of the songs, there is a similar change. On the surface, there doesn't seem to be that much of a difference between 'Mr. Tambourine Man' and 'Subterranean Homesick Blues', both from *Bringing It All Back Home* (1965). Both songs consist of the three chords which according to the classical theory fulfill the three main chord *functions*: that of *tonic*, *subdominant*, and *dominant*. Simply put, the **tonic** (T) is the keynote, the stable level of repose where the song usually begins and ends, whereas the **dominant** D is the contrasting, tension-laden level represented

[8] The most pleasant surprise on the two acoustical retro-albums *Good as I Been to You* (1992) and *World Gone Wrong* (1993) was the guitar work—he was actually still able! Concerning re-tuning, the New York versions of *Blood on the Tracks* (1975) are of course legendary exceptions, but they stand pitifully alone.

[9] It may even have been a mask; even though it was mostly redundant, it kept hanging there, and wasn't taken off until the performance of 'Isis' during the 1975 tour—when it was, significantly enough, replaced by another mask: the white-painted face.

by the chord five steps up from the keynote. It is an exaggeration, but just a slight one, to regard all music produced within a western art- or popular music tradition since the sixteenth century as a play with the balance between these two steps.

The third chord, the **subdominant** `S`, assumes a double position in relation to the other two. In many connections, it works as hardly more than a variant of the tonic, but its classic function is that of being the first step *away* from the tonic, as in the cadential figure `T-S-D-T` (see e.g. the beginning of 'Blowin' in the Wind'). The dominant creates a tension which requires resolution back to the tonic, and the subdominant is one step on the way to gaining this tenision, simply put.

It is not unproblematical to use these terms about popular music. They have grown out of a particular musical repertory—classic-romantical music of the eighteenth- and nineteenth centuries—and with a theoretical apparatus which is based on this music, and which cannnot easily be applied to any other material without violating the material. When I nevertheless use the terms in the following discussion of 'Mr Tambourine Man', I do this for two reasons. First, the classical western tradition cannot be excluded from the study of popular music. Even though various African and European folk music traditions—which can hardly be done justice through descriptions in a terminology and a conceptual apparatus shaped with the eyes fixed on Mozart and Beethoven—have been essential constituents in the popular music of the past century, this does not mean that popular music *is* folk music. In his **merwe:origins** (1989), **merwe:origins** convincingly argues in favour of the influence of classical 'art music'— especially in the harmonical area but also concerning melodic outline and phrasing sturctures—also in a 'purely' afro-american genre like the blues. For a harmonically structured song like 'Mr Tambourine Man' I thus consider it a relevant model of interpretation.

On the other hand, this doesn't make the model as such a good model. The value of the theoretical foundation of classical functional harmony can be doubted also in its 'native' field of classical music, and even more so applied on traditions which are farther removed from its original context. When I use terms like 'tonic' and 'dominant', I use them as neutral designations—to the extent that that is possible—for fundamental harmonic relationships like rest, contrast, and dynamics, and for some of those relations between these which are strongly established in classical western music and in traditions which relate to it.

What's special about 'Mr Tambourine Man' is that it does *not* begin on the tonic (T) but on the subdominant (S). From there, it passes via D to T, but without coming to a halt; instead, it returns back to S again. We thus have a complete cadence cycle, but with the 'wrong' steps: S-D-T-S instead of T-S-D-T.

The second phrase ('sleepy, and there is no place I'm going to') is another variation of the standard pattern: we get the beginning, T-S-D. This progression, which is usually the build-up phase of the cadence cycle, here has the opposite function: instead, D becomes the resting point were all half-refrains and every whole and half verse come to an end. Not until the end of the refrains is there a T which actually works as a resting point; all the others have been part of movements somewhere else.

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S D T S || T S D . |
S D T S || T S D T |
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A similar analysis can be made of the verses, which follow the same basic pattern as the refrains, but with an interesting twist. The two 'wrong' cadential figures in the refrain, come together in the T-S which the first ends and the second begins with.

Although the chords are the same, their functions are not. First time around: an uneasy rest on the wrong step, then: a new beginning. In the verses, this little segment assumes an independent role, and this little T-S block is repeated as many times as necessary for the unevenly long verses.

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   |          |
S D T S || T S D  .  => S D |: T S :| D  .
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The difference is subtle but significant: in its emancipated version, the T-S segment retains both its original characters—ending and beginning—and it is impossible to decide at any single occurrence which of them is in action: both are, at the same time.

An analysis such as this one isolates one element—harmonic functions and interconnections—and ignores others which for the final impression are just as important: the lyrics, of course, but also melodic shapes and gestures, rhythms,

phrasing.[10] But given this limitation—and in spite of it—the analysis intends to show that even a 'real' three-chord song like Mr. Tambourine Man can hold harmonic complexity to an entirely different degree than the other song in the comparison: 'Subterranean Homesick Blues'. This does not mean that the new songs are 'simple', only that Dylan sought other channels for his expression.[11]

If one only compares the two sides of *Bringing it All Back Home* one can perhaps understand the enraged critics we see in *Eat the Document* and *No Direction Home*, also without sharing their political or cultural-ideological 60s indignation. One can easily miss the ability to hint at a melody with an inimitable mixture of stringency, simplicity, and what can best be termed *sprezzatura*—the sophisticated, controlled nonchalance which was held in such high esteem in the court culture of the Italian Renaissance, and which Dylan embodies better than anyone else in today's cultural landscape. Hearing the two parts of the 1966 shows, for example, it is impossible not to be swept along by the sheer power in the electrical set, but when the sound orgasm has passed it is the beauty, the perfection, the expressivity of the acoustic solo set that remains, and one cannot but wonder what kind of nonsensical ramble—a jive against the press, perhaps?—it is when he claims to have been bored to death by the cursed solo sets and was only longing for the band to get on stage. No! *This is not the work of a tired man*. Dylan must be lying. [12]

All of this he abandoned, and compared to this, the ideological changes are mere ripples on the surface.[13] It is tempting to regard it as an answer to the

[10] For a more extensive treatment of this song, which also takes some of these aspects into consideration, see 'Three Tambourine Men', p. ??. See also the shorter analyses of 'Dear Landlord', 'Just Like a Woman', and 'In the Garden' (pp. ??, ??, and ??, respectively).

[11] It should also be added that Dylan's use of the blues genre is far from simple. Only a small handful of his countless blues-based songs can be called twelve-bar blues, and only rarely do two songs use the simple blues pattern in the same way.

[12] I usually have no problem believeing what Dylan says. Sure, he is a sphinx who is obsessed with carnevals and loves to tease journalists, but for an artist who is notorious for being intagible, mystical, and a riddle, he has always been frank and communicative—surprisingly so, perhaps—both in interviews and in the songs themselves, and to the extent that I have checked his facts, they always make sense. But not this time.

[13] Again, Dylan has been honest: he was never particularly political, and he became the Voice of a Generation purely by mistake. Hearing the preserved recording of a Bob Fass radio show from 1963, where Dylan stumbles into the studio in the middle of the night with the acetates of his new album, *The Freewheelin'* and jokes liberally about the politically correct folk purists; it becomes very difficult to uphold the thesis that a radical change

question: what to do next when perfection has been achieved? Or, in the poet's own words: 'You find out when you reach the top, you're on the bottom'.[14] It is as if to say: done here, nothing more to do, must move on, must get away from here.

The Long Lost Weekend (1967–74)

And off he went. Chronologically speaking, the electrified revolution in 1965–66 became only a short phase. Through three ineluctable albums, a hectic world tour and a uniting of textual fullness of meaning with a popular mode of expression which changed both spheres,[15], he perfected this genre—whatever it should be called; neither 'mathematical music' nor 'drug song' seem quite adequate—in a short time. But then he was gone. There was rumour of a motorcycle accident, but in those days, before chatrooms and newsgroups, the rumours had less to work with, the uncertainty correspondingly more. In hindsight, we are probably justified in saying that it should not be 'Dylan survived a motorcycle accident', but that 'Dylan survived *thanks to* a motorcycle accident.

It is easy to sympathize with the need to turn the page and start something new after the long and intensive eruption through the previous two years, not least given the new situation as a married man and a family father (and, in 1968, fatherless). But the same hindsight also tells us that the sharp break with creative activity was only apparent; to the public, it may have looked like he was spent, but 1967 was in fact his most productive year ever, with the released album *John Wesley Harding* as the tip of an iceberg the full extent of which was only gradually revealed. Fourteen songs from the 'Basement Tapes' soon began to circulate as the first bootleg album ever, but in its entirety the collection counts more than a hundred tracks. They vary dramatically in character and in quality, from funny but utterly meaningless 'See you later, Allen Ginsberg'

occured two-three years later which made him turn his back on 'his' movement: he was already thoroughly uninterested in that part of the folk movement by the time 'Blowin' ' and 'Hard Rain' came out.

[14] Or, as he has expressed it more recently, talking about why old records sound better than new ones: 'Back then, it was more important to be great than to be *perfect*'.

[15] 'Dylan freed the mind the way Elvis freed the body', as Bruce Springsteen said at the introduction into the Rock'n'roll hall of fame, 20 januar 1988.

and 'I'm your Teenage Prayer' and unfinished fragments like 'Won't You Be My Baby' and 'I'm Alright', to classics like 'Tears of Rage' and 'I Shall Be Released'—and the most legendary of them all: 'I'm Not There (1956)'. But even though the collection is uneven, it is also a demonstration of a creativity which is deeply fascinating, not only as a 'document' of the lost years, but as an independent 'work'.

Over the years between 1967 and 1973—i.e. between *John Wesely Harding* (1967) and *Planet Waves* (1974), Dylan recorded *c.* two hundred different songs, in addition to the hundred Basement tapes. Just like them, it is an uneven batch of recordings. Close up, it is easy to perceive the whole period as a long 'lost weekend'—a series of unengaged mediocrities, where the rubble buries the occasional gems. Song by song there is little to be excited about; album by album they place themselves between the adequate (*Nashville Skyline*), interesting (*New Morning*), and the strangely embarrassing (*Self Portrait*), but even the best is far from great. But considering the period as a whole, it becomes easier to see a general direction for the creative process, beyond fulfilling contractual obligations for a number of albums—it may even only gradually have become clear to Dylan himself what he was 'actually' doing.

It may be seen as a tripartite project. Most striking is of course the turn towards *country music*, in all its variants. *Nashville Skyline* (1969) comes close to being a pure country album, but the country element is predominant also on the other albums. It may be a small step from certain parts of the folk tradition to certain parts of the country tradition (is Jimmie Rodgers a blues, folk, or country artist?), but with a vantage point at the angry young man on *The Times They Are A-Changin'*, or the powerful young man (skinny, granted, but definitely powerful) on *Blonde on Blonde*, the slick crooner on songs like 'I Forgot More Than You'll Ever Know About Her' on *Self Portrait* will come as a surprise all the same—to most listeners probably an unpleasant one. What *is* he doing?

One can see the country ballads as a musical expression of the simple life, which reaches its most unadulterated, enthusiastic, unabashed heights in the 'la la la'-chorus of 'The Man In Me' and in lines like 'Build a little cabin in U-tah [. . .] Have a bunch of kids who call me Pa, / That must be what it's all about' from 'Sign on the Window'. The message is actually so clear that one is tempted to ask: 'Is that *really* what you think, Mr Dylan? Is *that* really what it's all about?'

It is more productive, at least from a musical point of view, to see the country period as another stage in Dylan's exploration of *band sound and dynamics*, of the possibilities it gives to play together with others, despite the limitations it also entails. Hence, the period also marks the fruition of a feature which later has become something of a trade-mark: the constant reworking of songs.

Reviews of Dylan shows usually manage to mention how unpredictable Dylan is and that he changes his songs completely from night to night. This was just as untrue in the early 60s as it is today. Dylan's concerts consisted of thoroughly prepared and rehearsed songs, a fixed set of songs each night, and in the same version throughout the tour. This is true also of the world tour in '65–'66: a couple of songs were exchanged for others during the tour, but in general, it is a fixed show that is presented.

With the intensivated collaboration in the quiet basement in Woodstock, with musicians who knew each other inside out, we get radically different versions of the same song—exactly as the myth about Dylan has it. 'Like A Rolling Stone' from the Isle of Wight concert in 1969 which is included on *Self Portrait*, may not be impeccable, but hey! it's an entirely new song.

What we have is a musical exploration of and in the dynamic interplay between musicians, arrangements, guitarist/singer. Had the official albums been all we had this would mostly have been hidden, but thanks to the outtakes which have leaked into circulation over the years, we can peek into this laboratory and see the whole period as a continuous *processing*, not just as the motley bouquet that appear from the albums.

Two pearls deserve special mention. 'Spanish is the Loving Tongue' in the version that was released on *Dylan* (1973; recorded April 1969) is probably the most tasteless waste of tape and minutes that has been released in Dylan's name. Complete with La-la-la chorus, mariachi band, and a performance which reveals little respect for either the song, the lyrics, or what energy may have gone into the making of the track.

One year later: Dylan alone at the piano, accompanied only by Charles Daniels on bass. The song is the same, at least on paper, but this time the outcome is the most magical creation Dylan has ever accomplished: an intensely personal rendition where the grief in the text is tangible. The piano starts out with a hint of a sound without a fixed rhythm; between the verses he rolls out some arabesques which come from no known place, but which occupy the space with the assuredness of the permanent resident; gradually a rhythm

materializes which together with the emotional drama of the lyrics and the warmth and intensity of the singing forms a subdued climax which lasts and lasts . . . No, it's not the same song. But the question is if the glorious version could have existed without the damned one.[16]

Second pearl: The recording of the soundtrack for *Pat Garret & Billy the Kid* was according to all reports a traumatic experience, and the result is, despite certain highlights, uneven. One of the tracks, which Dylan calls 'Billy Surrenders', begins as a form- and directionless plucking of some notes on the guitar, up and down on a couple of strings, nothing more. The other musicians try as best as they can to follow lead—something takes form in the chaos, and suddenly one notices the musical idea which lies behind it all, which turns out to have (or to become) both a melody, a rhythm and a direction, and it was there all the time: a new variation of the 'Billy'-theme and the verse about being 'hunted by the man who was your friend'.

Keeping these examples in mind, we may revise the history of the period 1967–73: not as the story of a burned-out, tired artist with a new family situation, but as Bonnie Beecher's harmonica story over again: a plunge into a style, a tradition, and a method which was virgin territory, where he to a large extent had to start from scratch. In this light, Greil Marcus's legendary reaction to *Self Portrait*—'What is this Shit?'—turns out to be exactly the same as Bonnie Beecher's. And the answer to Marcus's indignant question is: it's just Dylan once again saying: 'Naw, I wanna get this—hwang! WHwaongg!'

The third part of the project is closely related to this: it may be that Dylan during these years has not had anything he wanted to say with the former immediacy or an intuitive way of saying it, whatever it is, but he is searching.[17] On *New Morning* (1972) no song resembles the other, everything is tried out—scat singing and swing jazz on 'If Dogs Run Free', country-waltz on 'Winterlude', and the strange but captivating 'Father of Night' and 'Three Angels'.

[16] The question is purely rhetorical; of course the answer is 'yes', but the thought is as enticing as the contrast is glaring.

[17] Cf. Dylan's own statement that he had to 'get to do consciously what I used to do unconsciously' (interview with Jonathan Cott, *Rolling Stone*, 16 November 1978).

Bloody Tracks and Rolling Thunder (1974–75)

The above is a construction, as are all stories, and should be read with the necessary reservation—he was of course burned-out and family father *as well*—but it is undeniably a more interesting story, and not entirely wrong either. It is also a story which makes it easier to present the next chapter: about the *Blood on the Tracks* and *Rolling Thunder Revue* years.

Because without it, it becomes difficult to pinpoint *what* is the greatness and novelty of this phase, even though everyone agrees that it is there. But if one sees it as a natural continuation of the preceding years, one may have to explain what 'Tangled Up In Blue' has to do with 'Spanish is the la-la-la-ving Tongue', but it also provides an answer: they are extremes in the same quest for a voice and a point (where the quest, and ot necessarily the answer, is the most important).

On *Blood on the Tracks*, the enthusiasm of having something to say again, both textually, musically, and formally, is unquestionable[18] A unique combination of a renewed interest in open tunings (inspired by Joni Mitchell), a new perspective on narrative and time (inspired by the mysterious art teacher Norman Raeben), and a broken heart (inspired by Sara), resulted in an outpouring of creativity which bears comparison with the trilogy from the mid-60s.

It is a dear topic of dispute in Dylan circles which version of the record is the best: the one that was recorded in New York in September 1974 or the one that was finally released, where Dylan, encouraged by his brother David had rerecorded a number of songs. Many say that it would have been better had he not messed around with songs that were already perfect, but instead kept the intense New York versions.

Both versions have their strong points. On the one hand there is an undeniable emotional intensity in the original versions, which is occasionally lost in the new recordings. On the other, the new versions make the album as a whole a far more varied and—to my ears—satisfying listening experience than the New York versions, which are all played in the same open E tuning and only intermittently breaks away from a certain bitter melancholy. Luckily, we don't have to choose, since both versions are available.

[18] Even though Dylan may not have been all too enthusiastic about the *contents* of the message; cf. his remark to Mary Travis, that he 'found it hard to understand how people could *enjoy* hearing that type of pain' (**heylin:shades**, p. 373).

But even though I tend to prefer the revised version, musically speaking the New York versions are by far the most interesting, precisely because of the open tuning and the way he uses it. Normally, the strings of a guitar are tuned so as to make it possible to play as many different chords as possible: the tones of the strings are placed at certain neutral intervals which, although they do favour certain keys, do not exclude others.

Open tuning, on the other hand, takes the opposite approach, in that all the strings are tuned to tones from one chord only. Thus, one is also limited to this chord and its closest relatives,[19] but as long as one stays within this area, the many open strings boost the resonance and thus provides a fuller sound. Even more importantly, one will tend to use the open strings of the base chord also in other chords where those tones don't naturally belong, which works in two opposite directions at once: providing tonal stability, while the extra notes produce 'juicy' chords.

Joni Mitchell is usually given the credit for having opened Dylan's eyes to the possibilities of open tunings. If so, it can't have amounted to more than a reintroduction: a substantial part of Dylan's earliest repertory was played in various open and altered tunings.

Also in other ways, *Blood On The Tracks* marks a return to the acoustic Dylan of the early 60s. While the records since 1965 have the character of 'Dylan with band', *Blood on the Tracks* is rather 'Dylan with accompaniment', and the guitar playing is of the same kind as in the early days: a rhythmic, driving ground work; the full sonority that the open E tuning provides; the same economical playing style with maximum effect achieved with a minimum of effort; similar licks between verses and stanzas; and Dylan's guitar as the obvious musical centre. But it is a return only under the influence of the intervening period: both the expressivity of the mid-60s and the later excursions to the broader harmonical palette of the jazz and country repertories can be heard in the songs on *Blood on the Tracks*, e.g. on 'Idiot Wind', which with simple guitaristic means (thanks to the open tuning) moves in the borderland between major and minor with several different versions of the same chords. What the acoustic set in 1965 was in relation to the solo artist of the early 60s, *Blood on*

[19] One can of course play other chords with simple barre chords anywhere on the neck, but this gives an unflexible sound and is against the spirit of open tuning (where the open strings are essential), at least in the form Dylan gives it.

the Tracks was in relation to the preceding years: the perfection of a process of absorption.

If *Blood on the Tracks* is primarily an album experience, *Desire* can hardly be judged separately from the concerts of the *Rolling Thunder Revue*. Here, the creative, musical community has central stage. Dylan originally wished for the tour to function like a travelling circus, a carnival which could give concerts wherever they happened to be, on short notice and in small venues. It was not intended to be a Bob Dylan tour but an incessantly rolling caravan where artists could come and go—including himself.

It didn't quite turn out that way: Dylan was the obvious centre of attention and interest, and fairly quickly the shows ended up in large arenas after all. But nonetheless, the shows are characterized by an exuberant variety—of styles, musicians, instruments, art forms—which lend them their very special character, and which must have been deeply satisfying for Dylan and the other participants. The full show lasted for *c*. four hours, and even though Dylan was undoubtedly the protagonist, he was still one among many others on stage and his set just a small part of a bigger whole. Thus, what the acoustical set in 1965 was in relation to the solo artist of the early 60s, the *The Rolling Thunder Revue* was in relation to the concerts with the Band in 1966: the perfection of Dylan as a fellow musician who mastered *sprezzatura* in a musical companionship the way he once did it as a soloist.

Battling the Boundaries—Fighting the Form (1978)

The *Rolling Thunder* shows used to end with the song 'Gotta Travel On', and that's exactly what Dylan did. Again, the perfection that had been attained was a call for departure and not for further refinement. And again, there were external circumstances which emphasised the break, beyond the artistic or musical reasons. A couple of years of divorce hassle and the undeniable failure with his cinematographic magnum opus *Renaldo & Clara* had apparently made Dylan a poor man, and the world tour he embarked on in 1978—his first real world tour—has been nicknamed 'The Palimony Tour'.

The contrast with *Rolling Thunder* could hardly have been starker. Dylan no longer performed in jeans and bandana, but in silk vest and brocade; the band was no longer the former group of friends and musical libertines, but

a slick band to a large extent taken over from the remains of Elvis' old show band; the whole appearance radiated 'Las Vegas' instead of 'Gypsy caravan'.

Musically speaking, the menu that was served during the tour was as close to *pop* as we have ever seen it in Dylan's carreer. It was music for the masses. At the opening concerts in Budokan in Japan, Dylan even let the concert arrangers dictate which songs he should sing.

And it certainly started bad. The live album 'At Budokan' which came out of the visit to Japan starts off with a 'Mr Tambourine Man' where the pop arrangement is dominated by a flute. Even Mozart hated the flute!

If 1978 is a memorable year, it is maninly because of the autumn leg of the tour. The greatness of these concerts has, strangely enough, been recognized only in recent years. The expectations to the European summer shows were enormous—this was his first appearance on European soil since 1966, and for most people it was their first chance to see him live. The concerts were gigantic; the out-door concert at the Blackbushe airfield in England is assumed to have had 200,000 visitors. Another highlight—perhaps not the least for Dylan himself—was the concert on Hitler's stadium in Nuremberg where Dylan played from the opposite side of the arena from where Hitler had been standing, and introduced 'Masters of War' saying that 'It is a great pleasure to sing it in this place'. Hence, there is a certain mythical glow around this part of the tour. But back in America in the fall, the reviewers were negative to Dylan's accomplishments, for reasons that had little to do with the music. The late shows have therefore been largely forgotten until they have been resurrected thanks to a handful of outstanding bootleg albums.[20]

It is an exciting period because it demonstrates Dylan's battle against the boundaries of genre norms. It can be heard as a long answer to the question 'An artist like Bob Dylan, with his roots in folk and rock music and whose version of perfection can be defined as *sprezzatura*: the studied, confident nonchalance, how can he find himself at home in a commercial soundscape and under formal and artistic constraints which are dictated by what the people wants (because he needs their money, or simply because he wants to)?' And the answer is that an artist like Bob Dylan solves the problem in part by redefining the genre norms so that *they* feel at home with *him*. It appears to be this work with the

[20] *Hush Hush, Sweet Charlotte* (see below, p. 20) has taken the place of pride among the shows, but others are just as good.

form which is what generates the engagement in 1978, in the same way that the material and the companionship did it during the Rolling Thunder years.

The same 'Mr Tambourine Man' is the song which most clearly illustrates the radical transformation that this formal labour led to, between the first concerts and the last. The flute is still there during the summer leg, but it has become more frenzied, and come autumn it is gone. The arrangement is also changed: the happy clappy pop song has lost most of its drive; instead, the instruments weave a carpet of sound upon which his voice meanders. And the vocal is as far from the spring tour as one can possibly come: the rhythm is completely free and every phrase ends with stretched-out tones which tend to slide upwards into the area of scream in a way which resembles John Lennon's primal scream therapy on his *Plastic Ono Band*.

The song that stands out as the true highlight of the 1978 season undergoes the same treatment: 'Tangled Up In Blue'. It was introduced in the setlist during the summer in a new arrangement, a slow, broad, emotional grand ballad. The accompaniment, which consists of guitar, saxophone, and keyboard, intimates more than marks a pulse. To begin with, the song is rather square, with a fixed melody and predominantly a firm rhythm which because of the slow tempo leaves the melody in a constant danger of falling apart in single syllables; the rhythm decides in this song, and it is as if it takes some effort to keep it together as a meaningful unit.

But how different isn't the autumn version! The grand ballad arrangement is basically the same as during the summer tour, but it now becomes a sounding background for the most intensive (and intensively slow) vocalizations ever. And this time it is the text and the sound that reigns, and the soul in turmoil who restlessly roams the American continent in the song (and—one may imagine—also on stage), gets free reins in a performance of the same cloth as in 'Mr Tambourine Man'. The square rhythm is gone; only in a single phrase here and there is it perceivable, and the effect is striking: what used to be fixed form, a musical straitjacket for a text that wants to get free, is now an effect which kan be used or avoided at the wish of the singer in the moment. When the fixed puls can suddenly be heard in the phrase 'They never did like mama's home-made dress',[21] it stand out dramatically from the surrounding phrases, whether one hears it as an echo of the serious formality of the nuptial liaison,

[21] In the version from Charlotte, 10 December. Other nights might have had other variants, but the effect is the same.

or just as a musical expression. Regular rhythm is hardly anything new, but this time, it's as if it is heard for the first time.

Are You Ready? (1979)

In November 1978, Dylan picked up a cross from the stage floor which someone had tossed up to him, and the rest is history. The last few times he sings 'Tangled Up In Blue', the lyrics are changed. He no longer visits topless places to have a beer, nor does he smoke pipes or read Italian poets: the topless place has become the the Flamingo hotel, where 'she' is dancing in a dress made of stars and stripes. He now reads the Bible and thinks about death ('all the people I used to know, at least the ones that ain't in the grave').

In other words: it is time for new chapter and a new departure, more radical this time than ever before. As a reborn and saved Christian he suddenly had an agenda which in one single blow rendered all his old songs useless. In a quick succession, Dylan writes a collection of songs where he distances himself from all the traditions he has always felt at home in and being inspired by and instead turns to the gospel tradition. The suddenness and comprehensiveness of the change means that in the 'gospel years', we have an unusually clear picture of 'Who is Dylan the musician right now?'

The conversion became an opportunity for Dylan to delve more seriously into a tradition which had always been dear to him even though he had never taken the chance to live it out. The Staple Singers had, according to Dylan himself, been an important influence ever since he heard them on the radio at night at age twelve. When Dylan became a gospel musician himself, this was the direction in which he turned. He was attracted to Roebuck Staples' voice, which united a sweet and gentle voice with a rough bluesy edge which made him '[sound more] like a blues singer singing gospel'.[22] And the same could be said about Dylan; a large portion of the new songs are undeniably blues songs, even though they come with a different sound than before. The rhythm section is more lively than earlier, and there are two keyboard players in the band. The backing singers, who all had their background in black church choirs, were chosen more for their feeling than their perfection: It wasn't so much standing

[22] The statement is from an interview Dylan gave on the occasion of The Staple Singers tribute show, 27 Oct 2001, quoted from **gray:enc:staple**, p. 638.

there with the music and trying to prove how perfectly you could sing, but people who had a story in their voices, when they'd sing there was a feeling there. That feeling comes from life experiences, and that's what he was after.'[23]

In the best Christian spirit he throws himself into the 70,000 fathoms' depth, and apparently sees it as liberating. The joy of absorbing the gospel tradition the same way he earlier did with folk and blues is tangible, and never before or after has his singing been more exuberant or the union of vitality and joy and deep seriousness more contagious, no matter what one may think of his conversion.

And he didn't do a 'hwang WHwaongg' this time. Dylan had a message to deliver, at any cost, and he hired some of the most outstanding producers in the rock world, the duo Jerry Wexler and Barry Beckett; he brought in the rising star Mark Knopfler on guitar; and he even overcame his own displeasure at hard work in the studio. The result—*Slow Train Coming* (1979)—did, not surprisingly, turn out to be one of the strongest albums in Dylan's catalogue—if one can see through the layers of doomsday and armageddon that pour out of many of the lyrics.

The Never-Ending Tour (1988–)

The eighties were, for Dylan just like the rest of us, a difficult time. *Down in the Groove* from 1988 is a good representative of this period. Six of the then songs on the album are straightforward three-chord rock in A major, where the biggest difference between the songs is the titles. And undeniable gems like Ralph Stanley's bluegrass ballad 'Rank Stranger', the album as a whole confirms that the eighties (here defined as the period between 1983 and 1988—incidentally Reagan's central years in charge) are—hopefully—forgettable.

Down in the Groove is in good company: *Empire Burlesque* from the previous year has a couple of acceptable songs, but as an album it is fairly unbearable, mainly because of the production by Arthur Baker, the star producer of the eighties. Knocked Out Loaded from the following year has only two redeeming features: it lasts half an hour only, and a third of it is 'Brownsville Girl', a road

[23] Carolyn Dennis, who was to become Dylan's second wife (*Follow That Dream international*, December, 1992).

movie better than any I've seen on the screen, which unfortunately means that one has to buy the album.

It was therefore a great surprise to all: nobody had expected anything more to come from Dylan's hand. The first two volumes of Paul Williams' excellent *Bob Dylan: Performing Artist* have the subtitles 'The Early Years, 1960–73' and 'The Middle Years, 1974–86'—an entirely plausible plan for a trilogy where one could expect a volume three 'The Last Years', where it would be too much to hope for to get enough live material to fill a whole volume about the 'performing artist' alone, but where the rest might be filled up with some retrospective filler material to finalize the series in style. But such expectations were shattered by events: *Performing Artist* vol. 3 has the somewhat tentative and vague title '1986–1990 and beyond', and volume 4 is scheduled to appear with the title '2003–1990 and back again'.[24]

The surprise that ruined William's neat outline, was 'The Never-Ending Tour'. It started in 1988 and at the time of writing it is still true to its name.

The name, the 'Never-Ending Tour' only indirectly goes back to Dylan himself. In an interview in 1989, he was asked: 'The last tour has gone virtually straight into this one.' According to the published version, he answers: 'It's all the same tour. The Never-Ending Tour.' But as Michael Gray has revealed, the name was formulated by the journalist, Adrian Deevoy, in a follow-up question which Dylan answered affirmatively if 'unenthusiastically'.[25]

The term may still stand. It is well established, and it covers well a period which forms a natural chapter in the history of Dylan as a musician—not only for the obvious external reasons concerning biographical acts and facts, but also because even though many traits of Dylan's artistic profile are still the same, there are also some thoroughgoing changes in premises.

The most evident change is quantitative: from the beginning until 1987, Dylan had given a little more than five hundred concerts; today he is rapidly approaching the two thousandth *Never-Ending tour* show, with an average of one hundred a year. While there was a time when it was perfectly possible to have a complete Dylan collection—not only all the official albums but also every existing concert recording and bootleg album—as the years pass

[24] **Williams:1991**; **Williams:1994**; **Williams:2004**.

[25] **gray:enc**, p. 173. The interview was first published in *Q*, no. 39, December 1989. Dylan has on several occasion rejected the name; in the booklet to *World Gone Wrong* (1993) he says that it ended in 1991 when G. E. Smith left the band.

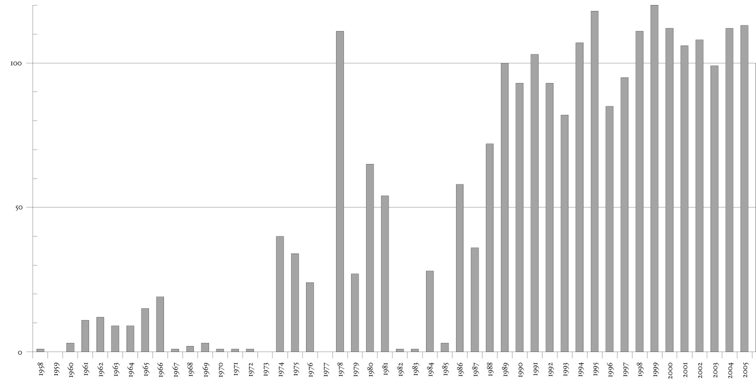

Figure 0.1 Registered concerts per year, 1958–2005. Source: http://db.dylantree.com

and the tour rolls on, this has become virtually (and perhaps also practically) impossible.

Which also means that this is a difficult chapter to write. To present a meaningful survey of these nearly twenty years of modern rock history is way beyond the scope of an article like this. I will therefore go for a more limited task: first, I will give a brief sketch of the whole period, then focus on a few distinctive features.

* * *

The *Never-Ending Tour* was born out of an awakening, a spiritual experience not unlike the one that led to the conversion in 1978. In various interviews, Dylan has explained how in 1986 he was tired of it all, felt no connection with the songs he was singing, and used the backup singers as a screen to hide behind. During a short tour with the Grateful Dead (whom he seriously considered to join, as a regular member) he realised that what *he* could no longer do—fill the songs he was singing, his *own* songs, with meaning—the Dead did without any problem. Then, during a concert in Locarno, Switzerland, 5 October, 1987, it happened:

> It's almost like I heard it as a voice. [. . .] *I'm determined to stand, whether God will deliver me or not.* And all of a sudden everything just exploded. [. . .] After that is when I sort of knew: I've got to go out and play these songs.[26]

And so he did. The format was supposed to be as small as possible: no more backup singers, just drums, bass, and a guitar. It was tailored to the new project: to rediscover his own songs.

The years of the Never-Ending Tour are both very different and quite similar. They may be likened to bottles of wine from the same vineyard, which may vary in quality and character from one year to another, but where there are no sharp breaks.

The first year, 1988, is a good one—vintage Never-Ending Tour. The shows were fairly short, but in return, he worked his way through an impressive amount of songs, and the energy Dylan draws from the joy of having found a way to do his thing again, is apparent. A regular element, which remained so for the first ten years, was an acoustic set in the middle of the concert where Dylan, usually supported only by an acoustic guitar, pulled out songs from the folk repertory again, but also early rock'n'roll, Tin Pan Alley schlagers, and more recent songs. Alley-schlagere og nyere covers.

The general opinion on the years 1989–1991 is more mixed. Again, Dylan has claimed it to have been his final blow against the myth of Bob Dylan, Icon And Voice of a Generation. Whether this is true, or it was caused by changes in the band or that Dylan's visions went too fast and too far for the others on stage to keep up, or simply by an excessive consumption of liquids—during these years we find some of the worst concert experiences Dylan has ever exposed us to.

And yet: it was never a *clear* 'Hwang WHwaongg'. In his best moments, Dylan managed to bring new life to the old songs, not least through a singing which is both expressive and inventive regarding melody lines and phrasing.

In 1993, band and leader had found a form, and we get a series of good years. Characteristic of the '93 shows are the long, long numbers with many long guitar solos ('Tangled up in Blue' lasts twelve minutes). The series culminates with 1995, where particularly the spring concerts in Prague and Brixton stand out.

[26] *Newsweek.* October 13, 1997

The music in the following years, until today, is more spotless than before—for better or for worse. There wasn't a tighter rock combo than Dylan's band in existence on the surface of the planet around the turn of the millennium. The downside is that there was far less room for the expressivity, the unexpected experiments of the former years. Instead we get a well-rehearsed, professional programme performed with great technical and musical expertise—one knows what one gets, and one knows that it is good, but one *knows* it.

Somewhat simplified one may summarize the tendency during these years as a development away from simple *folk* and more expansive rock, towards a cleaner rock style, in combination with other genres within *Americana*: bluegrass, inspired by the Stanley Brothers; different shades of country music; and the improbable but highly satisfactory cross-over to swing-jazz which is so prominent on the two latest albums.

* * *

What is it, then, that Dylan is doing and has been since 1988? How can he keep going at his breakneck speed, year after year? the only year prior to 1988 that even comes close, is 1978, and that, apparently, was an experience which almost destroyed him. What is different now?

'Never-Ending' is probably part of the answer: he is now a hard-working musician who goes to work every day and is happy with that. When the single moments are seen 'sub specie aeternitatis', he no longer has to be a genius and a prophet every time he goes on stage; he can instead be the skilled craftsman who does what he is best at together with other professionals who can make sure the job is properly done. He is, in the best and most relaxed sense of the word, 'just a song-and-dance man'.

Another interesting tendency, which also follows its own pulse, is the relationship between concerts and records. Dylan has always expressed a deep disdain for recording studios, microphones, and producers, and—at least according to the myth—his best tracks are those which have not been perfected through numerous takes, but which have been perfect on the first take, preferrably with musicians who haven't even heard the song on beforehand, so that they haven't tired of it or learned it too well to be spontaneously creative any more. The live situation, filling the moment with music which is born out of that same moment—*that* is Dylan's art form. Significantly enough, during the periods which are held to be his weakest—the *Self Portrait* and *Knocked Out Loaded* eras—the number of album releases has not gone down (even

though they perhaps should have): it is as a live performer that he has been absent.

During the Never-Ending Tour years, he seems to have taken the consequences of this. It may not be surprising that the new releases are scarcer when he is on the road all the time, but he also seems to have had a more relaxed attitude towards it, as if he is thinking: 'I'm a song-and-dance man—the records will have to come when they come.'

When they did come, they were not bad. His last three records, *Time Out Of Mind*, *'Love and Theft'*, and *Modern Times*, have been received very favourably by critics and audience alike, and they have—hardly surprising, but worth pointing out—found a natural place in his live repertory, side by side with the classics of the 60s.

It is not that the repertory needed expansion. In average, Dylan has played a little over one hundred different songs per year since 1988—374 different songs altogether.[27] The repertory falls in three different categories. The core is of course his own songs, where a relatively small group of songs dominate, but where he has also reintroduced a substantial part of his entire production, reviving songs that most people had given up the hope of ever hearing live.

The second main group consists of old classics from the folk repertory—the same treasure trove he pillaged in his early carreer and which has followed him ever since. For a long time, the Never-Ending Tour concerts had a fixed structure with an acoustic set in the middle where he was only accompanied by a guitarist, and the gems are too many to mention: songs like 'Eileen Aroon', 'White Dove', 'Roving Gambler', and, in the later years, religious songs that are best known—if at all—from the hymnals: 'Rock of Ages', 'I am the Man, Thomas', and 'Hallelujah, I'm Ready to Go'.

And finally his inimitable covers, spanning the whole range from evergreens like 'I'm In The Mood For Love' and Charles Aznavour's 'The Times We've Known', 50s' hits like 'Any Way You Want Me' and 'Blue Bonnet Girl', to modern standards like Leonard Cohen's 'Hallelujah' (which I am bold enough to claim that nobody has sung better, including the originator), the odd Beatles song, Neil Young's 'Old Man', and more obscure songs like Charles Daniels's 'Old Rock'n'roller', which he presented, at the one concert where he played it: 'In case you're wondering what happens to people like me, here's a song to tell about it.' A rare gesture was the inclusion of several songs by Warren Zevon in

[27] Between 1988 and the summer tour of 2005.

2002 while Zevon was terminally ill in cancer. As one fan expressed it: 'Jesus is the last guy bob dedicated three songs to in a show.'

In a certain sense, he treats all three categories in the same way. When with the help of the Grateful Dead he rediscovered his own songs, it was precisely as a repertory of songs with qualities in themselves, independently of him as the originator—that he had in fact written them, was almost an insignificant coincidence. In recent interviews, he talks proudly about his old songs, but also with a detached awe: they have come *through* him.

This also means that he is emancipated from them: he can let go of the demand—from himself or from the audience—that he has to bring out new emotional depths and write them down in heart blood: the songs have their effect on their own. He is just the messenger. He performs them like a cover act—'Dylan does Dylan'—which also appears from the fact that he usually returns to the original versions of the songs: the wonderful re-writes of songs like 'Tangled Up In Blue' and 'Simple Twist of Fate' are gone.

One significant difference remains between how he treats his own songs and those of others. When he sings Zevon's 'Accidentally Like A Martyr' it is by and large a faithful rendition of the original; the arrangement is the same as Zevon's own, and the text is presented clearly and audibly. It is as if he wants the audience to hear the song, and to understand what they hear.

'Like a Rolling Stone', 'Just Like A Woman' or any other of the familiar Dylan classics are a completely different matter. Here, it is often difficult to follow the lyrics, unless one knows them already; the melodies are normally (and—through the years: increasingly) reduced to short figures which are repeated *ad nauseam* and boredom, so that just about every line in every single song have at times consisted of monotonous recitations punctuated by rising octaves at the end.

These performances are probably responsible for the concert review topos about how unpredictable Dylan is and how he always changes his songs beyond recognition. But the truth of the matter is that if one disregards the singing, the arrangements are overwhelmingly stable and mostly faithful to the original album versions.[28] This is an important point for the understanding of Dylan as a live artist during the Never-Ending Tour years: he uses the listener's knowledge

[28] There are exceptions, of course, such as the swing-jazz version of 'Trying to Get To Heaven' and less radical but still new arrangements of songs like 'Boots of Spanish Leather', 'Gotta Serve Somebody', etc.

of the songs as the foundation upon which he constructs the evening's show, the canvas on which he 'paints his masterpiece'. Given this '(p)recognition', he can move freely around in his melody lines and his phrasings, his accents and his gestures. The arrangements have the same function as the guitar accompaniment in the early acoustic years: as a necessary but not sufficient point of departure; a field of action, not an independent 'work'. Sometimes the result is forgettable, routine-like—and what else can one expect?—but then there are all the other times, when a lyric line gets a surprising twist because of a new accent, or a counter-melody brings out new musical associations, and what we have is an entirely new song, even though the arrangement is the same as the night before or the night after. These are the moments which make it worthwhile to collect piles of almost identical concert recordings: you never know where the nugget is, so you gotta have 'em all, and without a good knowledge of Dylan's sometimes peculiar 'canvas', there is the risk that one would overlook the brilliant strokes and mistake them for specks on the canvas.

'Mathematical music'

But there is also a method in the madness of variations. In a central and much discussed passage in his autobiography *Chronicles* (2004), Dylan gives a candid account of how a certain, apparently very precise system of 'mathematical music' which he had once learned from Lonnie Johnson in 1965, was a decisive factor behind the change which set the Never-Ending Tour in motion. He describes it as a system which can be applied mechanically, and which will *always work*, because it is based on the properties of certain numbers:

> There's no mystery to it and it's not a technical trick. The scheme is for real [. . .], like a delicate design that would arrange the structure of whatever piece I was performing. [. . .] And because this works on its own mathematical formula, it can't miss'[29]

He is relatively detailed in his descriptions of this system and certain of the number relations with respect to melodies and rhythms, but that does not mean that everything is understandable ('In a diatonic scale there are eight notes, in a pentatonic there are five. If you're using the first scale, and you hit

[29] Bob Dylan, *Chronicles* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), pp. 158–9.

2, 5 and 7 to the phrase and then repeat it, a melody forms. Or you can use 2 three times. Or you can use 4 once and 7 twice. It's indefinite what you can do, and each time would create a different melody.')[30] But from more general descriptions of the system one can form an outline of what he means, which also corresponds well with what he does on stage.

What Dylan describes is a *formulaic* system for composition and performance, where a set of general rules can be applied to many different situations. The system builds on a certain approach to rhythmic and melodic cells, based on more or less esoteric considerations of the properties of numbers, but it's actually not very mathematical at all: rather, it is a method to establish a temporary musical system of meaning through a conscious use of certain numerically based formulas, and repetition of these—possibly but not necessarily also against the background of a conviction that these numbers have certain objective properties.

A summary of the system, which I would prefer to call 'creative redundancy' rather than 'mathematical music', might read:

1. Make a random selection of tones and form patterns out of these, which are then repeated and recombined.
2. Through these iterations, new tonal centres are established, and hence a field of tension between the original tonal focal points of the song and the new patterns.
3. For the patterns to be recognized as a new tonal centre (and not just a random selection of tones) in the short time that the musician has at his disposal, they must be simple;
4. but if they are, and if one finds a balance between redundancy and creativity (meaning: there is a limit to how long one can keep on playing 2 5 7 2 5 7, whatever it means), it will always work.

So when Dylan says:

> A song executes itself on several fronts and you can ignore musical customs. All you need is a drummer and a bass player, and all shortcomings become irrelevant as long as you stick to the system.
>
> The method works on higher or lower degrees depending on different patterns and the syncopation of a piece.
>
> Very few would be converted to it because it had nothing to do with technique and musicians work their whole lives to be technically superior players'[31]

[30] *Chronicles*, p. 158.
[31] *Chronicles*, p. 158.

it can be translated freely but contentswise fairly precisely to the following:

> A song can exploit several different meaning systems and the tension between them at the same time, and you are not limited to the rules set by one such set of musical customs. Since I play rock, I need a drummer and a bass player, but all shortcomings become irrelevant as long as you stick to the system, since this system is based on a conscious play with 'inventive redundancy' and not on the intricacy of the base system and the technical prowess of the musician.
>
> Since the system works in the interplay beween the song and the newly established fields of meaning, the concrete way of playing or singing will have to be adjusted to the different patterns already present in the song.
>
> Very few would be converted to it because, whereas most music making takes place in contexts where value judgement is based on *complexity* and most musicians depend on technical prowess to accomplish this, the 'Lonnie' method instead emphasises and requires *simplicity*, both on the part of the performer and as a constitutive element of the system itself.

Dylan himself emphasises the 'redundancy' part and pairs it with the metaphysical qualities of numbers in his explanation of what it is that makes the system Just Work. My interpretation is a little different: that redundancy may be a precondition for the system, but what really makes it Just Work is the other element: inventiveness. I don't think it is a system that someone else can learn to use, at least not directly, as a system. It is hardly insignificant that there are twenty years of touring and music making between the time when he first learned it and when he understood how to put it to use. It has taken him those years to gain the musicianship (and perhaps also the need for routine which persistent touring must bring with it) which he then could cross-fertilize with Lonnie Johnson's secret. In other words, the system is based less on mathematics and Lonnie than on 'inventive redundancy' and Dylan's own musicianship.

If it has seemed meaningful to give Dylan's more or less clearly formulated thoughts about his mathematical model this much attention, it is because it has seemed to be a good key: this *is* what he's actually doing. His solos mostly consist of little figures which are repeated and varied,[32] and the same goes for his singing which makes unprepared first-timers shake their heads in bewilderment and say with the critics: 'I didn't recognize any of the songs; he has changed them all.' The 'Lonnie theory' may be seen as the principles

[32] See especially my analysis of 'Mr Tambourine Man' from Cascais, 1993 and Vienna, 1999 in 'Three Tambourine Men', on page ??.

behind that which concretely happens when he uses the original songs as starting points for his own variations.

Furthermore, it gives a vantage point for answering the question what is different now and in 1978. 'Inventive redundancy' is the successful outcome of transferring Dylan's governing principle as a guitar player—maximum effect with minimum effort—to the live situation with a full band.

The Pre/post-modern Dylan

Dylan has always borrowed liberally from the traditions he has involved himself with: most of the melodies to his early songs are slightly reworked or exactly copied versions of existing folk songs. On his last couple of albumsx, this has come to the fore again, in ways which make one ask what his current 'project' really is.

It all started when Chris Barnes read the Japanese gangster biography *Confessions of a Yakuza* by Yunichi Saga and recognized phrases and whole sentences which he knew well from another context: the lyrics to *'Love and Theft'*. He noted down several of these instances. When *The Guardian* picked up on the story, it created a bit of a stir in the media for a while (and Saga's book skyrocketed on the bestselling lists).

New discoveries followed: not only the lyrics but also the music was borrowed. 'Floater' is virtually identical with Guy Lombardo's 'Snuggled On Your Shoulders'; 'Sugar Baby' is Gene Austin's 'Lonesome Road' with new lyrics (mostly; the central admonition 'Look up, look up, seek your maker / 'fore Gabriel blows his horn' is Austin's), and so forth.

With *Modern Times* the story repeated itself. The texts have taken more than scattered images from 'the Poet Laureate of the Confederacy', Henry Timrod and from the Penguin edition of Ovid's *Tristia*. And seven (so far) of the ten songs have known models not just for the melodies but for *all* the music: arrangements, solos, the whole thing. And yet, the record sleeve states: 'All songs written by Bob Dylan'.

Again, one may ask: what is he doing? The media have mostly been preoccupied with the lyric borrowings, and this is perhaps understandable: that the Voice of a Generation no longer finds words himself but has to steal them from others, is a better story than that an old Bard who can't sing anyway nicks a melody here and there. But the musical borrowings are actually a far

more serious matter: they are more substantial and the implications are wider. Playing around with fragments of existing texts and assembling them in new ways is a well-established literary technique; playing music that someone else has written as if it was one's own, is less favourably looked upon.

When the method is as consistently and pervasively used as it is, it invites the question if he has ran out of own ideas or if this on the contrary is a new, grand creative model in a postmodern spirit: a gigantic collage where the methods of the folk tradition are extended way beyond their established genre limits. What if the models that have been discovered are just the tip of an iceberg—what if *all* of 'Floater', or for that matter all of *'Love and Theft'* has been borrowed (or stolen, as the title of the album indicates) from many different sources, and put together like a jigsaw puzzle of ideas, images, and cultural heritage?

Over the past ten years, Dylan has delivered three successful albums, the acclaimed documentary *No Direction Home*, volume one of his autobiography *Chronicles*, the motion picture *Masked and Anonymous*, he has his own weekly radio show, and the tour—well, it hasn't ended yet and probably never will. During this period, Dylan has passed from a 'has-been' to an obvious mega star with a constant media presence and a high status, not just among historians and fans, but in general. The only thing that may give cause for concern, and which also makes the benevolent collage interpretation dubious, is that the quality of his live show seems to have gone down over the past few years.[33] One day at the office follows another, without any noticeable engagement. If the live show, which has always been Dylan's hallmark, is on the decline and the record production ends up as competent renditions of cover material, where does that leave us regarding the question of the heart behind it all? Should we consider whatever decline in quality we may sense as an inevitable and temporary heart beat, or has the distancing involved in the 'inventive redundancy' gone so far that the heart has left the project altogether?

[33] This is of course a personal judgement; see 'Genius, Guitars, and Goodbyes' (p. ??) for a discussion of the reasons for this judgement. A similar criticism has been voiced by Michael Gray, such as in the final chapter of **gray:song3**.

The Uneven Heart

I have construed Dylan's musical carreer as an uneven heart, as a pulsating series of phases of appropriation (of a genre, a style, or a form), which are then used with internalized obviousness, only to slide into the background for the next phase of appropriation. My fascination with Dylan's nervous energy, as I presented it initially, then becomes just one side of the coin: just as important is the element of controlled calm, and the combination of these. One may also regard it as an oscillation between extrovert and introvert, between phases of appropriation mostly for the artist's own pleasure (Bonnie Beecher will probably nod in recognition to this), and of use of the appropriated in a communicative situation.

Whereby the final core concept has been introduced, which is the true motivation for the emphasis of the 'heart': communication. For Dylan, it is not simply a matter of a pulsation between different musical styles, but of ways of using different musical styles as a means of communication through organized sound.

Woody Guthrie has apparently said about Dylan: 'That boy's got a voice. Maybe he won't make it with his writing, but he can sing it. He can really sing it.'

Not just 'sing', but 'sing *it*'. That little extra word transforms the words of the dying hobo-poet into the most precise description of Dylan's work: as an artist who can sing *it*.

Initially, this might be read as a devaluation of the musical side in relation to the textual: that what counts is, after all, *what* one sings, which opinions and emotions one expresses. But that can not be what Guthrie has had in mind: it is the *voice*, not the words, that brings 'it' out.

Even though this turns the most common opinion about Dylan upside down, it is not difficult to agree with Guthrie: what makes Dylan special is not only his ability to put words together in a way which has resonance in many different listeners, but also to let these words come to expression in a musical style which is shaped precisely to fit this expression, or even to amplify it.

One might even turn it upside down once more and say that what makes Dylan special is his ability to shape his music in a way which has resonance in many different listeners, and then combine this music with words which are able to amplify the musical contents.

This is not just a logical-rhetorical exercise. It is grounded in a Wittgensteinian understanding of language, where the meaning of a word is its use, and where that connection between a sound even (a 'word') and a certain conception which we perceive as the word's meaning, does not have any particular metaphysical status determined by properties in the object (be it 'red' or 'C major'), but is founded in a conventional, internalized pattern of associations between previous experiences of similar sound events and other regularly occurring events ('G major'). In this perspective, there is no radical difference between music and language; it makes perfect sense to say that language is a kind of music.

The ultimate question is, then, what Guthrie's 'it' is, and where the perception stems from that it is somehow communicated, through the voice or in music. When it is felt that music says something, it is because connections within one system of meaning (e.g. music) can be based on elements which are also important and can be recognized in others (e.g. language): tension/resolution, compliance or break with conventions, etc. My survey of Dylan's musical carreer can be regarded in this light: as an exegesis of which 'sounds' he has used and which associations with other sounds and other meaning systems these may be made in hearing and interpreting them. Most directly, one may point to Dylan's use of the sounds of language, where he, in Mike Daley's words,

> uses pitch in a way that seems to directly draw on the meaningful properties of pitch in everyday speech. This 'speechlike' pitch use he combines with more abstractly 'musical' pitch to create a performance. The dialectic between these two poles of vocal expression causes Dylan's performance to be received as 'meaningful' in some rather specific ways; the linguistic [. . .] meanings that are encoded in Dylan's performance find a high degree of concordance with some types of meanings decoded by listeners.[34]

But also the monotonous, insistent seriousness of 'It's alright, Ma', the bittersweet arabesques in 'Spanish Is the Loving Tongue', or the floating tonal directions in 'Mr Tambourine Man', and in a more general sense the feeling of restlessness both in single performances and in the musical œuvre as a whole—they all give occasion to draw associations between musical and non-musical patterns of meaning. To the extent that I have made explicit interpretations

[34] **daley:voices**, p. 2.

of these elements, these should only be regarded as personal reflections; it would be a degradation of the purely musical meaning of a song such as 'Mr Tambourine Man' to say, e.g., that the free relationship to fixed cadential patterns means the same freedom as in the line 'just to dance beneath the diamond sky with one hand waving free'. Rather, one might say that Dylan at his best manages to unite a distinct musical material with lyrics which are open and *un*distinct enough in relation to a fixed, conceptual meaning, in ways which opens up to associations of this kind, without giving neither the musical nor the lyrical side the upper hand in the relation.

Just as personal and individual as the perception of reality is that comes to expression in the texts, just as personal and individual is the musical style. When Dylan sings, we not only hear the song, we hear an individual's reaction to the world: also in the music, we hear the person Bob Dylan, a human being who talks to us as fellow human beings about the reality we all share, in a way which makes it meaningless to distinguish between the musical and the lived life.