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Special Editors' Column

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Introduction

Catharine Mason and Richard Thomas

Folklore, ethnomusicology, linguistics, anthropology, literary criticism, and philology: none of these fields can be left aside in a thorough attempt to gain insight into the rich dynamics and designs of Bob Dylan's performance artistry. It is indeed in the combined views and equations of these disciplines that scholars may identify with greater precision the complex subtleties or, shall we say, the subtle complexities of Dylan's creative breakthroughs into an art form uniquely his own and yet soundly embedded in American popular culture. Let there be no confusion: the artist under scrutiny performs not for the mathematician's final analysis, even if numbers and calculations abound in the unfolding meaning of his lyrics. From Dylan's powerful allusions to the divisive increments and common denominators of human experience, from his descriptions of the sole heartbeat to the elaborate use of the formulaic that creates a unison of voice, and from his devotion to both new and old, present and past, the avant-garde and the archaic, emerges that deep-set connection between the personal and cultural that is essential for lasting artistic creation. In light of this complexity, no single academic paradigm could enlighten these dynamics in isolation.

The multi-disciplinary emphasis of the Caen Colloquium, held at the Université de Caen in March 2005 was intended to provide a strongly interdisciplinary approach to Dylan's work. Coming together as specialists of fields as diverse as structural anthropology on the one hand—inspired by half a century of field research throughout indigenous America—and threadbare grammatical analysis on the other, Caen Colloquium participants sought to exchange scholarship on Bob Dylan's body of song. Sharing a fascination with Dylan's creative impulses, we also brought to our analyses the effects of his lyrics on our own personal perceptions of art, music, social life, cultural manifestations, personal struggles, universal meanings, and so on. The Colloquium as event allowed us to share our experiences and

inspiration as listeners and as conscious interpreters equipped with the academic insights, tools, methods, and concepts—as well as the limitations—of our respective fields. The present publication seeks to provide the more objective and scholarly results of that encounter.

To a certain extent, the selection of the disciplines to be represented at the colloquium was methodic. But, as artistically inspired events will have it, the group that gathered might never have been anticipated. With considerable difficulty, we have divided the papers submitted to us into four disciplines: literary criticism, ethnomusicology, anthropology, and linguistics. Two of the papers appear to us as a melding of two disciplines: Mike Daley's study of Dylan's use of intonation provides new paths into both ethnomusicology and linguistics, while Catharine Mason's work on blues poetics also draws from linguistic analysis as it reaches for a literary approach. Whether the papers be clear-cut contributions from the specified disciplines or, as these two papers show, an essentially interdisciplinary venture, the editors have come to believe that ongoing Dylan studies—and song and performance studies more generally—will profit from the input and collaborative inquiries of a truly interdisciplinary approach.

Studies of song must account for a wide array of cultural phenomena. Linguists points to lexical choices, grammar, phonology, syntax, and stylistics; literary critics lead us to consider the sung text, lyrics, word use, intertextuality, fluctuation of literary register, dialogism, and interpretive strategies; ethnomusicologists focus on melody, rhythm, timbre, intonation, harmony, vocalization, instrumentation, and intermusicality; and anthropologists and culture critics are concerned with social groups and their organization, cultural context, history, tradition, transmission, collective meaning, and so on. All four of these fields can be of tremendous benefit for a more thorough understanding of song and performance.

It all began when an American mother (CM) living abroad with her toddler and newborn began listening closely to the songs from Bob Dylan's album *Under the Red Sky* (1990). Feeling a million miles away from her home country, she asked, "what is this guy doing with my language?" The children, at that stage compliant with their mother's enthusiasm, soon began to share in the music that Michael Gray (2000) would come to analyze in relation to the nursery rhyme and folktale traditions to which it so clearly belongs. Soon enough *Under the Red Sky* became an integral part of family poetry and song, alongside the works of Dr. Seuss, Shel Silverstein, Jacques Prévert, and Antoine. But what started as family entertainment quickly became academic inquiry, as CM, a folklorist and linguist at the University of Caen, began to wrestle with the linguistic and musical effects of the Dylan she had come across: What is Bob Dylan doing with language? What

is he doing with language in performance? What is he communicating with guitar chords and harmonica riffs? What is he doing with narrative and rhyme and intonation? What has his audience come to expect of him over the expanse of his long career? How is it that so many musicians—both professional and amateur—of so many generations have found inspiration in his quaintest of riffs, in his bare-boned narratives, in his quirkiest of metaphors, in his alliterations and rhythms and ellipses? Is this internationally famous songwriter truly a poet or is he just clever with words?

It was then that CM met a classicist (RT), also a long-time Dylan fan who was just beginning to recognize in Dylan a literary and aesthetic connection to the Greek and Roman poets he studies, particularly in the way both Dylan and Roman poetry are layered with texts from preceding Greek and Latin traditions. In the spring of 2001, RT had come to give a lecture on Roman poetry at the University of Caen. CM picked him up at the Caen train station, and when she turned on the ignition Dylan's "Idiot Wind" came across loud and clear from the tape deck. Talk of their shared interest led to CM asking RT if he was interested in coming to a conference she was thinking of holding on Dylan's performance art. He readily assented, still not quite sure how this would fit with his academic persona. Well before the Colloquium was actually held at Caen, the two had decided to publish the proceedings of the conference.

Prior to the Caen event, they had approached John Miles Foley, editor of *Oral Tradition*, whose assistance proved invaluable every step of the way. Indeed, Foley's own long-standing and cutting-edge work on performance extended to an academic interest in Dylan. He contributed to the intellectual foundations of the conference, insisting on the need to include ethnomusicologists, to resist the tendency to isolate the lyrics from the music, and urging a serious focus on literary and oral traditions. Thanks are due for these contributions, and especially for his decision to publish the proceedings of the conference in *Oral Tradition*. The present volume, then, like the conference itself, reflects the great variety of fields that easily and naturally intersect with Dylan's work. The papers are ordered so as to reflect that variety. Although each work stands alone, there is also a symbiosis and a sense, as emerged during the days at Caen, in which the parts take on a larger collective significance from the company they keep.

A number of the papers in this volume generally fall under the literary rubric. Gordon Ball, who for over a decade has been nominating Dylan for a Nobel Prize in Literature, puts to rest (as do other contributors), the notion that what Dylan does somehow falls short of being literature. Can song,

particularly “popular” song, constitute literature? And is Dylan’s artistic register and status as a “performance artist” sufficiently elevated enough to qualify him? To the first question, also addressed in the essay by Richard Thomas, Ball notes first that music and poetry can indeed be synonymous. Homer tells his Muse to sing, and Virgil uses the verb “I sing” in the first line of his great epic. Rather than being something new and unliterary, Dylan, in Ball’s view, “has helped return poetry to its primordial transmission by human breath; he has revived the traditions of bard, minstrel, troubadour.” If among other things great literature provides insights into the human experience through words, musicality, and other modes that have a powerful effect on a global audience, then Dylan’s literary excellence is beyond question.

One of the preoccupations of Dylan scholarship has had to do with his intertexts, where his songs come from, and what meanings they derive from their places of origin, be they textual or musical, secular or religious, ancient or modern. The essay by Richard Thomas explores the phenomenon of Dylan’s increasing study of the ancient worlds of Greece and Rome, evident in particular in the Dylan of the last decade (that is, on the last three albums and in his book *Chronicles, Volume One*). When on *Modern Times*’ “Rollin’ and Tumblin’” Dylan sings “I’ve been conjuring up all these long dead souls from their crumbling tombs” he alludes not just to the nineteenth-century poet Henry Timrod, Bing Crosby, or the long-dead bluesmen who are part of the fabric of the songs on this album, he also takes us back 2000 years to the Roman poet Ovid, whose exile poetry is one of the dominant intertexts of *Modern Times*. Thomas’s essay counters the view of those who cannot distinguish plagiarism (a charge also leveled against the poet Virgil in antiquity) from creative reuse. Thomas also looks at Dylan’s re-performance, lyrical renovation, and variation from the perspective of the Homeric rhapsode, a class of singers who, in the centuries following the inscribing of the Homeric poems in the eighth century BCE, re-performed the poems in musical settings.

Christophe Lebold’s contribution studies Dylan from an aesthetic and literary perspective that puts the singer in a tradition related to the acknowledged great poets of the western tradition, but from a point of view specific to Dylan. He considers Dylan not from a textual, “readerly” point of view, but rather from aspects having to do with the combination of his music and lyrics, use of voice, and personae created in Dylan’s lyrics and voice and varied in performance. Dylan is thus shown to be distinct from a writer like Keats, for instance, on the one hand, and Sinatra on the other, as a unique phenomenon inhabiting worlds that are simultaneously literary, musical, performative, and narratological.

Keith Negus's contribution argues for the importance of working with Dylan's melodies, as the lyrics can never be separated and simply read. He looks at issues of orality and performance and the nature and quality of Dylan's voice. Negus rejects the proposition, argued, for example, by Betsy Bowden (2001:1) that "without words most Dylan melodies and chord changes would be boring." He also addresses what emerges in his study as a false dichotomy of opposing folk and blues as "low register" to "canonical high culture," citing Paul Williams' insight (2004:xiii) that "It's all in the riff. That's the secret of Bob Dylan's music . . . the riff calls forth the great vocal performances." Negus shows how riffs¹ shape the songs, with the words chosen to convey the meaning of the song as it arises from the interplay between the vocals and the riffs. Negus also engages the aesthetic—writing about melody, singability, and pleasure—with original observations on what he shows to be the identical melody, with different harmonization, in the "no, no, no" of "It Ain't Me Babe" (1964) and the "yeah, yeah, yeah" of the Beatles "She Loves You" (1963) "over three notes descending within the interval of a minor third, and the same notes at that—G, F sharp, E." From the issue of singability, Negus moves on to what he calls Dylan's "willful disruption of familiar melodies," used as a tool for "undermining the audience's ability to sing along." Finally, Negus discusses the place of personal singing in modern culture. All of these observations, like Negus' paper in general, have much to contribute on the aesthetics of Dylan's song-making and singing.

There is a similar use of the technical to describe the aesthetic in musicologist Michael Daley's paper, which scrutinizes one stanza from the June 16, 1965 studio version of "Like A Rolling Stone," the greatest song of all time according to *Rolling Stone* (November 2004). He applies the methodology of linguist Michael Halliday, who in Daley's words "has found speech intonation, which includes pitch movement, timbre, syllabic rhythm and loudness, to be an integral part of English grammar and crucial to the transmission of certain kinds of meaning." His study is directed at establishing the aesthetic effects of the song, as established by critical responses (including Dylan's own) to the success of the song. He arranges these responses into five thematic areas: strong antagonism (in lyrics, hard vocal timbre, invisibility of narrator), attractiveness (siren-like power of the song drawing listener to the abyss), positive message (chiefly through affirmatory harmonic structures), projecting song (flung out, "vomitific" in

¹ In his *Studying Popular Music*, Richard Middleton (1990:125) states that the riff may be best defined as "short rhythmic, melodic, or harmonic figures repeated to form a structural framework."

Dylan's own words) and effectiveness (the virtuosity in general, including musical pitch). Daley then studies the second verse and chorus of the song "Miss Lonely" ("ah you gone to the finest school all right miss lonely. . .") and chorus from the perspective of intonation, the components of which include tonality (the pattern by which tone groups are distributed throughout speech), tonicity (the placement of tonic prominence, within each tone group), and tone (the tone or pitch contours, of which Halliday detected five types).² What emerges is a system that allows for interpretation based on linguistic usage but which allows interpretation of varying meanings given by the verse in re-performance. Shifts in tonality, tonicity, and tone type can legitimately be held to create shifts in areas of empathy, anger, point of view, and narratological involvement, just as surely as can the shifts in lyrics (for instance in a song like "If You See Her, Say Hello").

Todd Harvey's study of "Man of Constant Sorrow," a song obviously not written by Dylan but one that he recorded three times in 1961, allow him to set Dylan in the traditions of the song that stretch from the beginning of the twentieth century to 1961 and beyond. As with the contributions of Negus and Daley, we find a strong assertion of the need to valorize melodic and other musical considerations along with the lyrics, if we are even to attempt to approximate the essence of Dylan's performance artistry. This tension was very productive throughout the conference and is one of the strengths of the volume. Particularly useful is Harvey's organizing versions of melodies and versions of lyrics, with each feature grouped into distinct variant groups. "Man of Constant Sorrow" may have been composed as early as 1907 by Dick Burnett who, in 1973 when asked in an interview by music historian Charles Wolfe whether he wrote it reportedly responded, "no I think I got that ballet from somebody—I dunno. It may be my song" Different versions of the song have been recorded by both Burnett and Dylan, and Harvey has collected these numerous versions in order to better assess the May 1961 version. In doing so, Harvey finds that "Dylan borrowed lyrics from several local performers, applied aspects of Guthrie's accompanimental style, used [Mike] Seeger's harmonic structure, and fashioned a melody that approximated earlier sources, but fit his developing vocal style." Also valuable, and as close as we can get to being in the recording studios and rehearsals with Dylan, is Harvey's comparative assessment of the then 20-year-old's evolution in the six months from the

² Halliday (1970:125) detected five types of pitch or tone contours: 1) falling; tone 2) high rising, or falling-rising (pointed); tone 3) low rising; tone 4) falling-rising (rounded); and tone 5) rising-falling (rounded).

version in May to what was released on *Bob Dylan* in March 1962.³ A month later, in the third of the 1961 versions, “the song has solidified” as Harvey puts it and “this impression is confirmed by the March 1963 *Folk Songs and More Songs* program, released as part of the *No Direction Home* documentary film. Dylan has made the song his own.”

In a number of the remaining contributions, cultural approaches to Dylan performances are quite varied and include Spanish, Amerindian, and countercultural influences on Dylan’s work. Christopher Rollason begins with an exploration of Dylan’s actual knowledge of Spanish, and treats the place of Spanish and Spanish-American themes, characters, and situations in Dylan’s *oeuvre*, which he shows are quite pervasive. He considers the presence of these themes in songs, from the casual on “Just Like Tom Thumb’s Blues,” to the pervasive “Senor,” to such works as *Tarantula* for prose, and delves into the extensive reception of Dylan in Latin America and Spain, in music, culture and translation, while providing insights into the singer’s engagement with Spanish literary traditions (with a particular and valuable focus on García Lorca). The hybridity of Spanish and Latin American cultural production, combining “low register” and “high culture” elements to create what is essentially a new art form, also maps well onto this essential element of Dylan’s own creativity and art.

Structural anthropologist Emmanuel Désveaux combs the Dylan corpus for elements, themes, and stylistic devices commonly found in Amerindian traditions collected by field researchers—including himself—from the late-nineteenth century to the present day. He expands his demonstration to an interpretation of Dylan’s more mythical schemes as they reflect worldviews in Amerindian oral traditions. In an interesting study of some of the direct influences of indigenous American cultures on American popular culture, Désveaux also analyzes the transformational processes behind such hybridization.

Laure Bouquerel’s study brings us closer to the immediate context of Dylan’s creative impulse in examining the rise of stardom and the dynamics of counterculture as two factors directly affecting the young performer. The role of Dylan’s stardom in his performance art involves his reaction to various media as well as to his audience. His refusal to play the role played by, for example, his hero and the fad-setting star, Elvis Presley, is seen by Bouquerel as an artistic innovation, unique in Dylan’s portrayal of what she calls the “ordinary star.” It is also, as she argues, an artistic evolution of the cultural context. In a study of Dylan’s image as foregrounded by D. A. Pennebaker in the classic documentary film *Don’t Look Back*, Bouquerel

³ This version was recorded on November 22, 1961.

demonstrates the blurred boundaries between art forms, subject and object, and the personal and cultural as seen in both Dylan's folk stance and Pennebaker's *cinéma vérité*.

Language and meaning are the foci of the three papers that bring this volume to a close. Words as the building blocks of language and syntax as its underlying rules are, as of yet, far too often ignored in the study of folk poetry. Jean-Charles Khalifa has taken a leap forward in his semantic and syntactic tour of the Dylan corpus. When we consider the impact of Roman Jakobson's definition (1987:71) of the function of poetry as "projecting the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination," Khalifa's study provides invaluable insights for literary critics. With a highly scientific approach to Dylan's use of language, our linguist leads us to think more concretely about artistic vision and about Dylan's own achievements in both content and form.

Nicolas Froeliger provides us with a study of French covers of Bob Dylan songs in a search for general rules of adapting songs into another language. He explains the difference between covering and translating, suggesting that it is largely a matter of meter and scansion. This work provides elaborate examples of translation strategies from numerous Dylan interpreters in French, including faithfulness to meaning, rhythm and phrasing, attitude of subject matter, poetics, and musicality. Froeliger more closely examines Dylan covers by Hughes Aufray and by Graeme Allwright in order to identify two predominant approaches to faithfulness: Aufray, as he demonstrates, attaches his work to the sound of the initial words while Allwright is more concerned with meaning.

Focusing on language use and style more specifically, Catharine Mason provides a study of blues poetics as it has influenced the songwriting strategies of Bob Dylan. Beginning with a close listening of Dylan's interpretation of Blind Willie McTell's "Broke Down Engine," the author identifies various stylistic devices adopted and adapted by the younger singer. A description of *songfulness*, blues metaphors, grammatical manipulations, use of the informal register, and the complex poetic and syntactic structures of the AAB song form (thereby coining the phrase "binary blues clauses"), provides the ingredients and orientations of a detailed *explication de texte* of Dylan's "10,000 Men."

Perhaps the most stimulating and challenging part of the Caen Dylan Colloquium was the active participation of artists. A considerable number of singer-songwriters, musicians, interpreters of Dylan songs, and visual artists accepted our invitation to gather and share their art, as well as their intellectual insights with scholars, students, and fans as we sought to further academic and artistic appreciation of Bob Dylan's performance art. All

would probably agree that genuine collaboration between artists and intellectuals provided some of the most rewarding, challenging and inspiring aspects of the Caen event.

In preparation for the colloquium, Steve Young, an internationally acclaimed singer-songwriter from Nashville, Tennessee, stepped into the university classroom to present a musically illustrated lecture on the history of American roots music to students of linguistics. Young and his son Jubal performed mostly original music for us, explaining through narrative and at times with more technical description, elaborate details about the songwriting craft. Jubal Young generously ventured into a couple of French high schools to explain the artistic, historic, and material realities of songwriting in Nashville.

Steve Young's "paper" given at the colloquium provided a more in-depth musical analysis of blues genres, again with outstanding and unforgettable guitar accompaniment and vocals. For two weeks in Normandy, the barriers between concert halls and lecture halls began to crumble, thanks to the articulate insights of Steve and Jubal Young into the history of American music, the aspects and functions of creating and performing, and some personal narratives about the impulse, the inspiration, the frustration, and the regeneration of making art.

Numerous interpretations of Dylan songs were performed by the Youngs, by several members of the colloquium, and by the Ziklights, a local high school rock group of advanced conservatory training. Perhaps the most telling event of the colloquium was the innovative rap interpretation by the Ziklights of "Subterranean Homesick Blues." Unexpected discussions about the role of personal voice in performance, of contextual indices in performance, and of cross-generational transmission were motivated by such youthful performance of this song first released 40 years before.

Charlie McCoy's elaborate and witty personal narrative, describing his artistic collaboration with Bob Dylan in New York and then in Nashville (as evidenced in, for example, "Highway 61 Revisited," "Blonde on Blonde," "John Wesley Harding," and "Nashville Skyline"), provided rich insight into the creative process of studio production. Performing across genre boundaries, McCoy insisted that Dylan opened the doors of Nashville studios for a whole new generation of performing artists. Further testimony into his own experience of the performance arena, with precise reference to the warm welcome provided to him by French audiences, shed light on some of the cultural discussions in the academic papers. McCoy's harmonica interpretation of "Just Like a Woman," along with Steve Young's "musical

paper” convinced us that artistic performance itself must become an integral part of academic vistas in performance studies.

The visual interpretation of selected song lines and titles of Robert Borne’s still photography and that of Zhou Hong’s calligraphy-paintings provided an aesthetic dimension to the colloquium that surprised and stimulated colloquium participants. Unexpected questions emerged that were above and beyond colloquium objectives but floated in the air: What exactly are the rhetorical devices and functions shared by a performing art and a visual art? How might performance define itself as an aesthetic form in light of artistic and critical achievements in the visual artists?

Given the widespread and fabulously cross-cultural influence of Dylan’s performance as an artistic expression as seen in Hong’s work, one is forced to agree that her calligraphed word provides a mirrored reflection of the sung text. In what ways might her ideogrammatic paintings account for, or possibly extend, the performance arena constructed by Dylan? What does her transformation of artistic and language media say about art as process?

Borne’s photographic exhibit provides a closer association between the visual dynamics of Dylan’s song lyrics and a purely visual construction; yet can one claim that his photographs provide mere illustration of Dylan’s narrative and descriptive allusions? Or might we suspect that Dylan’s lines were used as commentary to the pictorial views captured on camera by the photographer? Such questions, though left unanswered, brought about fresh new insights and academic motivation that we hope will lead to further study of Dylan’s artistic achievement.

Indeed, as the colloquium advanced, perhaps more questions than answers were formulated. How does performance connect performer and audience members? How does performance combine and create verbal, social and cultural meaning and practice? How does performance design a new purpose for, as well as experience and vision of traditional art forms? Through such rich and varied academic and artistic insight, colloquium participants were constantly reminded of the contextual and emergent qualities of performance, as they incorporate the essential building blocks of an ephemeral phenomenon. As Foley (1995:80) states,

the phenomenological present conferred by actual performance context—the Rajasthani *bhopo*’s episode before the illustrated cloth “map,” the folk preacher’s retelling of a Biblical tale before his or her congregation, the Serbian *bajalica*’s whispered spell in her client’s ear—vanishes and along with it the unique and primal connection between this particular visit to the performance arena and the traditional sense of having been there before. The face-to-face interaction, not only between performer and audience but also among audience members, cannot be played out in

a written text, no matter how multi-channelled that document may be. Nothing can wholly replace the personal exploration of an oral traditional performance by a person steeped in the signicative geography of the event.

In our endeavor to understand the traditional and social fabric from which the individual performer borrows and adapts the complex dynamics, elements, functions, references, and configurations of a song, we must identify the locus of meaning which guides the complex choices of the performer. An approach to performance as both contextual and emergent places under our microscope the all-encompassing moment of artistic process manifesting in concrete form, the merging of tradition and innovation, and the renewal of human expression as a socially embedded, ritualized, formal event. But what has guided all of the papers presented in this volume is a highly personal and intimate encounter by each writer of Dylan in creativity, composition, and, as always, in performance.

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