The Times Higher Education
Published: 18 June 2009

Title: The Cambridge Companion to Bob Dylan
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Publisher: Cambridge University Press
ISBN: 9780521886949 and 714945
Pages: 204
Price: £45.00 and £14.99

The Cambridge Companion to Bob Dylan situates Dylan and his work in the history of American culture. Dylan appears in this new American studies series after Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and W.E.B. Du Bois.

Nine essays discuss Dylan within the Anglo-American tradition of song and poetry and as a performer, collaborator, cultural icon and key figure in American gender politics, social causes, ethnomusicology, religion and university course syllabuses. Eight shorter essays examine landmark albums, from *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* (1963) to *Love and Theft* (2001).

Kevin Dettmar's introduction pinpoints the critical perspectives in each essay and poses questions such as whether Dylan is a poet or songwriter. Either-or questions such as this led to what Lee Marshall calls the "ambivalent mixture of attraction and repulsion [that] has characterised Dylan's attitude to those who study him since the 1960s".

Marshall uses as a case in point the honorary doctorate Dylan received at Princeton University in 1970. There he had to listen while a professor read out a degree citation that showed little empathy for who he was as an artist or what being falsely proclaimed "the authentic expression of the disturbed and concerned conscience of young America" had cost him and his family.

This is particularly ironic because Dylan's best songs are full of empathy. They put us inside particular settings and lay bare how people act and feel. Consider *Man in the Long Black Coat*: "Crickets are chirpin', the water is high,/There's a soft cotton dress on the line hangin' dry,/Window wide open, African trees/Bent over backwards from a hurricane breeze." Dylan's voice and words and what David Shumway calls his "primitive" instrumentation make us feel what it means at this time and place that "She gave her heart to the man/In the long black coat". We do not even need to know who she is.

As Barbara O'Dair notes in her essay on Dylan and gender politics, his songs have a "life force all their own" because they come at human emotions and behaviour from multiple perspectives. She cites Dylan: "Sometimes the 'you' in my songs is me talking to me ... It's up to you to figure out who's who."

The *Companion* avoids unthinking hagiography. Even Robert Polito's swollen claim, in his essay on *Highway 61 Revisited*, that "a hundred years from now ... [Dylan's] recordings

and performances ... will advance the signature narrative of what it was like to live and create during his lifetime" is on target. No songster since Homer has spoken with so dominant and sustained a voice to the realities of a culture.

Dylan never was a spokesperson for movements and causes, as we understand the term. But for 50 years, his performances have made us feel in sounds and words the human condition as Job, Thucydides, Stephen Foster, Woody Guthrie, the Reverend Gary Davis, Robert Johnson, Hank Williams, the Stanley Brothers, Gordon Lightfoot, Ricky Nelson and Warren Zevon have painted it: blind hopes, greed, corruption, homicidal-suicidal poverty, fatal wealth and power, justice ill used, wisdom thrown in jail, love and longing, loss and betrayal, innocence, brutality, joyful play, loneliness, hypocrisy, poetic ecstasy and God's own salvation.

Listen to *I Was Young When I Left Home*, taped in Minnesota in December 1961. Dylan was 20 years old. Yet he gets across how it feels to be long away from home, used up, ashamed that what you are worth as a human being is a debt to the commissary store, sorrowful that your mother is dead and your sisters "all gone wrong". A heartbreaking childhood memory flashes: "An' I'm playin' on a track, ma'd come an' woop me back".

The essays touch on the sources of Dylan's genius. My own feeling is that Dylan is as close to a true oral poet-singer as our modern ears will ever hear again.

He is an autodidact, protective of his own singular muses, as all songsters in such traditions must be.

Too restless, omnivorous and single-mindedly creative to sit in university classrooms, Dylan, as Shumway notes, has absorbed "the influence of virtually every sort of American popular music".

When Dylan says that Robert Johnson's "compositions seemed to come right out of his mouth and not his memory", he could be speaking of himself. He took Johnson's songs apart like a mechanic rebuilding an engine from a Buick 6.

He learned to paint songs like Johnson and Guthrie. According to Eric Bulson, *Blowin' in the Wind* and *Hard Rain* were the first fruits of Dylan's capturing truth in this way.

Dylan has looked back ever since to roots music and hurt songs to retune his gift for singing the tears and inside joke of life as they should be sung.