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## "Famous Long Ago": Bob Dylan Revisited

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*Bob Dylan: The Essential Interviews.* Edited by Jonathan Cott. New York: Wenner Books, 2006. 445 pages. \$23.95 (cloth).

*The Bob Dylan Encyclopedia.* By Michael Gray. New York: Continuum, 2006. 736 pages. \$40.00 (cloth).

*Like a Rolling Stone: Bob Dylan at the Crossroads.* By Greil Marcus. New York: Public Affairs, 2005. 304 pages. \$14.00 (paper).

*Wicked Messenger: Bob Dylan and the 1960s.* By Mike Marqusee. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005. 365 pages. \$16.95 (paper).

*Highway 61 Revisited.* By Mark Polizzotti. New York: Continuum, 2006. 161 pages. \$9.95 (paper).

*Dylan's Vision of Sin.* By Christopher Ricks. New York: Harper Collins, 2004. 517 pages. \$26.95 (cloth).

*Writing Dylan: The Songs of a Lonesome Traveler.* By Larry David Smith. Westport: Praeger, 2005. 512 pages. \$49.95 (cloth).

On May 24, 2006, Bob Dylan turned 65. A month later he appeared in Ireland as part of his Never-Ending tour (Dylan has been performing continuously since 1988). He opened the set with "Maggie's Farm," which more than forty years earlier triggered convulsions at the Newport Folk Festival. He also performed "Highway 61 Revisited," "Ballad of a Thin Man," "Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again," and "Absolutely Sweet Marie." His first encore was "Like a Rolling Stone," the song considered by many, including the magazine that shares its name, to be the greatest rock song of all time.

Despite his set list, Dylan has worked hard not to be a sixties nostalgia act. He recorded songs and albums in the seventies and eighties (*Blood on the Tracks* and *Oh Mercy*, for example) that stand among his finest work. His albums *Time Out of Mind* (1997) and *Love and Theft* (2001) won Grammy

awards. At the Kennedy Center, where in 1997 he received the highest award the nation bestows its creative artists, President Clinton remarked that “Bob Dylan has kept moving forward, musically and spiritually, challenging all of us to move forward with him.”

And yet, for all the appreciation of a lifetime of work, it was what Dylan sang, said, did, and represented for a few years in the 1960s that continues to draw the public’s attention and ignite the imagination of new generations of listeners. In recent years, with the publication of Bob Dylan’s *Chronicles: Volume One* (2004), the screening of Martin Scorsese’s *No Direction Home* (2005), and the release of Dylan’s concerts at Philharmonic Hall in 1964 and Manchester in 1966, this interest has reached a fever pitch. The Experience Music project created a traveling exhibition titled “Bob Dylan’s American Journey, 1956–1966” that was featured at the Rock ’n’ Roll Hall of Fame in summer 2006. A Broadway show, *The Times They Are A-Changin’*, choreographed by Twyla Tharp, opened on Broadway. And in March 2007, a Bob Dylan symposium, “‘Highway 61 Revisited’: Dylan’s Road from Minnesota to the World,” will be held at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.

It is not surprising that at the same time that public interest in Dylan has soared, critical interest has also reached new peaks. Over the past few years, major interpretive works evaluating Dylan’s entire corpus have appeared, as have studies that focus on the 1960s in general, and the *annus mirabilis* of 1965 in particular. There is also a *Bob Dylan Encyclopedia*, edited by Michael Gray, one of the leading students of Dylan’s career. This work is no dry-as-dust compendium. Gray serves up opinions, judgments, and interpretations alongside facts and information. He even includes entries on himself as well as other Dylan interpreters. Typical of Gray’s profiles is his consideration of the film *No Direction Home*. Gray derides Scorsese’s “part-time . . . input to the film,” finds “scandalous” the “lack of attention paid to the impact of the blues on Dylan’s formative years,” and concludes that the film is “Dylan for beginners.” At the same time, Gray understands that *No Direction Home* takes a significant leap in legitimizing Dylan as a major American cultural figure: “until now, his mysterious greatness has always been in the side tents of public acknowledgment. *No Direction Home* puts him up there with James Dean or Marilyn Monroe as a mainstream American hero.”

There is no question that Dylan is an iconic American figure. In 1963, he became a folk legend, the proverbial voice of a generation, with moving tunes received as songs of social engagement and protest, songs such as “Blowin’ in the Wind,” “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall,” and “Masters of War.” At the March on Washington he performed “Only a Pawn in Their Game,” a song about the

assassination of Medgar Evers. And yet no sooner had he been anointed the musical conscience of his generation than he rebelled against his own persona and reemerged as an even more provocative and powerful songwriter who transformed the times again, even as some were first responding to the initial awakening. In short order he issued *Bringing It All Back Home* (1965), *Highway 61 Revisited* (1965), and *Blonde on Blonde* (1966), perhaps the greatest burst of sustained creative genius since Faulkner published successively and annually *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Sanctuary* (1931), and *Light in August* (1932). Dylan embodied two revolutions within three years, two seismic cultural shifts. Before they ended, and ever since, writers have inquired into the meaning of Bob Dylan.

Dylan, for one, has always refused to play the role of the guru or prophet, a refusal that has served only to deepen his mystique. “I’m just a guitar player,” he declares in D. A. Pennebaker’s *Dont Look Back*, a pathbreaking documentary of Dylan’s 1965 tour through England. “I’ve just got nothing to say about these things I write. I just write them,” he tells one reporter. “I don’t write them for any reason. There’s no great message.” Nearly forty years later, he was still being asked the same question and still providing the same answer. He told Ed Bradley on *60 Minutes*, “My stuff were songs, you know? They weren’t sermons. If you examine the songs, I don’t believe you’re gonna find anything in there that says that I’m a spokesman for anybody or anything really.”

Examine the songs indeed. Few among us have not at various times and places shrieked the lyrics and contemplated the words. One scholar who has done so more than casually is Christopher Ricks. A distinguished literary critic, Ricks has written about Milton, Keats, Eliot, and Tennyson. At the same time, he has lectured and written about Dylan. In *Dylan’s Vision of Sin*, Ricks applies his vast critical intelligence to the lyrics of several dozen Dylan songs.

Ricks loosely organizes the volume around the themes of sin, virtue, and grace. For Ricks, the seven deadly sins (envy, covetousness, greed, sloth, lust, anger, pride), the four cardinal virtues (justice, prudence, temperance, and fortitude), and three graces (faith, hope, and charity) “may be the right way to take hold of the bundle” of Dylan’s songs (6). The result is a discursive, playful meditation on selected songs that are analyzed as poems and with little regard to chronology or context.

Ricks spends too little space justifying his approach. It is not clear why sin is his theme of choice. To be sure, the topic is vague enough that sin fits any number of songs, but so do love, escape, and identity. Search the lyrics at [bobdylan.com](http://bobdylan.com) and the word “sin” returns 12 hits. By comparison, the word “love” returns 141 hits, “road” appears in 67 songs, and “dream” in 50. Of

course a lyrics search has its limitations. For example, the word “sex” returns only one hit, but Dylan’s music from the 1960s is filled with allusions to sexual activity. The point is that Ricks might have identified a number of approaches and he is not persuasive that sin is necessarily the best one.

More problematic is the decision to treat the songs as poems. Ricks knows this, acknowledging that “songs are different from poems” (13), but he goes ahead nonetheless to read the lyrics as poems. He takes some justification from quoting Dylan, who told an interviewer in 1978, “I consider myself a poet first and a musician second.” But what Dylan has considered himself has shifted with his audience, his mood, and his ever-changing persona. In August 1965, at the height of his fame, he declared “I don’t call myself a poet because I don’t like the word. I’m a trapeze artist.”

A preoccupation with the lyrics—and the lyrics only—is common to much Dylan scholarship. But a song is not a poem. “A song,” Dylan wrote in the liner notes for *Bringing It All Back Home*, “is anything that can walk by itself.” “Some people say that I am a poet,” he concluded, but it is clear that, at least during the 1960s, he never considered himself anything but a songwriter for whom the words could not be separated from rhythm and rhyme, sound and phrasing. Say all you like about a song such as “Like a Rolling Stone,” but you cannot fully understand its power from the words only. For example, the opening snare drum awakens and explodes. Bruce Springsteen put it best: the opening blast “sounded like somebody’d kicked open the door to your mind.”

Ricks, of course, is entitled to define his approach to the songs, and whatever the distortions of treating them as poems, his analysis often proves rewarding. His reading of “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll,” Dylan’s searing account of the death of a middle-aged black woman who was struck with a cane by a young white man from an affluent family, is eye-opening. On the lyric “In a matter of minutes on bail was out walking,” Ricks observes, “not walked out on bail but strolled out on bail. . . . There you have it, leisure and freedom and amplitude. Meanwhile that ‘matter of minutes’ anticipates another little lapse of time, that ‘six month sentence.’ Such numbers are felt to figure all the way through, as with those seventy-four years and those fifty-one years old. Even the scale of the verses plays its scrupulous part. The verses build up. First, six lines plus the refrain. Then seven lines plus the refrain. Then ten lines plus the refrain. And then the same again, for there it must stay, on the same scale, no longer lengthening. The final verse, pronouncing the sentence of (and upon) this court, must not be allowed to trump the life of Hattie Carroll” (232–33).

However Dylan thought of himself, the wonder of Ricks’s readings is that he seems always to have an illustration from a great poet to which he can compare what Dylan is doing in the lyrics: Wordsworth, Tennyson, Donne, Marvel, Shakespeare, Keats, Blake, and Eliot, among others. For example, he reads “Lay, Lady, Lay” beside Donne’s “To His Mistress Going to Bed,” and the similarities are stunning. In “Like a Rolling Stone,” Ricks shows that Dylan’s use of the word “now” is akin to Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress.” Here is Ricks on the accusatory “you” of the song: “The pronoun ‘you’ is the song’s pronouncement, this being a song in which although ‘they’ may for a while be hanging out with ‘you’ . . . and ‘he’ may be doing so, too . . . ‘you’ will never, Miss Lonely, enjoy the company of ‘we’ or ‘us,’ and never enjoy the company of an ‘I.’ Of all Dylan’s creations this is the song that, while one of his most individual, exercises the severest self-control when it comes to never mentioning its first person” (190).

In readings such as these, Ricks helps us to understand the architecture, and therefore the power, of Dylan’s songs. The framework of “sin” doesn’t knit the volume together. And one wishes Ricks had displayed a bit more self-control with his endless punning (“Dyligent”) and his puerile asides (“The word ‘pawn’ may hold a grudge, yes, but then if you were a grudge wouldn’t you like to be held?”). But the attentive reader comes away enlightened and stimulated by the analysis of individual songs.

In *Dylan’s Vision of Sin*, Ricks eschews any concern with chronology or context. By contrast, Larry Smith’s *Writing Dylan* moves deliberately across the songwriter’s career. Smith focuses on Dylan as an artist who has fashioned and refashioned his identity into a series of characters and performances. Smith’s list includes “a rebellious biker, a sincere activist, an insincere poet, a dedicated traditionalist, a crazed vaudevillian, a repentant believer, a detached professional, and a reborn rounder” (xv). Smith is not interested in the relationship between Dylan’s changing personas and larger cultural and social shifts. Rather, he seeks to “integrate auteur theory and narrative synthesis to explore how Bob Zimmerman wrote for his various characters. . . . Through narrative synthesis we disassemble the art, chart its internal workings, note its strategic functions, and reassemble that work in terms of an oeuvre that exposes our auteur ‘Bob Dylan’” (xv).

Smith’s reminder that Dylan has always worn masks (“I’m wearing my Bob Dylan mask,” the singer chortled at his Halloween concert in 1964), and that the search for the man behind them is futile, provides a useful correction to the idea that we can “know” Dylan. “Trust the art, not the artist,” the saying goes. Dylan’s art, his music (“It’s all music: no more, no less,” he declared in August

1965) repays close attention. Smith's approach, unfortunately, is to analyze each album and put every song into a category. Thus, he tells us that on *Bringing It All Back Home* "under two master categories, we have four subdivisions: narrative impressionism involving positive responses to romantic relationships, . . . narrative impressionism featuring sermonic prescriptions, . . . wordplay with a point, . . . and wordplay without a point" (77). The categories are not especially helpful. Neither is his comment at the end of a discussion of "It's Alright Ma (I'm only Bleeding)." Smith writes, "Wow" (88).

At a certain level, it's easy to appreciate the exclamation. Saying something original and insightful about Dylan, or any great artist, sometimes seems impossible. Listening again to the songs we must allow ourselves to be blown away. At the same time, we've got a job to do. When Smith moves beyond the songs to complementary materials he is more successful. He draws our attention to the liner notes of the albums, and he offers a cogent summary of *Dont Look Back*. He is also more interested in the music than some other writers are, hinting at Dylan's musical innovations, pointing out, for example, that in "Ballad of a Thin Man" "the slow, again churchy, piano-organ interplay works to a rhythm that betrays the wordplay" (105).

But in the end, Smith can not illuminate precisely why *Highway 61 Revisited* "stands alone in the history of music" (109). His discussion of the album is particularly off-putting. Because he is searching for a narrative coherence and cannot locate it, he concludes that the album "is *designed* to make you crazy." He says the album is divided into two parts: "four pieces of narrative impressionism and five songs of unrestrained wordplay." He thinks it is all "in some sort of code" (100), a claim that whisks us back to the 1960s when self-professed Dylanologists combed through the songwriter's garbage searching for clues to unlock the meaning of the tunes (see the entry on A. J. Weberman in the *Bob Dylan Encyclopedia*). What's even more frustrating than claiming there is a code is that Smith can't crack it. About "Like a Rolling Stone," he says that "maybe the song is simply words piled on top of one another via a loose framework." He quotes the "Napoleon in rags" verse and surrenders: "Do with this what you will" (101).

Fortunately, others have done a great deal with the subjects of Dylan and the 1960s, *Highway 61 Revisited*, and "Like a Rolling Stone." Mike Marqusee's *Wicked Messenger*, a revised and expanded version of *Chimes of Freedom*, is, simply put, the finest book on Dylan and the politics of the 1960s yet published. Connecting his vast knowledge of Dylan's music to some of the key civil rights moments of the decade, and offering a reading that is informed by a sensible use of theory as well as his own political beliefs, Marqusee accomplishes the near impossible: he gets us to rethink Dylan.

Marqusee argues that the usual story of a politically engaged folksinger abandoning both politics and folk for alienation and rock misrepresents Dylan and his music. Marqusee recovers the power and meaning of the protest songs (songs about Emmett Till, the murder of Medgar Evers, war, anticommunist paranoia). “Because Dylan so decisively and rapidly repudiated his protest songs,” argues Marqusee, “critics and biographers have been tempted to dismiss them as simplistic and derivative, somehow not the ‘real Dylan.’ But these songs are not only an immense achievement in their own right, they are the foundation of Dylan’s subsequent evolution” (53).

What makes *Wicked Messenger* so good is that Marqusee is able simultaneously to focus on Dylan’s development while elucidating the links between the times and the songs. Indeed, the two, he shows us, are inseparable. To take one example, the “unexpected achievements of the civil rights movement,” he argues, made possible “The Times They Are A-Changin’,” a song that “blends arrogance with innocence, an individualist ethical appeal (‘lend a hand’) with a faith in collective action, ambitious radicalism with liberal naïveté. In doing so it expresses the consciousness of its moment precisely” (91).

In that song, Dylan famously declares “your sons and your daughters are beyond your command.” Dylan, of course, went on to demonstrate that he too was beyond the command of any movement or authority other than his own, a rebellion that seemed both sudden and complete. He left behind the Woody Guthrie mask for a new one that featured unkempt hair, Ray-Bans, and polka dot shirts. “From now on I want to write from inside me,” Dylan told Nat Hentoff in 1964. To read Dylan’s interviews and press conferences from this period, as collected in Jonathan Cott’s indispensable volume, is to see Dylan engaging in theater and wordplay made all the more uproarious—and painful—by how seriously he is taken. Asked about the cover of *Highway 61 Revisited* he says, “I haven’t really looked at it that much.” Asked about the meaning of the motorcycle in his work he says, “Oh, we all like motorcycles to some degree.” Asked if he thinks of himself more as a singer or a poet he responds, “Oh, I think of myself more as a song and dance man.” Nat Hentoff inquires about Dylan’s seeming withdrawal from involvement in the civil rights movement: “I do believe in equality,” Dylan answers, “but I also believe in distance” (104).

Dylan’s inward turn did not mean a turn without politics. Marqusee shrewdly points out that “one of the extraordinary things Dylan does in his post-protest songs is to offer a critique of politics itself as a field of human endeavor” (111). “My Back Pages,” from *Another Side of Bob Dylan* (1964) contains the famous couplet “Ah, but I was so much older then/I’m younger than that now.” Dylan wearied of the conformity of the movement that made

all participants into smug, aged warriors replaying the same issues and songs. Dylan didn't repudiate politics; he sought if anything a more radical, extreme form of (dis)engagement: at the end of *Dont Look Back*, Dylan relishes being called an anarchist by the English press. Dylan's argument with the movement, Marqusee believes, "is partly that its definition of the political doesn't go far enough, isn't radical enough, partly that it is in itself a prison, a restraint, and partly that it is pompous and lame and no fun at all" (112).

As a political activist himself, Marqusee understands this all too well. He identifies the shift from "the public to the personal" as a defining moment of the sixties. Drawing on his reading of theorists such as Theodor Adorno, Marqusee argues that "Dylan's premature disillusionment reflected not only the stresses of revolt and reaction, but also the relentless packaging of experience and identity in a consumer society. For Dylan and many others, one level of consciousness seemed to be quickly superseded by another; if you stayed at one level too long you risked being as obsolete—and as inauthentic—as last year's fashions. Thus Dylan helped make activism cool, and he helped make it uncool." Marqusee confesses, "I've more than once binged on the Dylan of this period, and relished his emotive attack on a movement that so rarely lives up to its claims" (119).

That attack was unlike any other. Dylan premiered "It's All Right Ma" at the Halloween concert in 1964, and after he announced the title there was laughter. "Yes, it's a very funny song," he said. But of course there is nothing funny about it, this ballad about alienation, loneliness, corruption, and emptiness. It offers a searing indictment of a consumer capitalist society that demands conformity and leaves its citizens feeling dismembered:

Advertising signs that con you  
 Into thinking you're the one  
 That can do what's never been done  
 That can win what's never been won  
 Meantime life outside goes on  
 All around you.

Marqusee takes critical analysis of the song to a new level. It is:

filled with Gramscian conviction that the most insidious means of domination are those that secure 'spontaneous consent' of the dominated. It's a song about 'the mind-forged manacles' that Blake heard clanging as he walked the streets of London in 1792. But Dylan is without either Gramsci's or Blake's abiding belief in collective human agency and capacity. His critique of the repressive, omni-invasive character of mass culture is . . . harrowing and all-inclusive (129).

Between the Halloween concert in 1964 and his motorcycle accident on July 29, 1966, Dylan’s work altered the cultural landscape forever. Marqusee nicely summarizes the disparate influences on Dylan this way: the songwriter drew on “folk, blues, country, R&B, rock ’n’ roll, gospel, British beat, symbolist, modernist and Beat poetry, surrealism and Dada, advertising jargon and social commentary, Fellini and *Mad* magazine” (139).

Like all great artists, he was a student of musical history who borrowed and transformed and, in addressing the cultural imperatives of the moment, created something lasting and new.

*Highway 61 Revisited* was released on August 30, 1965. Already the six-minute single “Like a Rolling Stone,” the lead-off song on the album, was on the pop charts, reaching number two behind the Beatles’ “Help.” The song, it turns out, was not only revolutionary; it was also popular. The impact of the song and album on the history of rock ’n’ roll is incalculable. As Springsteen put it in his speech inducting Dylan into the Rock ’n’ Roll Hall of Fame, “without Bob, the Beatles wouldn’t have made *Sgt. Pepper’s*, the Beach Boys would not have made *Pet Sounds*, the Sex Pistols wouldn’t have made ‘God Save the Queen,’ U2 wouldn’t have done ‘Pride in the Name of Love,’ Marvin Gaye wouldn’t have done ‘What’s Going On?,’ the Count Five would not have done ‘Psychotic Reaction,’ [and] Grandmaster Flash might not have done ‘The Message.’

Springsteen might have included his own work as well: the drum roll that opens “Born to Run” is a tribute to “Like a Rolling Stone”; the song’s Highway 9 is Bruce’s Highway 61. Without question *Highway 61 Revisited* is one of the most important albums in the history of rock ’n’ roll. Michael Gray’s encyclopedia entry seems only slightly hyperbolic: “revolutionary and stunning, not just for its energy, freshness and panache but in its vision . . . In an important sense the 1960s started here.” A recent volume in Continuum’s irresistible 33 1/3 series, chapbooks about seminal albums in rock history, is Tom Polizzotti’s study of the making and meaning of *Highway 61 Revisited*.

Polizzotti begins with a reading of Daniel Kramer’s iconic cover photograph, taken before the album was recorded. While noting that the chosen image was as much accidental as anything else, and warning against overinterpreting the photo, Polizzotti suggests that the look on Dylan’s face “lies somewhere between defiance and annoyance: he knows the music is good, the best he has ever made, but he doesn’t expect you to recognize it and he is gearing up for a fight” (6). Apparently, Dylan even fought for the title of the album, going up the corporate ladder at Columbia records until someone said “let him call it what he wants to call it.”

The title, of course, is crucial. Highway 61 runs near Duluth and one can follow it south across the Mississippi Delta into Memphis. Polizzotti is not the first to point out that “the album is a road map into a new territory, a return to the terrain of the artist’s youth, as well as an exploration of the access linking the northern and southern musical heritages (that is, in broadest terms, white and black, folk and blues), the twin poles of Dylan’s restless development” (9). Marqusee argues that Dylan “knew it was not only a route of escape and opportunity, but a venue of sacrifice and exploitation, a place where the human spirit was bought and sold, and where the individual was isolated” (181–82). Michael Gray’s discussion of Highway 61 is particularly astute, pointing out the myriad blues songs about the road, from Roosevelt Sykes’s “Highway 61 Blues” (1932) to Smokey Babe’s “I Went Down 61 Highway” (1961). Dylan’s creative journey took him down Highway 61. “I always felt like I started on it,” Dylan writes in *Chronicles*, “always had been on it and could go anywhere from it, even down into the deep Delta country. It was the same road full of the same contradictions, the same one-horse towns, the same spiritual ancestors.”

Polizzotti’s key contribution is to return our attention to the music, to remind us that however much we scrutinize the lyrics, Dylan’s musical contribution is just as important. After all, Duane Eddy, one of the legendary rock guitarists whose twangy sound revolutionized the electric guitar, recorded instrumental versions of Dylan’s songs. “Musicians have always known that my songs were about more than just words,” says Dylan in *Chronicles*, “but most people are not musicians.” Polizzotti may not be a musician, but he has a musical sensibility. “The musicians on *Highway 61*,” he points out, “are not so much accompanists as an integral part of the proceedings. . . . The album’s overall sound is an inextricable blend of instruments from Mike Bloomfield’s wailing leads to Dylan’s bottom-heavy strums to the echoing splashiness of Bobby Gregg’s drums. And perhaps more than anything, what distinguishes *Highway 61* is the beach-like expanse and cloudy swirl of Al Kooper’s organ playing. . . . This is music that retrieves the rock ’n’ roll Dylan practiced in his youth, music that was written to be played loud and raunchy, a teenage love he had never entirely renounced” (19–20).

Polizzotti leads us into the studio, reviews the recording sessions, and analyzes the various takes. In doing so, he shows how a song develops musically—much like looking at early drafts of a novel. Dylan went into the studio on June 15, 1965, and took his first stabs at “Like a Rolling Stone,” which he had written a week or so earlier. The versions that day are nearly unrecognizable, and all the takes are abandoned after a minute or two. Moreover, the song is being played “in waltz time, rather than the 4/4 signature the song would eventually

inhabit, giving it a statelier, less driving feel than we’re used to” (49). The next day Dylan returned to the studio. They tried the song fifteen times. The fourth take “picks up the song’s inherent energy and sustains it, runs with it, inhabits it, rides it all the way to the end” (53). The fourth take that day possessed the magic that has entered our cultural DNA.

Studied in this way, our understanding of each song is enriched, whether it is a discussion of the shift away from electric accompaniment in “Desolation Row,” Mike Bloomfield’s magical blues lick in “Ballad of a Thin Man,” or the use of the police whistle in “Highway 61.” Remarkably, an early mix of the album changed the order of the songs. Only after sharing the test pressing with the Beatles, with whom he met in New York on August 15 (and with whom a year earlier he smoked pot, apparently the first time for the Beatles), did Dylan and his producer, Bob Johnston, revise the order to what it is, to what it needed always to be, “a journey, a mad exploration of Highway 61 in all its registers” (132–33).

In both pressings, “Like a Rolling Stone” led off the album. In *Like a Rolling Stone: Bob Dylan at the Crossroads*, Greil Marcus offers a biography of the song. A preeminent rock and cultural critic, Marcus’s earlier book on Bob Dylan’s basement tapes received the highest accolade a work of criticism can obtain when, in *Chronicles*, Dylan cites Marcus’s original title, *Invisible Republic*, as an apt description of his cultural interests. (The book was republished as *The Old, Weird America*).

Marcus’s book is not so much biography (Polizzotti’s contains far more information) or interpretation (Ricks and Marqusee have much more to say about the meaning of the lyrics) as meditation. He is at his best when he is riffing, making lists and adding on references that are intended more to provoke than persuade. He calls “Bob Dylan’s 115th Dream” a “rewrite of Ralph Ellison’s 1952 novel *Invisible Man*, a comic version of the story Dylan would tell a few months later in ‘Like a Rolling Stone.’” He compares the opening second chorus of “Like a Rolling Stone” to the unfurling flag that Tashtego nails to the *Pequod*. The masterpiece, Marcus decides after listing a half dozen other examples to which it bears some relationship, “probably owes more to Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl” than to any song” (65, 131, 123).

By linking Dylan to Ellison, Melville, and Ginsberg, among many others, Marcus reminds us that Dylan’s work must be seen as part of a larger project to grapple with the tensions and ambiguities in American culture. Key to that enterprise is exploring the dream of escape that is at the center of the American experience. “Unmapped country,” Marcus calls the contours of “Like a Rolling Stone,” “hanging in the air as a territory of danger and flight, abandonment

and discovery, truth and lie” (201). Marqusee makes a similar point and introduces another cultural benchmark for comparison: “the seminal status of ‘Like a Rolling Stone’ . . . is about the song’s intimate rage and almost amoral assertion of personal autonomy—a defiant response to a world that insisted on tearing away that autonomy at every turn. ‘Like a Rolling Stone’ was Whitman’s ‘barbaric yawp’ broadcast on AM radio” (163).

Marcus’s keenest insight is that just as the song leaves the past behind (“no direction home”), it leaves itself behind as well, refusing to stand as a monument to its own greatness and therefore forever reenacting the drama of escape. “Because the song never plays the same way twice,” Marcus notes, “because whenever you hear the song you are not quite hearing a song you have heard before—it cannot carry nostalgia. . . . That first drum shot is what seals it. . . . in that moment there is no past to refer to—especially the past you yourself might mean to bring to the song” (98).

“Like a Rolling Stone” is that rare work of art, simultaneously of the times and transcending time, a song we always hear fresh, a song that brings new generations into its fold, a song that stops conversation whenever it is heard. Dylan knew it was his masterpiece. He told Marvin Bronstein in 1966 that “I found myself writing this song, this story, this long piece of vomit, twenty pages long, and out of it I took ‘Like a Rolling Stone’ and made it a single. And I’d never written anything like that before and it suddenly came to me that this is what I should do.” In 2004 he told Robert Hilburn: “It’s like a ghost is writing a song like that. It gives you the song and it goes away, it goes away. You don’t know what it means. Except the ghost picked me to write the song” (432).

Those ghosts include Poe, Melville, Whitman, and Guthrie, not to mention Blake, Rimbaud, Brecht, and countless others. “Every one of the records I’ve made,” Dylan confessed in 2001, “has emanated from the entire panorama of what America is to me” (425). This revelation might serve to stimulate future waves of Dylan scholarship. Terrific work has already been done on Dylan’s musical and literary influences, and good starts have been made toward understanding such topics as Dylan and politics or Dylan and region. Additional fruitful lines of inquiry that connect Dylan to the larger meaning of America and the 1960s might include studies of sexuality, drugs, social class, religion, storytelling, and attitudes toward history itself. We might unpack Dylan’s place in the construction of an American identity, chart the generational shifts of the time, and tease out the connections between what Dylan was doing in music and his contemporaries in other cultural arenas. And we still need to ponder the impact of Dylan’s music on its listeners, then and now.

This last question seems the most obvious, but is perhaps the most difficult. What does it mean when we say a song is the defining song of our life? How does music speak to us? Can a song change us and, by extension, change society? Dylan doesn't believe so. In 1965 he proclaimed “songs can't save the world” (he would participate in Live Aid in 1985, and helped create Farm Aid that same year, but he still expressed reservations). In 1966, he declared, “I don't believe songs can change people anyway.” At the time, he was responding to the heightened expectations associated first with his folk and then with his electric music. But he also knew all too well the power of music in the lives of his listeners. Some fans and critics denounced and derided him for his new sound. The disdain reached its apex at a concert in Manchester, England, on May 17, 1966, when someone in the audience hollered “Judas.” Dylan's response was simple: before launching into the closing song of the night, “Like a Rolling Stone,” he told the band to “play it fucking loud.”

It may just be that in the loudness of rock, in singing the lyrics and bouncing to the beat, we are transformed, or at least transported. The music provides release and offers escape. No matter how ordinary our lives, no matter how necessary the compromises we have made, no matter how stranded and alone we feel, the music restores a sense of immediacy and authenticity. Yes, it may all be an illusion; popular song is hopelessly commercialized, a tool honed to preserve and perpetuate the standing order rather than challenge it. No matter. “Like a Rolling Stone” plays, we close our eyes, point our fingers, and shout “How does it feel!” The answer, more than forty years later, is that it still feels great.