

TIME OUT OF MIND

THE LIVES OF

BOB DYLAN

'THIS IS THE BEST DYLAN BIOGRAPHY YET'
FINANCIAL TIMES ON IAN BELL'S ONCE UPON A TIME



IAN BELL

Also by Ian Bell

Once Upon a Time: The Lives of Bob Dylan
Dreams of Exile: Robert Louis Stevenson - A Biography

TIME OUT OF MIND

The Lives of Bob Dylan

Ian Bell



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For Amanda, who has heard it all ...

Author's Note

I WANT TO THANK MY EDITOR, CLAIRE ROSE, FOR SAVING MY AUTHORIAL skin more often than I can count. As she knows, counting is not my strong suit. Her work has been impeccable. Any remaining errors are my doing.

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I don't know him because I don't think there *is* any *him*.
I don't think he's *got* a self!

Allen Ginsberg, 1976

CHAPTER ONE

Time Is an Enemy

IT HAD BEEN A STRANGE TRIP, BRIEF AS A LUCID DREAM. AT ONE INSTANT Bob Dylan was no one from nowhere; at the next he was prophet-designate. In the depths of a bone-freezing New York winter a ragamuffin from the Minnesota outlands was notable only for his unfeasible ambition. By the following year's end, as a gilded decade commenced in earnest, all the talk was of poetry and poets, of a prodigy with a supernatural facility in the songwriter's art. In the capsule history, genius suffered no birth pangs. Everything that happened to Dylan happened at the speed of recorded sound.

For a brief while in the 1960s he had seemed to alter daily, changing in manner, speech, style, sound and physical appearance almost as casually as most men changed their button-down shirts. No sooner had the image of one Dylan emerged from the emulsion than the outline of another was becoming visible. His identity, such as it ever was, had resembled a shimmering ghost. In the beginning, 'Bob Dylan' was less a person than a manifestation, a series of gestures.

For him, a single decade would become a life sentence, but in truth he had spent little enough of the 1960s in the public eye. By common consent it had been his era, once

and ever after, and yet somehow, for much of the time, nothing to do with him. As late as late October 2012 a 71-year-old was still being badgered by an interviewer from *Rolling Stone* magazine for his reflections on 'his' decade, the one with which he was 'so identified'.

Dylan granted he had been *there*, as though times and places were one and the same, but said none of it had meant that much to him. As he told the journalist: 'I really wasn't so much a part of what they call "the Sixties".' The assertion sounds strange but rings true. You can pick out dates to prove it. For years on end, even - especially - at the height of his influence, Dylan had been silent, elliptical, gnomic or just absent. Hindsight says that his had been a comet's path. After the first dazzling flare he had all but disappeared from view.

A folk and blues record had been released and ignored in March of 1962. Critical acclaim had begun to form in a bubble around him with the appearance of *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* in May of the following year. True fame, the global kind, had descended with a trio of extraordinary albums issued in the space of 14 months in 1965 and 1966. Then he had exhausted himself, and shredded his nerves, and self-medicated, and crashed a motorcycle, and changed his way of thinking, and retreated into family life, and ducked from sight as though dodging a bullet: theories had abounded. The chronology says simply that he quit the concert circuit and the hoopla.

Three years and a matter of weeks: that, properly speaking, had been it for 'the voice of a generation'. His time spent clad in the Nessus-robe of the 'protest singer' had been briefer still. After girdling the globe in a few mad months in 1966 for the sake of audiences stranded somewhere between admiration and outrage, Dylan had withdrawn from the stage, injured several times over. He did not return for the best part of eight years. By the decade's end he had become a country crooner, of sorts, one liable to

call an ill-assorted collection of standards, covers and pastoral experiments his self-obliterating *Self Portrait*. Estranged fans had taken it as a bad joke. The fact remains that an artist whose name is entwined, supposedly, with the 1960s and the decade's concerns was involved only briefly with either. As the 1970s began he was, resolutely, a private citizen who sometimes - but not too often - wrote songs.

Even at fame's apex he had not created many truly big hits, as these things are measured, not for himself. None of the albums recorded during 'his' decade reached number one in his homeland. No chart-topping singles appeared under his name. Often enough the record industry's shiny gold and platinum certifications would arrive only after years of steady sales. Dylan had acquired vast influence among his contemporaries. He was talked about endlessly by the journalists, academics and self-designated radicals who wanted to bestow significance on pop music. Some people spent a lot of time - a peculiar enough notion - trying to explain him and his work. Too often, however, 'Bob Dylan' was a cipher, the blurred face in a piece of monochrome footage deployed just to mark a date.

His '60s had amounted to three fast, torrid years at the eye of the storm. The rest had been preface and footnotes. Some of the latter had been strange, some private, some important, but their meaning had only begun to become clear when the decade was done. For long stretches, Dylan had simply not been around. Assumptions, myths and guesswork had stood in his stead. In the 1960s, he had compressed time. By the 1970s, as 'youth culture' awoke to a hangover and worse, time seemed to stretch ahead of him, demanding to be filled.

There is plenty to be said, of course, about what Dylan had done along the way. He had challenged the folk tradition with his embrace. He had inspired the imitative flattery of a horde of singer-songwriters. He had destroyed the assumptions of Tin Pan Alley and raised the craft of song

to the level of literary art. Then he had given the academicians of literature a few problems of definition and assimilation. Dipping out of sight, refusing the assigned roles, he had produced some of his finest work and some of his worst. But still those who treated history as a public-relations exercise for one big idea or another refused to let the 1960s go. When clocks began to tick again, Dylan's reputation was marooned in time.

His talent, at once undeniable and oddly indefinable, produced a paradox. He inspired a great many people to attempt songwriting, but no one truly followed in his train. You could not trace Dylan's influence on pop, folk or 'rock' in the way you could delineate Louis Armstrong's profound effect on jazz, or name the borrowed Beatles chord changes in countless pop-type songs. Any number of performers took a crack at mere Dylan imitation, especially in the early days, affecting what they took to be his mannerisms or his diction, settling themselves beneath their harmonica racks and their political assumptions. None survived the inevitable mockery. Dylan, ran the consensus, was not to be copied. Musically, lyrically, there could never be a school of him, or a movement - now there was an obnoxious idea - made in his image. By the time the '60s were over, when he was eluding all categories, even the person in possession of the name no longer knew quite what to make of 'Bob Dylan'. But that had been a problem from the start.

**

How does it feel, as all the best questions begin, to sing the same songs over and over, decade after decade? Dylan's keenest admirers will tell you that he does no such thing. Those who persist in calling a busy performance schedule his never-ending tour argue that the true and profound meaning of Dylan's art is to be found on the public stage, in an idea of creative indeterminacy, in songs that are

continually reworked, revised and remade. Some advocates of the view go as far as to claim that Dylan's tours – certain of them, at any rate – will one day stand revealed as his real body of work and as central cultural events of the past half-century. They are comfortable with hyperbole. But these fans find their Dylan in his concerts, in hundreds of bootleg recordings drawn from hundreds of shows, in a precise definition of performance art and in the idea of creativity eternally in flux.¹ The songs of this Dylan are forever provisional. They never end. They will only conclude, in some manner, when he is no longer around.

It's a seductive notion, a grand theory, and the perfect excuse for evasions and omissions. It keeps the game of interpretation alive, year upon year. What could be said about a cunning, complex song such as 'Tangled Up in Blue', first heard on the 1975 album *Blood on the Tracks*? That would depend on the version under discussion and there are lots of those available to the patient fan. Verses of the song have come and gone down the years. Pronouns have been switched around. Tantalising changes of emphasis have been effected. Dylan's angle of attack, emotional, verbal and musical, has altered. And the song itself – if it even remains a singular entity – was/is constructed around the nature of time and identity.

Cultural and literary theory of the modern sort opens its jaws and swallows these hors d'oeuvres whole. They are perfect for the times. For Dylan, meanwhile, they provide the solution to another familiar problem. The youngster who once railed against even the idea of interpretation is now the old man whose songs, it sometimes seems, can mean just about anything. Or rather, they can mean something to every variety of someone. There is a critique and a critical school – literary, linguistic, musicological, philosophical, theological, historical, sociological – for every occasion. The priestly sects, academic and amateur, come hurrying over the fields in their droves to pronounce on the words that fall

from Dylan's mouth. And if those words are not always exactly, demonstrably his own – this era's fan obsession – so much the better. There is a *lot* to be said about intertextuality, originality, plagiarism, tradition, allusion, inspiration, codes, ciphers and the collapse of authorial hierarchies. Anyone who simply likes to listen to a Dylan song now and then is therefore missing the point, or so he or she is liable to be told. In the twenty-first century, Dylan offers limitless scope for the never-ending *tour d'horizon*.

Still, if it's Monday night, 19 November 2012, it must be Philadelphia. At the Wells Fargo Center, a sports and entertainment complex renamed to mark a banking group's escape from the great financial crash, Dylan offers that same 'Tangled Up in Blue' as his fourth number of the evening. According to his own bobdylan.com, this means the song has been performed on 1,273 occasions. That's a lot more creative flux and rewriting, you might think, than one defenceless poem can easily stand. The truth is that while Dylan never exactly repeats himself in performance, that while he has tinkered often enough with words and arrangements, he does not do so nightly, or monthly, or yearly. Arguably, his shows have not changed to any significant degree in the twenty-first century. Nevertheless, by 2012's end he will have heard himself deliver a version of 'Tangled Up in Blue' 1,275 times. To what purpose?

It's a living, certainly, and a pretty good one. In 2012, it would have cost you close to \$300,000, reportedly, just to secure Dylan for your festival. He can still sell \$600,000 worth of tickets while filling an amphitheatre in Berkeley, California.² Self-evidently, his performances meet a demand from audiences no longer greatly interested in music albums for their own sake. Putting on a show is simply what he does, having found no better, lasting alternative over the years. It's something, consequently, over which he believes he exercises no real choice: 'the road', in Dylan's accounting, is where he mostly exists. It means he is better

travelled than almost anyone now living. The view from a tour bus isn't perfect, but this artist knows his America far better than most. When the chance arises and the mood takes him he walks around, big towns and small, exploring the heartland. He has seen a lot of changes, seen things appear and disappear, and seen what time can do. That might be relevant to 'Tangled Up in Blue', the well-travelled song of departures and arrivals.

Just before Philadelphia, *Rolling Stone* has published its interview.³ In the piece, Dylan notes that he 'saw and felt a lot of things in the Fifties, which generates me to this day. It's sort of who I am.' But those times, the people, places, ideas and beliefs they contained, are long gone. The '60s, the era dominated culturally by a music industry that took transience and novelty for granted, wiped them out. Bob Dylan wiped them out. The songs made by the youth who emerged from the late 1950s continue, however. 'Blowin' in the Wind', the kid's first calling card, closes the Philadelphia show. That's performance number 1,145.

What kind of charge can the song still contain? Even the younger members of Dylan's audience, their perceptions fresh, are unlikely to be hearing 'Blowin' in the Wind' for the first time. Its alluring melody might still provoke an emotional reaction. The singer's ability to wring the sense of a contemporary meaning from words that are half a century old might still be arresting. The contrast between the verses of youth and a septuagenarian's gnarled, attrited vocals is, for some of us, invariably affecting. But in this, time is no illusion. It has done its work on Dylan, his songs, and on how those songs are heard. He has played Philadelphia 30-odd times in his career. In 2012, there's 'Highway 61 Revisited' (1,777 performances), 'Ballad of a Thin Man' (1,057), 'Like a Rolling Stone' (2,006) and, perennially, 'All Along the Watchtower' (2,101). The roughest arithmetic tells you that many millions of people have experienced these songs in concert halls and arenas. To those for whom it matters most,

the entrancing novelty of 2012's show in Philadelphia is the chance to hear 1964's 'Chimes of Freedom' receive only its 54th public performance, if bobdylan.com's busy researchers are right.

But what, as they say, is that all about? Dylan resists the legend of the never-ending tour fiercely. Something about the idea seems to offend him. In the *Rolling Stone* interview, but not for the first time, he asks rhetorical questions of those who wonder over his attachment to the life of the itinerant performer. 'Is there something strange about touring?' he asks Mikal Gilmore, his interviewer. 'About playing live shows? If there is, tell me what it is. Willie [Nelson]'s been playing them for years, and nobody ever asks him why he still tours.'

It's a fair point. But if the giving of concerts is just one of those quotidian things, why does Dylan's faithful website transcribe the set list for each and every show, or track the public performances of each and every song all the way back to 1960 and the Purple Onion pizza joint in St Paul, Minnesota, where the 19-year-old Dylan picked up a pitifully few dollars a night for singing the likes of 'Man of Constant Sorrow' and 'Sinner Man'? That kind of detail, that extreme attention to the minutiae of an existence, appeals most to those who keep alive the disputed myth of an Odyssean tour-without-end. Some of the fans have near-metaphysical notions about Dylan's activities, yet he - or whoever acts in his name - is both dismissive and complicit.

Anyone who has ever written so much as a postcard has to pay attention, at some point, to the person who did the writing. Who was she? What was he thinking? The poet who inters his earliest verse in the file marked 'juvenilia' also inters his younger self. Yet Dylan, in his 70s, elects to confront the words of a 20-something nightly. In some fashion he contends with time itself and leaves you to wonder what the songs still mean to him, if they can still mean anything. He says this to Mikal Gilmore: 'A performer,

if he's doing what he's supposed to do, doesn't feel any emotion at all.' He engenders feelings, in other words, but is - the old, alleged virtue of the allegedly authentic folk stylist - impersonal. Can that be true?

*

Each October, it begins again, the now annual, odd and faintly comical ritual. In 2011, bookmakers judge Dylan their 'second favourite'. After a lot of late and heavy betting, the singer is even installed briefly as a cert in a race that is no race, a contest never intended as a contest. Where once there had been idle speculation over a mere possibility advanced by a few eccentric enthusiasts, now real money is being laid by people prepared to believe that a popular singer and songwriter could - should? - win the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Why not? He already has an (honorary) Pulitzer Prize, awarded in 2008 for his 'profound impact on popular music and American culture, marked' - there are no prizes for writing these citations - 'by lyrical compositions of extraordinary poetic power'. The college dropout meanwhile has degrees granted by serious people at serious universities: from Princeton in 1970 and from St Andrews, Scotland's oldest such institution, in 2004. In fact, despite the 1963 Tom Paine Award debacle, when his tipsy, freestyle approach to free speech outraged liberalism's arbiters thanks to an attempt to understand John F. Kennedy's assassin, Dylan has acquired more scrolls and trophies than one man can easily store. By 2011 his name is attached to France's green gilt *Commandeur des Arts et des Lettres* medal, Spain's Prince of Asturias award, an Oscar, a Golden Globe, fully 11 Grammy awards, induction ceremonials in all the appropriate halls of musical fame, and to his homeland's National Medal of Arts. This last - though Dylan didn't actually show up for the affair - was bestowed in 2009 by

President Barack Obama himself. So much for the insurrectionary '60s, then.

At the end of May 2012, as the Nobel chatter resumes and tireless commentators return to the vexed topic of pop stars and poetry, Obama reappears to wrap a blue-and-white ribbon around the neck of a stony-faced artist. The commander-in-chief confers what is, for Americans, the most precious piece of costume jewellery available, the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Dylan honours the occasion by looking like a hostage. The dark glasses remain in place, even in the White House, but a smile is nowhere to be seen. Perhaps this is because a do-or-die pianist from the Marine Corps Band has just played 'Don't Think Twice, It's All Right'.

A statement from the administration is the usual thing: 'considerable influence on the civil rights movement of the 1960s ... significant impact on American culture over the past five decades'. Dylan is on line with the novelist Toni Morrison, the astronaut John Glenn, former secretary of state Madeleine Albright and others, dead and alive, accounted great and good. Obama says nice, sentimental things and, looking down from his six-feet-and-one-inch eminence, calls Dylan (5' 7") a giant.

Sometimes it seems as though he does little else but receive awards. Late in 2012, he tells his interviewer that he turns down most of what he is offered simply because he lacks the time to collect each and every prestigious ornament. Here is an artist who does not struggle in obscurity. Validation, as the language of the age would have it, is not required. Still, every other media report of the White House event persists in describing Dylan as a folk singer. He has not been one of those, by a generous estimate, since 1964. But for those who know nothing of an ancient musical tradition, and who probably couldn't care less, 'folk' is another of those '60s things.

As 2012 draws to a close, it is announced that Dylan's song 'The Times They Are a-Changin'', 48 years old, will be

among the 2013 'inductees' to the Grammy Hall of Fame. He has meanwhile emerged, without offering comment, from another round of Nobel speculation (once again, the ante-post second favourite has failed to place) and endured another controversy, this time over his paintings and the charge, now familiar, of plagiarism. His 35th studio album, *Tempest*, issued in September, has won a lot of praise, some of it preposterous. Now the announced wonder of the hour involves a venerable '60s star who, miraculously, can still make serious, intriguing music. For Dylan, it seems, there is no escape from his decade.

Posterity might one day take a different view. The lists of such things remind you, for example, that while nine Bob Dylan albums were released in the 1960s, exactly as many appeared in the following ten years. (If you include the vindictively titled *Dylan*, a collection of leftover cover versions released in retaliation by a spurned record company, the score for the 1970s is in fact ten.) Equally, if chart success is any kind of guide, the artist did far better in the aftermath of 'his' era, with three of the American number-one albums that eluded him throughout the '60s, than he had before.

Still journalism preserves its shorthand note: 'Dylan/ protest/ voice/ folk/ his generation'. These days, the laptop addendum might skip ahead: 'Wilderness years/ late renaissance/ astonishing'. The perception behind the precis endures for several reasons. One is that a decade as tumultuous as the '60s, as purportedly singular, seems still to demand a defining voice. Half a century on, the documentary sequences possess a soundtrack that is beyond cliché: the moptop quartet, the Stones and 'Street Fighting Man', a Motown track, and always, as though on an infernal loop, Dylan. Most often he can be heard singing a prophecy-song of changing times when the times foretold are long gone, the prophecy disproven and discarded. Whether this misrepresents history is beside the point. He

has become part of the received narrative. No one ever asks the actor when he would like the play to end.

Equally, the chronology of one phase in Dylan's later career catches the eye for several of the wrong reasons. There came a time when he measured every height with his fall, when his work, like his reputation, suffered a decline so precipitous it seemed unstoppable. Between the appearance of the hectoring evangelical Christian album *Saved* in June of 1980 and 1997's *Time Out of Mind* the test was to find a good word to say about Dylan's works, then to find more than a handful of people likely to give a damn. In the second half of the 1980s his albums hovered in the suburbs of the *Billboard* 200, peaking at 54 (*Knocked Out Loaded*) or 61 (*Down in the Groove*). A 'return to form', declared in repeated triumphs of journalistic hope over experience, might see him graze the top 20, as with 1983's *Infidels*, or aim for the edge of the top 30, as with *Oh Mercy* (1989). Then the collapse would resume. When the best Dylan seemed capable of producing was a brace of eccentric albums of ancient folk and blues tunes in 1992 and 1993, even the staunchest of old fans were no longer buying it, whatever it was supposed to be. In his live works, meanwhile, he was careering from the high peaks of adulation on an avalanche of lousy reviews.

The twenty-first century would decide that *Good As I Been to You* and *World Gone Wrong* are, in reality, fine and fascinating things, born of love and deep knowledge. Beyond the public gaze, they were the beginnings of Dylan's artistic redemption. At the time, they sounded like the voice of a wounded man groaning in the wilderness. They sounded, moreover, like the last resort of a poet in the purgatory of contractual obligation. Here, self-evidently, was a songwriter, the most esteemed songwriter in the world, who could no longer write. Notoriously, Dylan failed to release a single original composition between September of 1990 and September of 1997. So who wouldn't have

preferred to remember the candescent racket of 'Like a Rolling Stone'?

Lists of hits and misses do not begin to tell the story. Amid all the dross of 17 lost years in the '80s and '90s there were numerous works of lasting worth. Invariably, however, they were buried, like nuggets in deep silt, on albums that were inept or misconceived. *Knocked Out Loaded*, from 1986, is a lazy, execrable thing that nevertheless contains 'Brownsville Girl', one of the most inventive, complex and involving compositions to have appeared under Dylan's name. Even on the original vinyl record it seemed to come, at the start of side two, as though from nowhere, a narrative woven in patterns so intricate it still puzzles and enthrals admirers. But the track released was itself a shadow, arguably, of an even better original. The fact spoke to another perverse and self-destructive artistic habit.

In the 1980s and 1990s collectors of bootleg recordings began to grasp how completely Dylan could misjudge himself. It is another way of saying that a once-unerring artistic confidence had evaporated. Time and again, the songs he left off his albums were self-evidently superior, superior beyond the limits of relative worth or personal taste, to most of the things he chose to release. It became another Dylan puzzle. This ritual of self-harm had begun with *Infidels* and the decision to omit 'Foot of Pride' and 'Blind Willie McTell' (in either of its spellbinding incarnations) from the record. By 1989, *Oh Mercy* and the suppression - no other word seems right - of songs such as 'Series of Dreams' and 'Dignity', the pattern was plain. Both albums as released, for all their intermittent glories, were bedevilled by a lack of conviction. The artist's worst enemy was the artist himself. Then his ability to write anything at all began to desert him.

He had long lost the glorious facility of youth. No doubt he had heard too many people speak too often, too ponderously or too reverently, about his art. Clearly, he had

thought about it himself, often enough, while clarifying his language for 1967's *John Wesley Harding*, or while distilling the essential spirits of *Blood on the Tracks* in 1974. By the mid-1980s, when he was struggling to assemble the half-hour's worth of music he would call *Down in the Groove*, he had mislaid even the ability to be professionally glib. It amounted to this: Bob Dylan was no longer capable of composing, unaided, a single wholly new Bob Dylan song. The album was a wretched affair.

It should have been journey's end for a performer in Dylan's line of work. Beyond a band of diehards, he was no longer taken seriously. Worse, an artist who had always been impatient with the recording process no longer seemed to take his own records seriously. The next release documented parts of a tour – the wrong parts, but the error was by now predictable – with the Grateful Dead in the summer of 1987. Public gratitude was not much in evidence, if record sales were a guide, and the diagnosis of creative death was confirmed. Somehow Dylan was contriving to make each new album worse than its predecessor. The only rational explanation for *Dylan & the Dead*, so it seemed, was cynicism.

As though to emphasise the scale of the decay, the singer had meanwhile allowed his record company and his management to pass implicit judgement with 1985's multi-disc *Biograph* compendium. The exercise, involving 53 famous or previously unreleased recordings spanning a 20-year period, was not intended to shame Dylan. It was, among other things, the first move in a long campaign to reclaim his work from the bootleggers. Nevertheless, the contrast between tracks discarded in the '60s and '70s and the stuff he was passing as fit for consumption in the 1980s was damning. *Biograph*, an expensive set, sold at least as well as anything purportedly new to which Dylan was then putting his name. In most cases, it did better.

Real Live, a redundant document from a European tour, had been lucky to reach number 115 in the American chart at the end of 1984. *Empire Burlesque* had reached 33 in the summer of '85, but the pricey *Biograph* matched that when winter came, and went on to sell vastly more copies than Dylan's latest product. *Knocked Out Loaded* and *Down in the Groove* would follow: knocked down, then out. Such was the standard verdict. Most talented performers in popular music start out as small fry, as 'cults', and proceed with luck, work and judgement to achieve fame. Dylan was heading in the opposite direction. To all appearances, he was a spent force.

Did he care? Did he notice? Stray comments from the period suggest a stoical acceptance that his moment as an unlikely star had come and gone. For all that, whether obliged by contract, financial need or stubborn defiance, he continued to release those derided albums. The 1980s would see seven such artefacts emerge from the recording studios. *Infidels* and *Oh Mercy* might each have redeemed Dylan's reputation, but each was defaced - another unavoidable word - by its maker and those around him. The rest were very easy to forget.

In one sense, it needn't have mattered. On any fair reading Dylan's reputation would have been secure thanks only to the songs composed and sung between 1962 and 1978. In his business, particularly at the artistic end of the trade, a 16-year career is nothing at all to be ashamed of. Plenty of performers have made money for decades from work achieved in less time. The Beatles, those reproofing deities, had hung together for barely seven years as recording artists, after all. Elvis had counted out most of his days among the living dead. But the seeming creative extinction of Dylan in the late 1980s was peculiarly poignant because it seemed both complete and inexplicable.

He had been perplexing for long enough. As far as the forgiving fans who stuck around were concerned, that was

part of the contract. In 1969, there was the 'country' singer of *Nashville Skyline*; in 1970, the baffling anonymous artist of *Self Portrait*. After two of his most successful works, *Blood on the Tracks* and *Desire*, Dylan had ended the 1970s by surrendering his autonomy to God and evangelical Christianity. But at no time had he seemed wholly lost to art, bereft of ideas or a sense of direction. It hardly mattered, when the rot set in, that bootlegs told a more complicated story. As far as most listeners were concerned, Dylan drifted aimlessly through the second half of the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s. His records were poor or worse and few cared. Nothing important of him remained.

This meant, among other things, that it became silly to talk of Dylan the artist, Dylan the poet. Much attention was still being given to what he had done in better days, but by the 1980s many of the books and articles being published were sounding an elegiac note. The first edition of Robert Shelton's long-delayed *No Direction Home: The Life and Music of Bob Dylan* appeared in 1986, when those liable to wonder what all the fuss was about were being offered *Knocked Out Loaded*. In 498 pages of text, the biography contained only 13 pages dealing with Dylan's activities between 1980 and 1985. It ended by wondering whether the artist would follow 'Rimbaud's route' - and throw in his hand - or whether he would manage the Yeatsian path to 'even greater creativity toward old age'. Shelton was not prepared to guess.

The music business can offer at least ten comebacks for every penny. Most draw their inspiration from the creative agency of accountants, from managers sniffing a moment ripe for nostalgia or from the chance to exploit another greatest-hits package. Only rarely do performers renew themselves. Writers, equally, are reluctant to be reborn in late middle age. Lazarus never did explain how the trick was done. Nevertheless, Shelton covered his bets well enough. The late poetry of W.B. Yeats might certainly count as one

parallel with Dylan in his second coming; all those old or ageing blues players who were 'rediscovered' in his youth could stand as another set of precedents. Equally, you could dismiss all such comparisons. When Dylan rose again, he did it on his own terms.

Among his contemporaries there is a short list of those who have simply ploughed on – Neil Young, Paul McCartney, the egregiously avid Stones – and a vastly long list of the faded and fallen. His case was different. Beginning with his initial work on *Time Out of Mind* in 1996, and pressing on to *Tempest* in 2012, he forged another of those 16-year careers, became still another 'Bob Dylan', and vindicated himself. Critics fell into the habit of exhuming and adapting a famous line from Minnesota's F. Scott Fitzgerald and his unfinished *The Love of the Last Tycoon* (1941).⁴ As it turned out, there was a second act in at least one American life.

In these pages it will be argued, among other things, that in the process Dylan created a body of work – less sumptuous, less startling, less intoxicating – to match any of the products of his 1960s. He did it, moreover, while contending with everything, the whole accreted legend, the multiplicity of identities, that 'Bob Dylan' had come to mean. He did it while contending with age, with the fact of time, and with the burden of memory.

So we look again for the answer to the old, plain and perplexing question: how did he do that?

*

The Swedish Academy does not publicise its discussions or chat about the tastes of its 18 members when they are done selecting the Nobel laureate in literature. Dylan has been nominated each year since 1997, and each year the arguments over his place on the bookies' lists have resumed. How can one whose art depends on pop music be suitable for the highest honour available to a writer? Where

Dylan is concerned, the game is now ancient: poet or not? If a poet, of which variety, and by which criteria? Specifically, how can poetry be said to exist if it fails to 'survive' on the page?

Some still talk and write as though the very question demeans the august prize. Some of Dylan's own admirers meanwhile dismiss the entire debate, as though to clear the ground for bigger claims. *Of course* he is not a poet, they will say, but he is the greatest songwriter in a golden age for songwriting and that alone is a big enough thing. Talking to the fan magazine *Isis* in 2005, the author and Dylan scholar Greil Marcus made the familiar point. The prize is for *literature* (it turns out). Our boy sings, performs, and writes *songs*. Besides, said the scholar, Dylan has plenty of awards and no shortage of money. Marcus argued that 'thousands' of novelists were more deserving. Elsewhere, he had said confidently that Dylan's songs are not 'true literature'.⁵

Dylan doesn't need the Nobel and the Nobel doesn't need Dylan: point taken. But even implicit questions need answers. If you cannot place him among the poets, where would 'Desolation Row' figure in the development of post-war popular songwriting? It's very hard to say. If you cannot set Dylan among writers of verse, what has all the fuss, 50 long years of it, been about? For some critics, that's even harder to say. And what is this thing, this self-evidently exclusive thing, we call literature (if the Swedish Academy so pleases)? Where American poetry is concerned, a mid-century professorial parlour game, sometimes still misidentified as a 'New Criticism', has done its reductive work on art.

Tomas Tranströmer, an octogenarian Swede for whom the honour is long overdue, wins the Nobel in 2011. A year on, the honour and eight million kronor go to Mo Yan, the first Chinese novelist to be recognised, a writer controversial for his failure to be politically controversial in his homeland. In the present context, the fact leaves a trace of irony. On each

occasion, nevertheless, there is no sign that Dylan gives a damn. He accepts his honours, when time allows, but shows no inclination to argue over definitions of his work.

Tranströmer, though, is a *real* poet (who once wrote of 'jangling tambourines of ice', and elsewhere of being 'north of all music'). His status is not in dispute: anything but. The Swedish master, formerly a psychologist, makes sparse, dazzling arrangements of words to be delivered and received, uttered and heard. So what is it that Dylan does, exactly? Mo Yan's fictions are rooted in folk tales and given what is described routinely as a 'hallucinatory' edge. So why does that sound so familiar? The Nobel, it is sometimes forgotten, is *in* literature. Lexicographers, paid to think twice, will not stretch the definition of the thing beyond 'the art of composition in prose or verse', or 'the art of written work'. Academicians are a little harder to describe.

Judging by some of the press discussion over a song and dance man, a lot of people still define literature by a process of elimination. The only agreed truth is that no one else in Dylan's 'field' - which would be? - could even merit consideration as a candidate. In this game he is too big, or just too old, to be contained within mere popular music, yet simultaneously insufficiently literary to stand alongside others who pattern words obsessively. Where the recent history of the Nobel is concerned, Dylan might also be, quite simply, too American.

Gordon Ball, the Professor of English and Fine Arts at the Virginia Military Institute who first proposed Dylan for the 1997 Nobel, had attempted to deal with some of the arguments in his nomination letter for 1999. Backed by an international committee of like-minded academics, the editor and friend of Allen Ginsberg had reminded the Nobel judges that, in honouring the Italian playwright Dario Fo in 1997, they had already recognised an artist whose work 'depends on performance for full realisation'. Ball had then recalled the prize given to W.B. Yeats in 1923, despite, as

was said at the time, 'a greater element of song than is usual in Modern English poetry'. Thereafter the professor had invoked the praise given by Yeats to Rabindranath Tagore, a previous laureate, who was, said the Irishman, 'as great in music as he is in poetry'. Ball could no doubt have piled up more evidence for his thesis. The literature award has been given in years past to historians and philosophers. There is no obvious, definable reason why Dylan's way with words should be accounted the wrong way. But it would be unwise to risk money on the argument.

Remarking on the speculative betting generated by the 2011 Nobel, the permanent secretary to the Swedish Academy, one Peter Englund, compared Dylan to 'a literary UFO'. It was a neat way to dismiss a phenomenon and an inadvertent confession. Englund, and perhaps the Nobel Committee itself, didn't know what to make of Dylan. This said nothing about the singer, but it amounted to a slightly depressing comment on the guardians of world literature in the twenty-first century. Dispassionately, their response throughout has been puzzling. Either they want to say - but do not dare - that the Nobel must not be sullied by popular song, or they don't want to get into arguments liable to raise questions about their criteria, and hence about the nature of literature itself.

In March of 2013, nevertheless, an interesting fragment of news goes around the world. It seems that Dylan has been elected to join the elite group, generally 250 strong, of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. To most observers of such matters in the United States, this is not just another scintillating bauble to add to the pile in the artist's crowded trophy cabinet. There is more to it than a hearty handshake and a souvenir photograph. For better than a century the academy has had a reputation, never denied, for disdaining popular culture and anyone deemed too modern for their own or society's good. Once upon a time, those who ran the

institution would not have deigned even to notice Dylan's existence.

In 2013, in contrast, he is offered honorary rather than full membership simply because the academy cannot decide whether he is worthy - though there is apparently no longer any doubt about that - because of his music or because of his words. 'The board of directors considered the diversity of his work and acknowledged his iconic place in American culture,' says Virginia Dajani, executive director. 'Bob Dylan is a multitalented artist whose work so thoroughly crosses several disciplines that it defies categorisation.'

True enough. So again you wonder, whether the artist cares to or not, why the organisers of the Nobel are so fearful of cultural UFOs. He has been central to American culture for half a century. He is as 'literary', say millions of listeners and several shelves full of earnest books, as they come. Still the struggle to decide what he is, and what he is worth, and how he is to be placed in anyone's canon, goes on.

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In November of 1965, the 24-year-old Dylan had told Joseph Haas of the *Chicago Daily News* that he was spiritually non-aligned, that he reserved the right to make his own choices in life. 'I just don't have any religion or philosophy,' he had said. 'A lot of people do, and fine if they really do follow a certain code. I'm not about to go around changing anything. I don't like anybody to tell me what I have to do or believe, how I have to live.'

Oblivious to the contradiction, the young singer then proceeded to extol the 'amazingly true' I Ching, the ancient (if stubbornly cryptic) Chinese divination manual he pronounced 'the biggest thing of all'. By February of 1974, nevertheless, Dylan was explaining himself again to Ben Fong-Torres of *Rolling Stone*: 'Religion to me is a fleeting

thing. Can't nail it down. It's in me and out of me.' In the autumn of the following year, on the opening night of the Rolling Thunder Revue, he was questioned about belief in the deity by Allen Ginsberg. As Barry Miles, later the poet's biographer, reconstructed the exchange, the answer was as follows:

God? You mean God? Yes, I do. I mean I know because where I am I get the contact with - it's a certain vibration - in the midst of - you know, I've been up the mountain, and - yes, I've been up the mountain and I had a choice. Should I come down? So I came down. God said, 'Okay, you've been up on the mountain, now you go down. You're on your own, free. Check in later, but now you're on your own. Other business to do, so check back in sometime. Later.'⁶

'Later' turned out to involve the passage of just a few short years. By then it would cease to be a question, as it happens a wholly redundant question, of whether Dylan entertained a belief in God. Instead, he would 'accept Christ' sincerely and embrace the belief that Jesus is the Messiah. It's fair to say that the artist would surprise and dismay a few people with his decision. Early in 1979, nevertheless, he would be baptised by full immersion in a California swimming pool and begin to tell his audiences what it meant to be born again. Most would not thank him for it.

Oddly, perversely, his fans and critics would in later years treat Dylan's involvement with evangelical Christianity as a kind of phase, as though the artist had taken a holiday from himself. Somehow ignoring a host of songs over better than three decades, they would study the small print and ignore the contract, concluding - the relief was palpable - that he had got the thing out of his system with three quick albums, 1979 to 1981, before returning to 'secular music', his true calling. Of all the nonsense ever talked about Dylan, this error counts as monumental. Given the artist's habit of delivering statements of faith, albeit reluctantly, whenever he is pressed on the matter, given the apocalyptic imagery that runs through song after song, given that many of those

songs are impossible to understand if you discount religious belief, calling Dylan 'secular' is like calling the Dalai Lama a careers adviser. This artist cannot be understood without his God. Church membership is neither here nor there.

He was a religious writer for much of the 1960s, though it took a while for most people to notice. By the beginning of the 1980s, he had come to occupy a precise area in the unending realm of faith. Most followers of the major religions would consider Dylan's beliefs to be paradoxical. Some would call them nonsensical, others blasphemous. His statements and his songs nevertheless support a simple description. He remains a Jew, but a Jew who accepts Jesus and believes, furthermore, that Christ will return any time now. Fireworks and more will follow. Dylan is, as these things are described, a messianic Jew.

It renders him part of a small minority, but it also makes him typically American, one of those millions who have assembled creeds of all sorts from whatever was to hand and persuasive since before the republic was founded. After all, Dylan's acceptance of Christ at the end of the '70s happened at precisely the moment when evangelical Christianity was sweeping America. The history of his entire career says that he changes as the nation changes (and vice versa). In 2012, his latest album, *Tempest*, would again be coloured by the language of belief. For example, almost at random:[7](#)

I love women and she loves men
We've been to the west and we going back again
I heard a voice at the dusk of day
Saying, 'Be gentle, brother, be gentle and pray.'

Or:

Low cards are what I've got
But I'll play this hand whether I like it or not