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Highway 61 Revisited

Mark Polizzotti
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Part I
Vegetables and Death
The record grabs your attention even before the wrap comes off the sleeve. It’s in the gaze. No one else was making that kind of immediate challenge from an album cover. Even Dylan, for whom the outer photo is as much a performance as the music inside—from the smug come-on of his 1962 debut to the quizzical stare of *Bringing It All Back Home*— was pushing something new. The look he gives almost defies you to buy the disc, to put it on the turntable. Today we are used to glowering rock stars; in the summer of 1965, amid the likes of Sonny and Cher, the Beach Boys, the Lovin’ Spoonful, and other grinning combos, it was virtually unthinkable. A good ten years before the fact, Dylan was already out-punking Johnny Rotten.

Daniel Kramer’s cover image has by now become so famous that it scarcely needs introduction. Captured on the stoop of his manager’s Gramercy Park apartment (which Dylan used at leisure), his traveling buddy and court jester Bob Neuwirth severed at the waist behind him, Dylan sits wearing a semi-legible Triumph Motorcycles tee under a gaudy blue-and-purple silk shirt, the famous Ray-Bans folded in his right hand. The look on his face, beneath a teased pompadour that no comb would dare approach, lies somewhere between defiance and annoyance: he knows the music is good, the best he’s ever made, but he doesn’t expect you to recognize it and he’s gearing up for a fight. The slight leftward tilt of the head only accentuates the challenge. (Another photo from the same session, showing Dylan with head straighter and brows knit, makes him appear simply peevish.) A shape peeking from behind his left shoulder suggests a motorcycle’s handlebars and reflector—an assumed nod to the road trip connotations of the album’s title. In reality, it’s just the handle of a baby stroller belonging to the couple upstairs.

“We spent a day wandering around New York taking pictures,” recalled Kramer, who had also staged the complex interior of *Bringing It All Back Home*. “We tried out various locations and stopped at a clothes store and bought outfits for Bob, though the ones he wears on the cover are his own… I put [Neuwirth] behind him in the picture to give it extra color.” The image has since become one of the defining portraits of Dylan from this period.

But the story behind it is also a cautionary tale, for the photo that now seems so inevitable was only one of several possibilities, and the relation we see between cover and music exists largely in our own minds. Like the feverishly pugnacious interviewer at Dylan’s San Francisco press conference later that year, we are unable simply to let it be: something inside us insists on knowing what
the picture *means*. In fact, the definitive portrait was almost accidental. After shooting in three or four locations around the city, said Kramer, “we eventually went back to the apartment…. Then I decided that the light was still decent outside, and we did a few more out on the steps. When we went over the pictures that I had narrowed down, Bob focused in on this, and he thought it should be his album cover. Although there were one or two others that might have made just as good a cover. And people would have said, ‘That’s an iconic photograph, isn’t it fortunate that that’s the one you chose?’”

Kramer points to the example of the Russian director Sergei Eisenstein, who famously juxtaposed facial close-ups with a variety of contrasting scenes (charging soldiers, a baby carriage tumbling down the steps): “And then the audience, when they see the face after that scene, says, ‘This is the perfect expression for that. This is what the person is feeling: horror, joy, surprise.’ You read into it.” As it happens, the *Highway 61* photo was created not in response to the music, but several months before it existed. “The picture was made before the album was recorded. But I also had some feeling about what Bob was trying to accomplish and what he was looking for.” Just as now, forty years later, we believe we see in the face glaring out at us the kind of music we’re looking for: music that makes no concessions to current taste and listens to no counsel but its own. Music that, largely because of this, sounds as timeless as the ancient ballads that irrigate its roots. Music that still has the rare quality, after all this time, of making us hear what we want to hear.

Released on August 30, 1965, reaching no. 3 on the *Billboard* charts in November and earning Dylan his second consecutive gold record, *Highway 61 Revisited* stands at the apex of a monumental trilogy of albums recorded in barely more than a year, beginning with the exploratory yawp of *Bringing It All Back Home* and ending with the spellbinding excess of *Blonde on Blonde*. (Or again: it provides the connector between *Bringing’s* impudent “What else can you show me?” and *Blonde’s* jaded “waiting to find out what price / You have to pay to get out of going through all these things twice.”) It is a work of unique directedness, even pragmatism: diamond-hard, muscular, powerful as a V-8, at times joyously spontaneous yet always controlled. Dylan famously described his music of this time as “mathematical,” and no other album of his gives such a sense of precision, while at the same time racing forward with such reckless abandon. It contains at least one anointed classic in “Like a Rolling Stone,” crowned the greatest rock song of all time in 2004 by the periodical-of-record that shares its name, and a number of others—“Ballad of a Thin Man,” “Just Like Tom Thumb’s Blues,” the epic “Desolation Row”—that sit at the pinnacle
of Dylan’s songwriting career. It is also one of the few albums to withstand Dylan’s own pitiless self-scrutiny. While his liner notes jokingly term the songs “exercises in tonal breath control,” he uncharacteristically told an interviewer later that year: “[My records are] not gonna be any better from now on… [Highway 61 is] just too good. There’s a lot of stuff on there which I would listen to.”

Like many of Dylan’s titles, *Highway 61 Revisited* is a program unto itself. His later remarks to biographer Robert Shelton emphasize the importance he placed in the title and the trouble he had in asserting it: “I wanted to call that album *Highway 61 Revisited*. Nobody understood it. I had to go up the fucking ladder until finally the word came down and said: ‘Let him call it what he wants to call it.’” The album is a roadmap into new territory, a return to the terrain of the artist’s youth, as well as an exploration of the axis 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. Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*, one of Dylan’s great inspirations, details the lightning visits of Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty to various acquaintances during their insane zigzags across America. In *Highway 61*, Dylan treats the elements of his musical formation as so many friends and relations along his route, dropped in on for the night, their hospitality repaid or abused.

So much has been written about Dylan, and about *Highway 61*, that any further commentary seems redundant. As the thinking person’s rock star, Dylan has been intellectual catnip to generations of commentators. Other popular artists have sold far more records, from the Beatles to Michael Jackson to Mariah Carey, but none has inspired quite the same level of reverence, or reference. And yet part of the magic of Dylan’s material is that it pushes one to confront it again and again, to try to come to grips with it in words, to do more—often, no doubt, to his despair—than simply bring it back home and take it all in. So powerful is the emotional response it can evoke, at least in a certain kind of listener, that it demands some kind of outpouring in return. As Joan Baez put it, “Some people are just not interested. But if you’re interested, he goes way, way deep.” Still, however insightful the commentary or exhaustive the analysis—and this, too, is part of the magic—the music always bounces back, challenging the intrepid critic to take another shot, knowing that he can never deliver the final word.

Is *Highway 61 Revisited* the quintessential Dylan album? To some degree, this is an unanswerable question: there have been so many Dylans. But it does stand at the crossroads of a major shift—one it helped bring about—in the landscape of American popular music, and of American culture. It paved the
way for more complex and literate strains of rock and helped divert pop from “Surf’s Up” to the Beatles’ “In My Life” and the Stones’ “Paint It Black.” (One might, in fact, describe most of Aftermath as a poor xerox of Highway 61, from “Lady Jane” to the eleven-minute closer “Goin’ Home.”) And while other albums of Dylan’s reflect his ever-changing moods and mercurial ability to redraft his persona (Nashville Skyline, Slow Train Coming), none embodies the thrill, freedom, and sheer daredevil bravado that still emanates from Highway 61 more than forty years after its release. Time has dulled none of its edge. Once you’ve let yourself be drawn into this journey, other popular music begins to sound frivolous and conventional.

For many, Highway 61 Revisited is the first resolute step across the line separating Dylan the “folkie” from Dylan the high-octane rock visionary. But as he stressed repeatedly at the time, the supposed turn toward electric music was really a return, a revisiting of the Little Richard—style rock ’n’ roll he had pounded out as a teenager with a succession of garage bands sporting names like the Golden Chords, the Shadow Blasters, and Elston Gunn and the Rock Boppers. And more, that even his acoustic Golden Age had been haunted by the ghost of electricity, from his first single, “Mixed Up Confusion” (1962), to four songs with electric backing intended for the landmark Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan of 1963—though of these, only the understated “Corrina, Corrina” made the final cut. (Timing is everything, however: in 1962, when interviewer Cynthia Gooding mentioned having met Dylan back when he “wanted to be a rock and roll singer,” 6 Dylan quickly steered her to another topic.)

“Nobody told me to go electric,” Dylan told Shelton in 1966. “Hey, I went electric on [Freewheelin]…. The only reason they cut out the electric ones was because I didn’t write them.” Some two decades later, he added that even in the early days, when playing “straight” folk tunes, “somehow because of my earlier rock ’n’ roll background [I] was crossing the two styles…. In other words, I played all the folk songs with a rock ’n’ roll attitude. This is what made me different and allowed me to cut through all the mess and be heard.” 7 He might have had in mind his 1961 rendition of the classic blues “Highway 51,” a kind of connector road to Highway 61, which with its driving Everly Brothers riff is rock ’n’ roll in all but the instrumentation.

In fact, the songs on Highway 61 Revisited do not so much subvert the motifs of Dylan’s earlier work as amplify them, in both senses of the word. Though roundly decried by purists for having shed his protest mantle, Dylan in 1965 was making statements just as disputatious as, and far more radical than, anything
contained in his “finger-pointing” songs. More unsettling as well: for if the indignant reportage of “Hollis Brown” and “Hattie Carroll” or the poetically worded imponderables of “Blowin’ in the Wind” ultimately leave the listener with a warm-and-fuzzy self-righteousness, a sense of elbows linked and vision shared, it is another thing entirely to find handholds in the raging, swirling, elusive critiques that underlie “Ballad of a Thin Man.”

What Dylan has abandoned in *Highway 61 Revisited* is not his sense of outrage or protest, but the illusion of community. In these songs, there is no easily identified villain or butt of the joke: the pawn in their game, the Mr. Jones, might just as well be you the listener as Medgar Evers’s nameless killer or some clueless critic. Besides, as he remarked in 1966, “‘Protest’ is not my word. I’ve never thought of myself as such…. It’s an amusement-park word. A normal person in his righteous mind would have to have the hiccups to pronounce it honestly. The word ‘message’ strikes me as having a hernia-like sound.” Somewhat more soberly, he added in 2004, “I never set out to write politics. I didn’t want to be a political moralist…. There are many sides to us, and I wanted to follow them all.” Ultimately, Dylan’s social protest comes down to the same distrustful, gut-level rebellion that has been common currency in rock ’n’ roll since it chimed its first chords.

In 1965, Dylan reportedly taunted Joan Baez with the flip explanation, “Hey, hey, news can sell, right? I knew people would buy that kind of shit, right?” We might dismiss this simply as caustic overstatement, an opportunity to twist the knife. Less easily dismissed is the sense that Dylan’s protest songs derived not only from a genuine feeling of outrage but also from a kind of hubris. Whatever else one can say about it, dashing off a work like “Blowin’ in the Wind” in ten minutes and having it become a generational anthem is a tour de force, the best validation a fledgling songwriter could ask. Dylan hinted as much in an interview from that period, when he spent less time damning the masters of war than he did mocking the formulaic composers of Tin Pan Alley: “I don’t have to be anybody like those guys up on Broadway that’re always writin’ about ‘I’m hot for you and you’re hot for me—ooka dooka dooka dee.’”

And in fact, even Dylan’s most reportorial songs seem intended not so much to prosecute specific injustices as to undermine certainties and institutions—as he put it, to “needle.” One close friend noted that Dylan’s approach in these songs was not journalistic but “poetical. It was all intuitive, on an emotional level.” Few in those heady days of Dylan’s early success seem to have recognized this, which is why even before the unambiguously inner-directed stare of *Highway 61*, more confessional songs like “One Too Many Mornings”
and “It Ain’t Me, Babe” seemed such a reversal. The fact is, Dylan has always been out to buck authority in all its guises—the masters who “make the rules / for the wise men and the fools,” as well as those who “must obey authority / That they do not respect in any degree”—and that’s one of the things that give his protest its seductive edge. Whether implicit or overt (in songs ranging from “When the Ship Comes In” to “Subterranean Homesick Blues” to “Most Likely You Go Your Way and I’ll Go Mine”), what comes through time and again is Dylan’s distrust of power structures, any power structure, societal or emotional. Authority likes the status quo. And as Dylan keeps reminding us, he not busy being born, and then reborn, is busy dying.

At the same time, there is a certain omeriness, even a kind of perversity, underlying Dylan’s relationship to authority figures, evident in his compositions and career choices over the past forty years—from his in-your-face appearance at Newport in 1965 to his 2004 arrangement with Victoria’s Secret or his recent collaboration with choreographer Twyla Tharp, which has caused much gnashing of teeth among the faithful. It subtends his notorious embrace and then rejection of friends and mentors, the fabled stylistic migrations that have taken him from folk to rock to country to gospel and back again, his sometimes brilliant, sometimes disastrous recastings of his own material, and his often antagonistic relations with his audience (the same antagonism glimpsed in Highway 61’s cover photo). Emblematic is his arch recipe for dealing with unruly fans: “You just, you know…turn ’em off very fast. Kick ’em in the head or something like that. They get the picture.”

Practically from the moment he began making a stage-name for himself, Dylan has engaged in a psychic tug-of-war with the press and the public, pushing them away while doing his best to keep them coming back for more.

Most people try to find their inner child (or, in the case of numerous rock musicians, their inner infant). Dylan seems to have spent most of his early career liberating his inner curmudgeon. Beneath the childlike exterior, there is the voice and sentiment of a disgruntled elder, a worried man with a worried mind, looking upon the folly of his generation as if it were the doings of callow youths with whom he has no truck. His well-known rejection of Woodstock in 1969—both the festival and the hippies who poured into his backyard to attend it—was further evidence, which many still refuse to acknowledge, that Dylan is a product not of the time and culture he helped shape, but of the time and culture that shaped him: the same time and culture reflected in the bleak, plainspoken ballads collected on Harry Smith’s 1952 Anthology of American Folk Music, themselves a mirror of the flat-plain realities Dylan saw as a child in 1940s
Minnesota. Greil Marcus, among others, has stressed just how bound to his land and time Dylan is, how deeply his roots dig into the dark, acrid subsoil of what Marcus has termed “the old, weird America.”

Chariness begins at home, of course: Dylan’s great distrust echoes not only in his public affairs but through his personal relations as well; love and admiration rarely go without some measure of resentment and rebuke. The Freewheelin’ outtake “Hero Blues,” an early work-out of the “It Ain’t Me, Babe” theme, has the singer chiding the “gal he got” for wanting him to go out and fight “so she can tell all her friends.” Unimpressed, the song’s hero (as it were) concludes, “You need a different kind of man, you need Napoleon Bone-ay-part.” Played for humor against a restless bass-note figure, “Hero Blues,” as Oliver Trager comments in Keys to the Rain, might be a rebuttal to escalating American involvement in Vietnam, a viewpoint buttressed by Dylan’s concert introduction of the song as being “for all the boys who know girls who want ’em to go out and get themselves to kill [get themselves killed?].” But I think it’s also possible to see in it a disgruntled reading of Dylan’s relationship with Suze Rotolo during that same period. The girl on the cover of The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan, Suze was the inspiration behind songs ranging from the sublime (“Don’t Think Twice, It’s All Right”) to the regrettable (the flatly mean-spirited “Ballad in Plain D,” an account of their break-up). Although Dylan credited her with having raised his political consciousness in the early sixties, sending him out to challenge the world’s injustices with his songs, the biting humor of “Hero Blues” suggests ambivalence about being pulled in a direction he wasn’t sure he wanted to take—and more generally, resentment at being pulled in any direction at all.

“Folk music is the only music where it isn’t simple,” Dylan remarked to Nora Ephron in 1965. “It’s never been simple. It’s weird, man, full of legend, myth, Bible, and ghosts.” Simplicity is not a natural register for Dylan. The folk tradition from which he hails is not the soft, sentimental variety that spawned such crowd-pleasers as “I Gave My Love a Cherry” and “Walk Right In” but the darker, more complex and morally ambiguous strain that has conveyed the unvarnished human condition for centuries. In a striking comment to Nat Hentoff the following year, he drew a sharp distinction between the voguish “folk scene” of hootenannies and the rich compost of the people’s music:

Folk music is a bunch of fat people. I have to think of all this as traditional music. Traditional music is based on hexagrams. It comes about from legends, Bibles, plagues, and it revolves around vegetables and death. There’s nobody that’s going to kill traditional
music. All these songs about roses growing out of people’s brains and lovers who are really geese and swans that turn into angels—they’re not going to die…. Songs like “Which Side Are You On?” and “I Love You, Porgy”—they’re not folk-music songs; they’re political songs. They’re already dead.\(^\text{14}\)

In recording \emph{Highway 61 Revisited}, Dylan was not turning his back on his folk beginnings, as was often hysterically charged, but further tracing a line that stretched from the tales of careless love and homicidal frenzy that festoon Smith’s \emph{Anthology}; past the hoodoo blues of Robert Johnson and Peetie Wheatstraw; straight through the primitive rock ’n’ roll that sustained his high-school days; over the country stylings of Hank Williams and Bill Monroe; and into his own “chains of flashing images”\(^\text{15}\) in compositions ranging from “Hard Rain” to “Chimes of Freedom” to “It’s Alright, Ma (I’m Only Bleeding).”

In Dylan’s later recollection, the seeds of this lyrical approach were sown as early as 1962, both from the Symbolist and Beat poetry he was absorbing and from the visually exuberant painters he was discovering—painters like Goya, Delacroix, Picasso, Kandinsky, and especially Red Grooms:

Red was the Uncle Dave Macon of the art world. He incorporated every living thing into something and made it scream—everything side by side created equal—old tennis shoes, vending machines, alligators that crawled through sewers, dueling pistols, the Staten Island Ferry and Trinity Church…rodeo queens and Mickey Mouse heads, castle turrets and Mrs. O’Leary’s cow, creeps and greasers and weirdos and grinning, bejeweled nude models, faces with melancholy looks, blurs of sorrow…. Figures from history, too—Lincoln, Hugo, Baudelaire, Rembrandt—all done with graphic finesse, burned out as powerful as possible. I loved the way Grooms used laughter as a diabolical weapon. Subconsciously, I was wondering if it was possible to write songs like that.\(^\text{16}\)

Three years later, with the addition of a little juice, he found his answer.

It’s not as if we hadn’t been warned. \emph{Bringing It All Back Home}, released a mere five months before \emph{Highway 61}, opens with the raucous electric attack of “Subterranean Homesick Blues,” its tone and machine-gun delivery melding Woody Guthrie with Chuck Berry. The side concludes with “Bob Dylan’s 115th
Dream,” a blaring rewrite of earlier songs like “Talkin’ World War III Blues,” on which Dylan underscores his use of electric backing by retaining the false start, that has him and his producer laughing hysterically after the band fails to come in on time. If Side Two seems a concession to the folk purists, this is merely on the surface: “Mr. Tambourine Man” draws the singer lyrically into very different territory, a gauzy, late-night dance that sets his boot heels wandering far from the preoccupations dear to Pete Seeger and Co. “Gates of Eden” and “It’s Alright, Ma,” recorded together in one long take, provide an early glimpse of where Dylan’s verbal flights were leading him. The farewell track, “It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue,” with its triumphant put-downs and sadly mocking tone, points the way in everything but arrangement to “Like a Rolling Stone,” Dylan’s next release.

But for all its febrile rattling, Bringing It All Back Home still manages to sound essentially like electrified folk. Dylan is known to prefer recording “live”—that is, with all musicians playing simultaneously rather than overdubbing after the fact. Despite this, the instruments retain the feel of being layered onto what are essentially solo pieces. The early, acoustic-only take of “Subterranean Homesick Blues,” for instance, sounds surprisingly like the finished cut, the difference lying less in the absence of Al Gorgoni’s electric than in Dylan’s not yet having perfected his rapid-fire vocal delivery.

Highway 61, on the other hand, uses the sidemen’s rich instrumentation to craft a more complex aural world, stake out a more full-bodied sound. Much more than with Bringing It All Back Home (or with other folksingers who were experimenting with electric backing at the time, such as Tim Hardin or Richard Fariña), the musicians on Highway 61 are not so much accompanists as an integral part of the proceedings. “I knew I had to sing it with a band,” Dylan told the journalist Ralph J. Gleason about “Rolling Stone.” “I always sing when I write, even prose, and I heard it like that.”17 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. Absent from Bringing, reedier and more haunting on Blonde on Blonde, here it thunders, washes, and grinds, churning the rest of the instruments into something thick, enveloping, and elemental as mud. 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.

“Dylan used to sound like a lung cancer victim singing Woody Guthrie. Now
he sounds like a Rolling Stone singing Immanuel Kant,” a reviewer wrote in 1965. There is a certain youthful quality that emerges from Highway 61, as it does from Bringing It All Back Home and Blonde on Blonde, never really to surface again. Earlier, Dylan had claimed to be “younger than that now,” but the age-old weariness persisted, not really dissipating until he found his way back to his R&B roots.

Lyrically, the songs on Highway 61 further explore and expand a trend seen increasingly over his previous albums, but here given free rein. They look not toward the journalistic concerns of the outside world but into the writer’s innermost reality—which increasingly meant the head-spinning experiences of a man suddenly coping with absurd amounts of fame. And they convey these experiences not in the “language of the tribe,” as Mallarmé said, but in an idiom that reflects the chaos within, to a degree previously only glimpsed (notably in “Gates of Eden” and “It’s Alright, Ma”). “You can’t imagine what it was like to be Bob Dylan at this time,” recalled his friend David Blue:

One day he was a respected young songwriter, the next he was this thing. The Voice Of A Generation. The Man With All The Answers. People were at him all the time. Tell me what to think. Tell me where to stand. Tell me who to be. It was relentless. You or I couldn’t have stood that kind of pressure…. Dylan not only stood up to it, he continued to do great work on his own terms in spite of it. But as his life got more surreal, his writing got more surreal.

Imagine the headiness and pure unholy terror of going, in the space of a mere four years, from a shy unknown, sustained only by natural charm and a firm belief in your God-given talent, to a teen idol. The shock of it was one thing Dylan had never expected. As he put it in an open letter to Broadside magazine:

it sometimes gets so hard for me

I am now famous

I am now famous by the rules of the public famiousity

it snuck up on me

an pulverized me…
quote mr froyd

I get quite paranoid…

In this regard, *Highway 61 Revisited* is to my mind Dylan’s most genuine album of the period, and possibly of his entire career. Dylan has always presented a persona, which is to say (following the etymology of the word) that he has always worn masks—whether the clean-cheeked innocence of his folksinger days, the jawline scrub of his country period, or the more overt whiteface of the Rolling Thunder Revue. *Highway 61* is perhaps the only moment when he shows us, and himself, what it looks and sounds like to be Bob Zimmerman, the rock ’n’ roll kid with the dark imagination and truckloads of attitude, not to mention crateloads of insecurity; the only time he challenged us to know just how it feels. In delivering himself of his most elliptical material, he has offered up his most authentic statement.

And as with any such generalization, this one comes with a caveat. Throughout Dylan’s career, styles have been tried out, aspects of his personality plumbed, only to be abandoned, often well before the rest of the world has had a chance to catch on. “Restless Farewell,” his valedictory statement on *The Times They Are A-Changin’*, is emblematic: as a farewell to his self-conscious, self-serious “finger-pointing” phase; as a patchwork smattering of original bits and others’ efforts (in this case, the traditional “Little Moses,” which he would have heard from both Harry Smith’s *Anthology* and Baez); and more generally, as notice that, no matter where he happens to find himself on any given day, in short order he’ll “be down the road…and not give a damn.”

In Dylan’s personal mythology, U.S. Highway 61 occupies a privileged and recurring place. It runs through Duluth, Minnesota, where he was born in May 1941, and passes not far from Hibbing, an old iron mining town since stripped of its resources, where he grew up. It was one of the main roads on which he spuriously claimed to have run away from home at ages “10, 12, 13, 15, 15 1/2, 17 an’ 18,”20 and on which he truthfully rode as a teenager en route to the excitements of the Twin Cities. It was the highway he took in January 1959, traveling the seventy-five miles back to Duluth, to see Buddy Holly perform live, a mere two nights before the singer’s fatal plane crash. Later that year, it was the road that brought him sporadically to his classes at the University of Minnesota and, more regularly, to the folk clubs of Minneapolis and St. Paul. In “Tangled Up in Blue,” the narrator’s drift from “the Great North Woods” down
to New Orleans most likely occurs along that artery. “Highway 61, the main thoroughfare of the country blues, begins about where I came from,” Dylan wrote in Chronicles. “I always felt like I’d started on it, 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 … It was my place in the universe, always felt like it was in my blood.”

In traveling this territory, Dylan is not only kicking up the formative musical traces of his youth but, as the previous album suggested, bringing it all back home.

“There’s no place I feel closer to now, or get the feeling that I’m part of, except maybe New York,” Dylan once said of his native region. “I’m North Dakota-Minnesota-Midwestern. I’m that color. I speak that way. I’m from someplace called Iron Range. My brains and feelings have come from there.”

In the spring of 1963, once he had put plenty of distance between himself and the North Country, had won over the Village folk scene and Columbia producer John Hammond, and was waiting for his second album to hit the stores, he was able to grant his hometown this ambiguous tribute:

Hibbing’s got the biggest open pit ore mine in the world
Hibbing’s got schools, churches, grocery stores an’ a jail…
Hibbing’s got souped-up cars runnin’ full blast on a Friday night
Hibbing’s got corner bars with polka bands
You can stand at one end of Hibbing on the main drag an’ see clear past the city limits on the other end
Hibbing’s a good ol’ town

Still, that vista past the city limits yielded the same bleak perspective every time—one born of small-town parochialism, economic austerity, long harsh winters, and basic lack of vision—and Dylan’s view of Hibbing has more often than not been less favorable. “It was just some rural town on the way to nowhere,” he later remarked. “You couldn’t be a rebel… There really wasn’t any philosophy, any ideology to go against.” It’s a feeling any Midwestern (or suburban) boy knows in his bones: that past those town limits lies something bigger, something different, something that can only be reached through escape. “I left where I’m from because there’s nothing there,” Dylan told Paul J. Robbins in 1965. “I’m not going to fake it and say I went out to see the world. Hey, when I left there, man, I knew one thing: I had to get out of there and not come back.”
Extending 1,700 miles from Pigeon River on the Canadian border to the Gulf of Mexico, Highway 61 is the mainline linking the cold mining terrain of the North Country to the fertile blues roots of the Mississippi Delta. Along with its western cousin, Route 66, it is the most myth-laden stretch of highway in America. It passes by the birthplaces and homes of Muddy Waters, Charley Patton, Son House, and Elvis Presley. The crossroads at which Robert Johnson made his supposed pact with the devil is said to have been the intersection of Highways 61 and 49; today his grave rests off Highway 61 in Greenwood, Mississippi. “It is a very big symbol in American music because jazz traveled up the Mississippi, which Highway 61 parallels for a good part of its route,” Robert Shelton commented. “Jazz came up the river. Blues came up the river. A lot of great basic American culture came right up that highway and up that river.”

The stretch of Highway 61 near Clarksdale, Mississippi, is the road on which Bessie Smith, Empress of the Blues, was fatally injured in 1937, when help for a Negro car crash wasn’t fast in arriving, and it runs past the Memphis hotel where Martin Luther King, Jr., was murdered some thirty years later.

The road trip of Highway 61 Revisited encompasses all of these registers, musical, mythical, and autobiographical. It is a circular journey, striking out for new territory only to loop back and reconnect with old roots. It takes us from top to bottom and back again, from the frenzied urban rock of Minneapolis (en route to New York) to the midnight blues of Clarksdale, from Great Northern pretension to South of the Border dissolution. For the listener, this is also one of the few albums that rewards repeated hearings. One leaves it feeling exhausted, exhilarated, ready for more. As rich and challenging as these fifty-one minutes of music are, one could easily, one would gladly, flip the record back over and over, and follow the final harmonica wail of “Desolation Row,” yet again, with the smart opening drum crack of “Like a Rolling Stone.”
Part II
Out on Highway 61
Side One

1. The Language that He Used

It has to be the most celebrated drumbeat in all of popular music. Often described in ballistic terms—a “rifle shot,” a “gunshot”—Bobby Gregg’s inaugural smack is indeed the shot heard ’round the world. “I was in the car with my mother listening to WMCA,” Bruce Springsteen recalled twenty-four years after the fact, “and on came that snare shot that sounded like somebody’d kicked open the door to your mind.” Greil Marcus, in his penetrating if overwrought study of “Like a Rolling Stone,” contends that while many other songs use the same kick-off—including the Beatles’ “Any Time at All” from the previous year and Dylan’s own “From a Buick 6” further down Highway 61—“on no other record does the sound, or the act, so call attention to itself, as an absolute announcement that something new has begun.”26 This might be overstating the case somewhat: as Al Kooper reminded Marcus, it’s very common for the drummer to end a one-two-three-four count with a sharp thwack. Still, there is something about this particular beat that makes it more than simple timekeeping, that renders it more memorable. Somehow, a common device has turned itself into a signature. If you heard only this one second of “Like a Rolling Stone,” you could still identify the song.

This drumbeat has become so associated with the song, in fact, that its presence or absence directly inflects upon the character of the performance. “Like a Rolling Stone” was the invariable closer of Dylan’s 1966 world tour. One can almost gauge the degree of exasperation he felt on any given night over the catcalls that greeted his electric set by the emphasis that drummer Mickey Jones placed on his opening salvo. It echoes authoritatively in Edinburgh. It booms with smashing finality in the valedictory concert at Albert Hall, following a drawing introduction in which Dylan dedicates the song to “the Taj Mahawwwl.” And it positively deafens with scorn following the legendary “Judas!—You’re a LIAR” exchange between Dylan and disgruntled fan Keith Buder at the Manchester Free Trade Hall ten days earlier, which triggered Dylan’s exhortation to the band to “play fuckin’ loud.” Its absence in favor of a cranking instrumental build-up, in the version played at the Isle of Wight in 1969, was one of the reasons for that performance often being tagged as lifeless. (Oddly, the version played at the infamous Newport concert, only weeks after the studio version was recorded and with many of the same musicians, also
foregoes the opening bang: it made enough of a statement as it was.) Among the many, many covers of the song, one by the band Drive-By Truckers is notable in that it begins with a similar drum shot, which then rests for a few bars, imbuing their entire rendition with a kind of we-know-you-know slyness.

In fact, the famous drumbeat is actually two beats, the resounding snap of the snare followed by the almost subliminally faint echo of a kick-drum, which makes the whole thing take a half-step back and gives it an extra push of forward momentum: not ONE-(pause)-TWO, but ONE-two-THREE. Marcus, again, tends to oversell when he likens “the empty split-second that follows” the initial beat (but that’s just it: it’s not empty) to both “a house tumbling over a cliff” and the Oklahoma Land Rush. What he’s missing in his own rush to hyperbole is the way that half-heard second beat pulls in, eases in, the onslaught of guitar, piano, organ, bass, and drum that henceforth sends the song—and the album it starts off with—a literal bang—charging forward.

“Like a Rolling Stone” is also no doubt the most famous song ever written out of sheer boredom. Dylan had spent April and May 1965 in England, for what would be his last fully acoustic tour. Both the performances and the time surrounding them, captured in D. A. Pennebaker’s documentary *Dont Look Back* (the tide’s lack of apostrophe mirroring Dylan’s idiosyncratic approach to punctuation), show a man barely going through the motions. Dylan is in control of his material and his audience, but there is no spontaneity and little verve. Even supposedly off-the-cuff remarks (“This one is called ‘It’s Alright, Ma, I’m Only Bleeding’—ho ho ho” [audience laughs]) have been rehearsed many times before. By the time he returned to the States at the beginning of June, he was considering giving up performing altogether. “I was very drained,” he explained several months later. “I was playing a lot of songs I didn’t want to play. I was singing words I didn’t really want to sing…. It’s very tiring having other people tell you how much they dig you if you yourself don’t dig you.”

What changed his mind, he said, was the new musical vista opened by “Rolling Stone.” “I’d literally quit singing and playing,” he told Martin Bronstein of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, “and I found myself writing this song, this story, this long piece of vomit about twenty pages long, and out of it I took ‘Like a Rolling Stone’ and made it as a single. And I’d never written anything like that before.” As he described it to Jules Siegel, the “vomit” began as simple prose ramblings: “It wasn’t called anything, just a rhythm thing on paper… I had never thought of it as a song, until one day I was at the piano, and on the paper it was singing, ‘How does it feel?’ in a slow motion pace, in the utmost of slow motion following something.”
Dylan’s interviews are notoriously unreliable sources of information, more like theatrical performances than communication sessions, and perhaps none more so than the ones he gave around the release of *Highway 61.* But what emerges consistently from his remarks about “Rolling Stone,” in addition to his pleasure at having written it—“the best song I wrote,” he told Gleason—is the sense of spontaneity regained, of an elusive but thrilling encounter with the muse. “It’s like a ghost is writing a song like that,” he recalled in 2004, with a note of wistfulness as if speaking of a time long gone. “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.” To television commentator Ed Bradley that same year, he described the songs of this period as having come from “a place of magic.”

In this case, the magic seems to have been triggered precisely by the creative stagnation Dylan had been feeling (and that his records had been showing) over the previous two years. *The Times They Are A-Changin’* is well-crafted but resolutely downbeat, more like medicine than entertainment, while *Another Side,* despite a few stand-outs, just sounds bored. Little wonder that by the time Dylan returned from his all-acoustic British tour, he’d decided to give it all up—or that the inspiration of “Rolling Stone” seemed such a godsend. It ushered in a creative outpouring that is almost unrivaled in Dylan’s career (let alone anyone else’s), and that over the following half-year resulted in many of the songs on which his reputation still stands.

Also rare for a chart-topping pop hit, the lyrics focused not on love but its opposite. It was “all about my steady hatred directed at some point that was honest,” Dylan told Siegel, immediately amending that to: “In the end it wasn’t hatred, it was telling someone something they didn’t know, telling them they were lucky. Revenge, that’s a better word… It was like swimming in lava. In your eyesight, you see your victim swimming in lava. Hanging by their arms from a birch tree.” Lucky in lava is not the same as lucky in love, but the contradiction is very much in keeping with the spirit of “Like a Rolling Stone,” a song that manages to balance sadism, compassion, and sheer liberated joy in a six-minute display of pure bravado.

“Once upon a time you dressed so fine / Threw the bums a dime in your prime, didn’t you?”—practically every school-child knows the famous opening by now. It starts the album on a mythic, fairytale footing that is immediately jostled and rushed forward by the crush of internal rhymes, their hectoring rhythm nailed in place by the accusatory “*didn’t you*” at the end.* The song goes on to detail, in four rich, lyrically complex verses, the past smugness and present
downfall of Miss Lonely, who attended “the finest school” only to get “juiced in it”; who laughed at “everybody that was hanging out,” but now has to scrounge for her next meal; who “used to be so amused / At Napoleon in rags and the language that he used,” but is left with no option other than to make common cause.

Ah, you never turned around to see the frowns on the jugglers and the clowns
When they all did tricks for you
Never understood that it ain’t no good
You shouldn’t let other people get your kicks for you.

More than the privileged, the ones targeted here are the oblivious, those who imagine the world exists for their pleasure, who equate life experienced secondhand with life itself. The target is a world made too safe, too comfortable, and ultimately stifling. No wonder so many parents sent Dylan’s records sailing into the trash. This was no Beach Boys crooning about daddy’s T-Bird: for perhaps the first time since Jerry Lee Lewis, rock ’n’ roll was sounding dangerous.

Dangerous in more ways than one, for with its defiant chorus (“How does it feel / To be without a home...”), “Rolling Stone” manages to make bohemian poverty sound positively seductive. As several critics have pointed out, the chorus, and Dylan’s singing of it, builds with mounting glee at each repetition: once past the terror of losing everything, he seems to be urging us, the experience can be exhilarating. Jann Wenner, for one, recently remarked, “Everything has been stripped away. You’re on your own, you’re free now... You’re so helpless, and now you’ve got nothing left. And you’re invisible—you’ve got no secrets—that’s so liberating. You’ve nothing to fear anymore.” It is this sense of release—from possessions, from expectations, from societal demands—that lifts the song above just character demolition, and that no doubt accounts for much of its enduring popularity. If “Blowin’ in the Wind” and “The Times They Are A-Changin’” had elevated collective yearning and youthful impatience to anthemic levels, “Rolling Stone” did the same for alienation.

The question that has occupied Dylan scholars for decades is, who is Miss Lonely, the honest point at which all his vomitific anger was directed? One perennial favorite is Warhol Factory starlet and poor-little-rich-girl Edie Sedgwick (who is also, and more plausibly, considered the inspiration behind “Just Like a Woman” and “Leopard-Skin Pill-Box Hat”). If this is unlikely, it’s not so much because Dylan disclaimed it—“I don’t remember Edie that well,” he
later said. “She was a great girl. An exciting girl, very enthusiastic… but I don’t recall any type of relationship. If I did have one, I think I’d remember”—but because whatever relationship they did have seems to have taken place later that fall, after “Rolling Stone” was already in the stores. The fact is, Dylan probably did know Edie better than he let on, and according to various reports he saw a fair amount of her in late 1965, hitting the nightspots in her company, setting her up with his manager, even promising to make a film with her. It also appears that the relationship was much more casual for Dylan than for Edie. It ended in early 1966, when Warhol maliciously informed his protégée of her putative boyfriend’s recent marriage to ex-model Sara Lownds—about which not only the nonplused Edie but also most of Dylan’s friends knew nothing.

Dylan’s Sara-Eyed Lady of the Low(la)nds has also been named as an inspiration, and traces of her acrimonious divorce from fashion photographer Hans Lownds at around that time might be seen in Dylan’s reference to “your diplomat” who “took from you everything he could steal” (just as they resurface in the second verse of “Tangled Up in Blue”). And many, of course, feel that the target of Dylan’s spite is the well-heeled, well-schooled Joan Baez, whose two-year relationship with Dylan was lurching to a painful halt at the time he wrote the song. One need only watch the merciless japes to which Dylan and his sidekick Bobby Neuwirth treated Baez throughout the British tour that spring, captured for all the world’s witness in *Dont Look Back*, to see how she might fit the model. Baez, for her part, believed the song was about Neuwirth.

Ultimately, though, the issue is not whether the song is “about” any or all of these people (just as “Mr. Tambourine Man” is not about Bruce Langhorne and his giant tambourine, though he might have inspired the image), or even whether the “you” is really Dylan himself—as he suggested in this personal reworking of Freudian dream condensation: “I discovered something about all those earlier songs I had written. I discovered that when I used words like ‘he’ and ‘it’ and ‘they’ and talking about other people, I was really talking about nobody but me.” No doubt Miss Lonely is a composite, a stand-in for anyone who has stood on the foot of pride and has now stumbled; anyone, as Scaduto put it, whom Dylan believed “had been trapped by the poison” of self-delusion, himself included; any of the phonies who were beginning to crowd more tightly around him as his star continued to ascend.

Various people—women, mainly—have been plausibly linked to Dylan’s songs, from Suze Rotolo (“Don’t Think Twice, It’s All Right” and “Boots of Spanish Leather,” among others), Bonnie Beecher (“Girl from the North Country”), and Joan Baez (“She Belongs to Me”) to Columbia exec Ellen
Bernstein (“You’re Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go”). But regardless of their actual identities, or of how closely the models fit the description, these people are at most sources of inspiration rather than subjects. They provide a spur, an impetus, but rarely are they depicted as such. Instead, as Dylan has insisted on numerous occasions, the true subject of these songs is his own emotional process, and the process he wants to evoke in the listener. Suze Rotolo’s sister Carla, the atypically unambiguous target of “Ballad in Plain D,” recalled that it was “just devastating, the way he could twist somebody’s words back on themselves and make them feel he was right and they were wrong.”

If anything, “Like a Rolling Stone” is about this ability, and about Dylan reveling in the fact that he has it.

The question of who inspired the songs is one that crops up repeatedly along Highway 61, but for now the final word goes to the author himself, in a piece of obfuscation worthy of Samuel Beckett:

Sometimes the “you” in my songs is me talking to me. Other times I can be talking to somebody else. If I’m talking to me in a song, I’m not going to drop everything and say, alright, now I’m talking to you. It’s up to you to figure out who’s who. A lot of times it’s “you” talking to “you.” The “I,” like in “I and I,” also changes. It could be I, or it could be the “I” who created me. And also, it could be another person who’s saying “I.” When I say “I” right now, I don’t know who I’m talking about.

We might say that the subject of “Like a Rolling Stone” is words themselves, the language used by this Bone-ay-part in rags. Dylan arrived in New York in January 1961, his head and repertoire so crammed full of Guthrie lyrics that he called himself a “Woody Guthrie jukebox.” But there was still room to soak up more, words both sung and written. Robert Shelton depicts him “devouring everything he could lay his eyes on,” from Kerouac, Burroughs, Blake, and Ginsberg (who became a close friend at around the time of Highway 61) to Cummings, Pound, Eliot, and Brecht (Dylan has cited “Pirate Jenny” from The Threepenny Opera as an important early influence on his songwriting). To varying degrees, all of these precursors make appearances—blatant or hidden, in starring roles or cameos—in Dylan’s songs over the following years.

Prominent among these were the French Symbolists, particularly Arthur Rimbaud, whom Dylan has often cited as a favorite poet (alongside such literary lights as W. C. Fields, Smokey Robinson, Hank Williams, Marlon Brando,
Captain Marvel, and Clark Kent). “When I read [Rimbaud’s dictum, ‘I is someone else’] the bells went off,” he wrote in *Chronicles*. “It made perfect sense. I wished someone would have mentioned that to me earlier.” Lyrical, Rimbaud’s influence is palpable in what Dylan termed his “vision music,” songs that defy conventional definition to create a powerfully suggestive ambient landscape, while the poet’s famous “derangement of all the senses” is a fair description of Dylan’s lifestyle at this time. But even more than this, Rimbaud (and, before him, the French vagabond poet François Villon) shows through the attitude underlying these songs: young, street-smart, arrogant, rebellious, and highly seductive.*

Combined with this is the equally powerful homegrown strain (itself largely indebted to Rimbaud) of the Beat poets, to whom Dylan has paid repeated homage. Dave Van Ronk, in discussing both Dylan’s literary filiations and his well-known intolerance of the sixties rock revolution, noted that “Bobby is very much a product of the beat generation…You are not going to see any more like him.” Dylan likened his songs of this period to the cut-ups of William Burroughs, and there are notable similarities between these songs and the writings of Jack Kerouac, especially the Neal Cassady inspired *Visions of Cody* and *On the Road*—not only in their phrasings but also in Dylan’s whole persona, which seemed almost to be modeled on Dean Moriarty, the “holy goof,” the “burning shuddering frightful angel.”

And coloring them all is the elemental poetry found in the eerily affectless parables by American “roots” singers like Dock Boggs, Uncle Dave Macon, and Clarence Ashley and in the works of blues artists like Blind Lemon Jefferson and Robert Johnson. “Johnson’s words made my nerves quiver like piano wires,” Dylan later wrote. “The free association that he used, the sparkling allegories, big-ass truths wrapped in the hard shell of nonsensical abstractions.” Music historian Patrick Humphries sums it up this way: “Taken together it all falls into place, Hank Williams can stand next to Little Richard, lining up alongside Arthur Rimbaud, Lord Buckley, Herman Melville, Paul Verlaine, Paul Robeson, Lenny Bruce, Little Anthony & The Imperials…”

These influences had been crowding for years in Dylan’s mind, his head full of ideas slowly driving him insane, but with few exceptions—notably the recent “Gates of Eden” and “It’s Alright, Ma”—they had had little outlet in his songs. Instead, Dylan’s derangement of all the sentences began surfacing in the liner notes he composed for his albums, beginning with “11 Outlined Epitaphs” in 1963 and continuing through the untitled stream-of-consciousness penned for *Bringing It All Back Home*. 
The most extended such exercise, which one biographer aptly called “a hundred and thirty-seven pages of liner notes for a Dylan album that did not exist,” was the book-length prose poem eventually published as *Tarantula*. A free-for-all of loosely connected visions, as “vomitific” in its approach as anything he’d yet written, *Tarantula* is notable in one regard for the many phrases that suggest lyrics from *Highway 61*. (It can also be quite funny, though most critics dismiss it as unreadable.) Dylan likes laboratories; for him, creative process far outweighs finished product. *Tarantula* is the crucible for a new lyrical style, in the same way that the Basement Tapes or the Never Ending Tour were venues for musical experiments. In retrospect, numerous lines jump out at the reader as rough drafts of lyrics to come: “the sun is still yellow. some people would say it’s chicken” (“Tombstone Blues”), “now’s not the time to act silly” (“Tom Thumb”), “it doesnt matter where it’s at” and “the jugglers who call you by the wrong name” (“Rolling Stone”), “you cant buy a thrill with a dollar” (“It Takes a Lot to Laugh”), “people taking down puckered Jesus posters out there on 61 highway” (“Highway 61”), “Dracula smoking a cigarette & eating an angel” (“Desolation Row”), and so on. The text rushes forward with a full-throttle energy appropriately reminiscent of Kerouac and Ginsberg, bringing home just how controlled and constrained songs like “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll” could sound by comparison. Contracted by Macmillan publishers in 1964 to capitalize on Dylan’s growing fame, *Tarantula* eventually eluded both its publisher and its author, turning from the loose autobiography originally envisioned into a howl against the lyrical straightjacket Dylan had forced on himself.

“Like a Rolling Stone,” however, ended not only Dylan’s persona as a purveyor of acoustic folk songs, but also his need to use such side projects as *Tarantula* or album notes as an outlet for the increasingly surrealistic bent his writing was taking. By mid-1965, he was seeing the book as “just a nuisance,” having found that similar flows of verbal lava, if boiled down and set to music, could crystallize into the mathematical excitement of songs like “Rolling Stone.” Trapped by his publishing contract and by growing public expectation, Dylan continued to work fitfully on *Tarantula*, taking the galleys with him on his spring 1966 tour, and abandoning it only after his motorcycle accident that summer. (He eventually agreed to its publication in 1971, after numerous bootleg copies of the galleys had begun circulating.) But he was already distancing himself publicly from the unfinished book: “Music is the only thing that’s in tune with what’s happening,” he told an interviewer that summer of ’65, as he would tell others during those months. “It’s not in book form, it’s not on
the stage.” And to another the following year: “I’d never written anything like ['Rolling Stone'] before and it suddenly came to me that that was what I should do…. After writing that, I wasn’t interested in writing a novel, or a play…I wanted to write songs…. I mean, nobody’s ever really written songs before.”

In keeping with the rush of the music, the process of getting “Rolling Stone” on tape happened fast. Written shortly after Dylan’s return from England in early June (and possibly begun on the plane back), it was ready for rehearsal within a week. For the upcoming recording session, Dylan brought Chicago blues guitarist Mike Bloomfield—who traveled from the Windy City by bus—up to his Woodstock home to rehearse. Dylan and Bloomfield had met several years earlier in Bloomfield’s hometown, and initially the guitarist had not been impressed:

I thought it was just terrible music. I couldn’t believe this guy was so well touted. I went down to see him when he played in Chicago. I wanted to meet him, cut him, get up there and blow him off the stage. He couldn’t really sing, y’know. But to my surprise he was enchanting. I don’t know what he had, but he got over. He could get over better than anybody I ever saw… We jammed that day, and way later he phoned me up. He remembered me, and he asked me to come play on his record.

Dylan, for his part, recalled Bloomfield as the guy who “just played circles around anything I could play.” He soon proved one of the crucial ingredients that give Highway 61 its distinctive sound.

Two years Dylan’s junior, Michael Bloomfield had grown up in the affluent Chicago suburb of Glencoe, materially comfortable but a loner, overweight and unathletic, misunderstood by his man’s-man father and ostracized at school. He began playing guitar at around the age of thirteen and discovered the music of Elvis and the Chicago bluesmen from the family maid’s radio—the same music that Dylan, at about the same time, was pulling in on his radio late at night. By the age of seventeen, Bloomfield was playing in the Southside Chicago clubs, a self-described “white dot” in a rough black neighborhood, with the likes of Muddy Waters, Otis Spann, and Big Joe Williams (for whom Dylan played backup harmonica early on). “You had to hold your own. If you shucked, then you had no business being there. You’d not only be a white kid, you’d be a fool. You’d be a punk and a fool,” Bloomfield later recalled. “Some terrific violence
went down…. One time I was standing in a bar, and a guy walked in, and he took a woman’s head and slammed it on the bar and said, ‘Bartender, give this bitch a beer.’… This guy had cut off his old lady’s head in some horrible fight, and he slammed it down on top of the bar and said, ‘Bartender, give this bitch a beer.’ That freaked everybody out.”

Two years later, when Dylan tapped him for “Rolling Stone,” the guitarist was playing with the Paul Butterfield Blues Band, its membership typical of the young, predominantly white, mostly male interest in music and musicians from several decades and a sociocultural universe away. According to Clinton Heylin, it was primarily this association that made Bloomfield attractive. On May 12, at the end of his British tour, Dylan had gone into a London studio with John Mayall’s Bluesbreakers (which had just acquired the young Eric Clapton) to try out a possible collaboration, but nothing had come of it. “It was just a jam session,” Clapton recalled. “We did a lot of his blues songs. He was making it up.”

Stateside, Paul Butterfield was considered an American counterpart to John Mayall: perhaps what hadn’t worked with Clapton might work with Bloomfield.

“He taught me these songs,” Bloomfield related a few years later, “and he said, ‘I don’t want you to play any of that B. B. King shit, none of that fucking blues, I want you to play something else,’ so we fooled around and finally played something he liked.” Never one to dwell on explanations, Dylan charged Bloomfield with running down “Rolling Stone” for the other musicians when they went into the studio, as he would later do with Al Kooper, Robbie Robertson, and others who were momentarily drawn into his creative inner circle. The first recording session took place on June 15, little more than a week after Dylan had first conceived the song, at Columbia’s Studio A at 799 Seventh Avenue, just north of West 52nd Street.

Bloomfield was one of three sidemen to color “Rolling Stone” indelibly. The second was Dylan’s longtime producer Tom Wilson. A native Texan and one of the few black men at the time to have staked a prominent position on the other side of the console, Thomas Blanchard Wilson, Jr., was ten years Dylan’s senior. Tall and urbane, with musical tastes that ran toward sophisticated marginals, he was a Harvard graduate, a former Young Republican who later served on the New York Civil Rights Commission, an inveterate ladies’ man with the bearing of a Cambridge don. After working with the likes of Dylan and Simon & Garfunkel at Columbia, Wilson would move to MGM, where he produced early recordings by the Velvet Underground and the Mothers of Invention. Fiercely
proud, he was once heard to shout after a New York cabbie who had refused him as a fare, “I’m smarter than you, better looking than you, and I can buy and sell you!” He died of heart failure in 1978, age forty-seven.

Wilson’s association with Dylan stretched over three and a half albums and ushered in the transition from Dylan the finger-pointer to Dylan the rock star. At least some of the credit for Dylan’s switch to electric music belongs to him, and might be directly traceable to the producer’s retroactive electric overdubs on Dylan’s early recording of “House of the Rising Sun,” to see how it stacked against the Animals’ famous 1964 folk-rock adaptation (itself learned, in a notable instance of the “folk process,” from Dylan’s rendition). Soon afterward, Wilson would similarly try grafting a rock arrangement onto Simon & Garfunkel’s acoustic “The Sounds of Silence,” turning this previously overlooked coda to their debut album into a major hit. And in January 1965, it was he who shepherded Dylan’s first electric outing on Bringing It All Back Home.

From the start, however, the pairing of Dylan and Wilson had been largely a matter of convenience, a way of keeping the young artist from taking his talent elsewhere. Dylan had been signed to Columbia in 1961 by the renowned producer John Hammond. Although he remained forever grateful to Hammond, and impressed with his legendary roster of artists (Hammond, as everyone knew, had discovered the likes of Billie Holiday and Count Basie, and had narrowly missed bringing Robert Johnson to Carnegie Hall in 1938), he was dissatisfied with the producer’s lack of feedback, and in 1963 he sent in his new impresario, Albert Grossman, to flex managerial muscle. Columbia president David Kapralik’s response was to bring Wilson in as Hammond’s replacement. It was a strategic move: given Dylan’s political stances and Wilson’s race, the singer could not reject his new producer out of hand.

But Wilson was mainly a jazz producer, who by his own account “didn’t even particularly like folk music. I’d been recording Sun Ra and Coltrane and I thought folk music was for dumb guys” (though he was impressed with Dylan’s material). Moreover, like Hammond before him, Wilson took a cavalier approach to the recording process, often chatting up his girlfriends on the phone while his artists sang (just as Hammond was known for flipping through the newspaper). Guitarist Bruce Langhorne, who worked with both men, described them as “producers who really had so much love and respect for the artists that they would just… put the right people together in the right circumstance, and [let it] evolve.” While this minimalism afforded Dylan an almost unheard-of amount of artistic control, it also left him with an aftertaste of settling for less than his best:
a firmer hand might have pushed him to record a better take. And though the situation was tolerable when Dylan faced the microphone alone, it led to chaos once he brought in a band. Bloomfield later complained that Wilson was “a nonproducer. He didn’t know what was happening, man!… We did twenty alternate takes of every song, and it got ridiculous because they were long songs..... The thing just sort of fell together in this haphazard, half-assed way.”

By 1965, Dylan was becoming noticeably impatient with Wilson, over matters large and small. Daniel Kramer remembers Dylan losing his temper when Wilson, in an attempt to keep his singer centered in front of the microphone, set up an “obstacle course” of music stands, mike stands, and other equipment. A number of outtakes from this period preserve petulant outbursts from Dylan, who seems to delight in changing cues on his producer and defying what few directives waft through the intercom (while Wilson comes off as the soul of equanimity). This one from early in the year is typical:

Wilson: CO 85271, “Alcatraz to the Ninth Power”…

Dylan: No!! That’s not the name of it!

Wilson: That’s what you told me when you left.

Dylan: I switched songs. This song is, uh…uh…[hesitating, knowing he’s bullshitting and now trying to come up with a title and keep the giggle out of his voice] “Bank Account Blues.” Wilson (laughs): Correct cue, “Bank Account Blues.” Take one, rolling. [Dylan then goes on to play a heartfelt solo rendition of “I’ll Keep It with Mine.”]

Although the “Rolling Stone” sessions would prove their most successful collaboration by far, they also marked the last time that Tom Wilson worked with Dylan.

For Bringing It All Back Home, Wilson had recruited some of the best studio musicians in the city, including guitarists Al Gorgoni, Kenneth Rankin, and Bruce Langhorne; bassists William E. Lee and Joseph Macho, Jr. (Langhorne and Lee had also played on Freewheeling’); drummer Bobby Gregg; and keyboardists Paul Griffin and Frank Owens. For the “Rolling Stone” session, he again hired Gorgoni, Macho, Gregg, Griffin, and Owens, though not all of them would appear on the finished record. Some say Langhorne was also present, though his participation seems to have been limited to playing his oversized tambourine, audible but uncredited.
That first day, Dylan was backed by Bloomfield and Gorgoni on guitar, Gregg on drums, most likely Paul Griffin on organ and Frank Owens on piano, and either Russ Savakus (who is credited on the album) or Joe Macho (who isn’t) on bass. Contrary to his usual practice, he recorded “Rolling Stone” as a single, while waiting to have enough material of like character to fill an album.

What strikes the listener on hearing these first attempts is the difference in sound between the song’s early drafts and the version everyone knows; some takes, such as the one released on the first Bootleg Series compilation, are all but unrecognizable. On this take (the fourth that day), Dylan bangs out the bare-bones motif on piano, a play-by-numbers bassline behind him for a few bars, his voice stretched and scratchy (“DIDn’t you-ou-ou”). The chorus is sorrowful rather than triumphant, commiseration rather than prosecution: “To be without a home—so unknown.” A stray bleat or two on the harmonica and Dylan breaks it off: “The voice is gone, man.” Despite the bits and pieces of accompaniment, this is virtually a solo shot, more a demo than an actual performance. A few other takes yield a fuller sound, giving a hint of the work to come (though now and again he has Miss Lonely throw “the dumb’s a dime,” not yet having mastered his tongue-twister lyrics). Not one take that first day gets past the first minute or two.47

Most notable about that day’s versions is that they are 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. Dylan has famously identified the chord progression of Richie Valens’s 1958 hit “La Bamba” as the melodic kernel of “Rolling Stone,” thought it’s hard to pick out here (it emerges most clearly in Jerome Arnold’s bass work at Newport, even more than in the official studio release). What these early takes do recall is the piano improvisation that Dylan picked out the previous month in a backstage room in Newcastle (filmed in Dont Look Back, with Wilson sitting nearby)—“working out something that’s been running through his mind,” critic Paul Williams said of this moment, “the sound of his inner music at this time in his life. It’s startling how different it is from what he’ll be playing onstage.”48

The third key element in “Rolling Stone” was a struggling songwriter and sometime studio guitarist whose presence at the sessions, as every Dylan fan knows, constitutes one of the great moments of pop music serendipity. Alan Kooper (his father had changed the family name from Kuperschmidt) was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1944, and grew up in the neighboring borough of Queens. Like his future friend and bandmate Bloomfield, he had stumbled into music early—in his case at thirteen, playing guitar with a series of nondescript
dance bands, then working as a contract songwriter at one of several hit factories that dotted Broadway. Although his reputation now rests squarely on his abilities as an organist, at this point Kooper had scarcely ever touched the instrument.

Kooper would go on to have a long career in music that continues to this day, putting together the bands Blood, Sweat and Tears and the Blues Project, and producing artists ranging from Nils Lofgren to B. B. King. As a sideman, he can be heard on records by Judy Collins, Joan Baez, Tom Rush, Simon & Garfunkel, Jimi Hendrix, the Rolling Stones (that’s his piano on “You Can’t Always Get What You Want”), George Harrison, and of course Dylan, with whom he would make seven more albums. As for Bloomfield, he would leave Dylan after the *Highway 61* sessions to form the Electric Flag blues band; as he told Kooper, “All I want to do is play the blues, man. Ah *loves* tuh play de blues.” In 1968 he and Kooper teamed up on the *Super Sessions* album, but, as with so many of Bloomfield’s projects, a crippling drug habit prevented him from seeing it all the way through. In November 1980, Bloomfield joined Dylan onstage in San Francisco to reprise his now-legendary performance on “Like a Rolling Stone.” Three months later he was found in his car, dead of an overdose at thirty-seven.

Adding Kooper and Bloomfield to the mix indelibly altered the Columbia studio sound that Wilson had wrought for *Bringing It All Back Home*, and that he might otherwise have obtained on *Highway 61*. Bloomfield, for one, had learned his craft on the unforgiving stages of Chicago’s South Side. While he confessed to feeling like a “dumb punk” next to his older colleagues in the Columbia sound room, he was also the most experienced at navigating the unpredictability of live performance, unlike the studio guys for whom retakes and punch-ins were a given.

While Bloomfield’s presence was Dylan’s idea, Kooper’s was due to Tom Wilson, who had befriended the young songwriter/guitarist and invited him to witness the second “Rolling Stone” session, on June 16. “In 1965, being invited to a Bob Dylan session was like getting backstage passes to the fourth day of creation,” Kooper later wrote. “And make no mistake about it, a formal invitation was prerequisite. There was no just-happened-to-be-in-the-neighborhood of Columbia Studios when Bob Dylan was recording.” Possessing “ninety percent ambition,” Kooper intended to do more than just watch, however. “There was no way in hell I was going to visit a Bob Dylan session and just sit there,” he recalled. “I was committed to *play on it*. When he showed up that afternoon, it was with guitar case in hand.

Giving himself time to blend in, Kooper arrived at the session early, before the other musicians, and set up his gear, making it look like he’d been invited to
play. His one fear was that when Wilson arrived, he would spot the interloper and throw him out. As it happened, Wilson never got to call Kooper’s bluff, for just then “Dylan exploded through the doorway with this bizarre-looking guy carrying a Fender Telecaster guitar without a case…. It was storming outside and the guitar was all wet from the rain. But the guy just shuffled over into the corner, wiped it off with a rag, plugged in, and commenced to play some of the most incredible guitar I’d ever heard. And he was just warming up!... I was in over my head. I embarrassingly unplugged, packed up, [and] went into the control room.”

Kooper has now been asked to tell this story so many times he must hear it in his sleep. Here’s one version of it:

Later on in the session they moved the organ player [Paul Griffin] over to piano. And so I went to Tom Wilson and I said, “Why don’t you let me play the organ? I have a really great part for this.” And he said [imitating Wilson’s Texas twang], “Aw, man, you’re a guitar player, you’re not even an organ player.” And then he was called away to the phone. And [since] he didn’t say no, I went in and sat down at the organ.51

“OK, Bob, we got everybody there, let’s do one, and then I’ll play it back to you, you can pick it apart,” Wilson says once the tape starts rolling. A moment’s pause, then: “What are you doing there?” Embarrassed laughter from Kooper: this is the moment he’s been dreading. But Wilson is easy going and a gentleman, or maybe he thinks he can just edit Kooper out of the final mix: “OK, stand by,” he says with a laugh in his own voice. “This is CO 86446, ‘Like a Rolling Stone,’ uh, remake, take one.” The song kicks off with the well-known drumbeat, though not as resolute as in the money take, and overnight it seems to have found its rhythm and time signature. But the musicians are cold, the playing sporadic; Dylan’s voice drones, having trouble finding the tune, any tune, or the right rhythm (“You used. To”).

As for Kooper, he couldn’t hear himself over the band and had very little idea of what he was playing, not to mention how to play the instrument he was on. “But the tape is rolling, and that is Bob-fucking-Dylan over there singing, so this had better be me sitting here playing something,” he wrote. “The best I could manage was to play hesitantly by sight, feeling my way through the changes like a little kid fumbling in the dark for the light switch.”52 The odd thing is that, given the lackluster performance by the other musicians, Kooper comes off as the only one with any conviction at all in this take, at least until Bloomfield
starts catching fire as the chorus swoops in.

Fifteen takes were attempted that day, of which only two (the fourth and eleventh) made it all the way through. Of these, only take four picks up the song’s inherent energy and sustains it, runs with it, inhabits it, rides it all the way to the end. The result is a piece of music that sounds like nothing before it and very little since, lilting and insistent, driving and relaxed, exuberant and “mathematical” all at once. It isn’t a perfect performance—there are slips and mistakes—but it manages to sound as if it is. Or more to the point, where before these mistakes were fatal, they are now made irrelevant. All of it—Dylan’s assured voice, his jingle-jangle electric rhythm guitar rolling in like calm ocean waves; the groove suddenly found by the competent studio musicians Gregg and Griffin; the solos, soaring or understated as needed, from Mike Bloomfield’s prematurely experienced hands; Al Kooper’s nervous, essential organ strokes, “toiling away above Dylan’s voice like the sweat on his brow,” as one commentator put it—all of it comes together in this one six-minute slice of time, a freight train to some land of California that the band was able to hop only once and could never catch again. On some level, they knew it, too: “Like a wild thing, baby!” someone pipes up after the last note has faded. Still, it took eleven more tries before Dylan, not usually one to keep going after a song was nailed, gave up; eleven more tries before he finally realized he’d already gotten where he wanted some time back.

The first problem with “Rolling Stone,” from Columbia’s perspective, was that it ran too long: at six minutes and five seconds, it was nearly three times the length of the average single. The objections were partly technical—compressing that many grooves onto a seven-inch disc could adversely affect the sound quality—and largely financial: the longer a single, the fewer quarters pumped into the lucrative jukebox market. The sales department’s solution: cut it to fit. But Dylan refused, and the release was shifted from “immediate” to “unassigned”—industry code for “the tenth of Never.” Shaun Considine, who worked in Columbia’s sales department, suggests as well that the company reps who had based their success on mainstream pop, jazz, and country—the label was known at the time for the likes of Tony Bennett, Barbra Streisand, and Johnny Mathis—had little tolerance for rock ’n’ roll music in general, which Columbia was one of the last majors to embrace.

According to Considine, what saved the record was his getting a test pressing of it played at a popular nightspot, the resulting sensation causing DJs around New York to petition Columbia for copies. Ever skittish, Columbia sent out
promotional copies but, as had earlier been done with Ray Charles’s “What’d I Say” and the Isley Brothers’ “Shout” (both 1959, and both hits), the song was split into two halves, one on each side. Listeners quickly caught on, however, and the company relented: when “Like a Rolling Stone” was officially released on July 20, it was of a piece, backed with “Gates of Eden” (itself lasting five minutes and forty-four seconds, making this no doubt the longest 45 pressed to that time). To help attenuate the shock, the time on the label (as well as on early pressings of the album) was listed as 5:59.

The song’s length was hardly new for Dylan, of course. Already before “Rolling Stone,” he had surpassed the six-minute mark with “Hard Rain,” “Talkin’ World War III Blues,” “Chimes of Freedom,” “Bob Dylan’s 115th Dream,” and others besides. But none of these had been candidates for major airplay.

It was appropriate that Dylan should be the one to break top 40’s hallowed three-minute rule once and for all. His songs, many of them long even by today’s standards, always give the impression that there’s more to say, that even after the singer has reached the end of his tale, he can still go on, most of the time to brilliant effect. Songs like “It’s Alright, Ma,” “Visions of Johanna,” and “Memphis Blues Again,” each stretching beyond seven minutes—not to mention such marathons as “Desolation Row,” “Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands,” “Brownsville Girl,” and the epic shaggy-dog story “Highlands”—suggest a road stretching infinitely ahead, on which the steam of ideas, insights, and images never quite runs out. Many have remarked on Dylan’s prolific songwriting, his habit of scribbling lyrics on any bit of paper, in any situation. “Like a Rolling Stone” helped open the gates to a verbal flood in which he willingly went down.

The effect of its release was almost immediate. Within days, “Rolling Stone” entered the Billboard charts, and by September 4 had climbed to the no. 2 spot, displacing all but the Beatles’ “Help!” Producer Paul Rothchild, who was then working with the Butterfield Blues Band and would soon make his reputation with the Doors, heard the song at Albert Grossman’s house shortly before its release: “I had them play the fucking thing five times straight,” he said. “What I realized while I was sitting there was that one of US—one of the so-called Village hipsters—was making music that could compete with THEM—the Beatles and the Stones and the Dave Clark Five—without sacrificing any of the integrity of folk music or the power of rock ‘n’ roll.”

The influence was not only on the listening public. Dylan’s music, already a favorite among folksingers, was now being massively recorded by mainstream pop artists as well. Roger McGuinn’s band the Byrds were enjoying a no. 1 hit
that June with “Mr. Tambourine Man,” and there were forty-eight covers of Dylan songs in the shops by the end of summer. Over the following year, Dylan’s material was picked up by artists ranging from Marianne Faithfull, Dick Dale, Trini Lopez, Boz Scaggs, Manfred Mann, Mae West (appropriately, a single of the impish seduction song “If You Gotta Go, Go Now”), Judy Collins, Johnny Cash, Duane Eddy, Davy Jones (of Monkees famiousity), and Gordon Lightfoot to Odetta, the Four Seasons, Sonny & Cher, Chad & Jeremy, Alvin and the Chipmunks (“Mr. Tambourine Man”—a concept), Sir Henry and His Butlers, the Turtles, the Young Rascals, Elvis Presley (doing “Tomorrow Is a Long Time,” the cover Dylan treasured most), Jackie DeShannon, actors Eddie Albert and Noel Harrison (soon followed by actors Sebastian Cabot and, alas, William Shatner), Nina Simone, and Frank Sinatra’s little girl Nancy: in 1965, these boots of Spanish leather were made for walking.

Driving cross-country in February 1964, Dylan had been thunderstruck by the fact that “eight of the top ten songs were Beatles songs…. They were doing things nobody was doing. Their chords were outrageous, just outrageous, and their harmonies made it all valid. You could only do that with other musicians…. In my head the Beatles were it. In Colorado, I started thinking it was so far out that I couldn’t deal with it—eight in the top ten. It seemed to me a definite line was being drawn.” Eighteen months later, “Like a Rolling Stone” was putting Dylan in a similar position, and was even threatening to dislodge the Beatles themselves from the toppermost of the poppermost. Exit the “Woody Guthrie jukebox,” enter “Rimbaud with a Rickenbacker.” Dylan had hit cruising speed.

2. This Song Is Just a Riff

Alongside “Like a Rolling Stone” on the slate for June 15 are two other songs that take up the lion’s share of the work that day: “Phantom Engineer” (recast a few weeks later as “It Takes a Lot to Laugh, It Takes a Train to Cry”) and six takes of an eventually discarded piece, variously called “Sitting on a Barbed-Wire Fence,” “Killing Me Alive,” or “Over the Cliffs Pt. 1.” Since “Rolling Stone” was being recorded as a single, it’s possible that these two numbers were attempts at a B-side, before the decision was made to use “Gates of Eden.”

A leftover from the Bringing It All Back Home sessions, “Barbed-Wire Fence” is built around a standard twelve-bar blues structure—normally the first two lines identical, followed by a third, “answer” line—which Dylan immediately subverts by playing with the absurd specificity of his opening:
Well, I paid one million seven hundred thousand dollars and fifteen cents
Yes, I paid twelve thousand one hundred and nineteen dollars and twenty-two cents
To see my bulldog bite a rabbit and my hound dog sittin’ on a barbed-wire fence

Needless to say, Dylan further confuses the issue in the next take by singing an entirely different set of numbers.

One number remains constant, however: in the second verse (or third, depending on the take), Dylan laments, “This woman I got she’s killin’ me alive / She’s makin’ me into an old man and, man, I’m not even twenty-five” (in *Lyrics 1962-2001*, this inanely turns into “she’s filling me with her drive” and “thrillin’ me with her hive,” which doesn’t match either recorded version or even make good nonsense). Apart from that rare bit of autobiographical exactitude—Dylan was twenty-four when he recorded this—the “woman he got” opens another intriguing possibility. Futile as it is to play “who is it,” it’s not too much of a stretch to hear behind this line yet another swipe at Joan Baez, who as recently as a few weeks earlier was still trying to turn Dylan into an old man with her dogged fidelity to his protest material—apparently not having heard that he’d been so much older then, but not now.

“Barbed-Wire Fence,” in many respects just a warm-up exercise, is notable as an early example of the band members figuring each other out, and even more of Dylan happily revisiting his old Elston Gunn persona. (It is also sometimes cited as an early draft of “Just Like Tom Thumb’s Blues” because of its reference to an Arabian doctor who “wouldn’t tell me what it is that I got”—though apart from the recycled lyric, the two songs have little in common.) The earlier of two known complete takes sounds like nothing so much as a garage band pounding out “Louie, Louie,” with copious amounts of harmonica and Dylan’s clunky piano standing in for the Kingsmen’s organ. Behind him are Al Gorgoni with some electric strumming and Bloomfield trying out some standard-issue blues riffs (“that B. B. King shit”). By the next complete take, the band was following the song with more conviction, providing a much stronger bass-and-drum rhythm section (this version, in fact, starts off with yet another Gregg snare shot) and a strong two-beat organ accent playing off Gorgoni’s rolling guitar licks. Bloomfield, meanwhile, had found his way into the song, and by midway was burning through a frenetic solo that anticipates his scorching fills in “Tombstone Blues.” After this take they moved on to “Rolling Stone.”

“I know you’re gonna think this song is just a riff,” Dylan challenges in the
last verse, in a line that pretty much summarizes the proceedings so far, “unless you’ve been inside a tunnel and fell down 69, 70 feet over a barbed-wire cliff.” Otherwise put, you might think I’m just fooling around with this band, but I had to piss off an awful lot of people to get here. As time would soon show, he had no idea.

One more, very obscure outtake (it doesn’t even figure in Lyrics) was recorded during the second “Rolling Stone” session, on the 16th. Listed on the studio sheet only by its master number, CO 86449, it is sometimes referred to as “Why Should You Have to Be So Frantic,” after its first line:

Why should you have to be so frantic
You always wanted to live in the past
Now why you should [sic] be so Atlantic
You finally got your wish at last
You used to be, whoa, so modest
With your arm around your cigarette machine…

The song chugs on for a few more lines, then fades abruptly after the dubious reassurance that “things could be much worse.”

Unfinished as it is, “Why Should You” is an odd hybrid: its lyrics read like leftovers from the just-completed “Rolling Stone” but its overall sound suggests the early Blonde on Blonde sessions with the Band, especially the unreleased “I Wanna Be Your Lover”—an unexpected sound for the Kooper/Bloomfield duo to fall into after having just hammered out their first triumph. The single known take was recorded at the end of a long day and never again, a wrapper discarded by the roadside.

3. You Got a Lotta Nerve

Just as “Like a Rolling Stone” was entering the charts, Dylan made his annual appearance at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival. Even accounting for the difference between historical time and real time—the recognition that not everyone would have caught up with the new hit record mere days after its release—we might still have anticipated that the wide airplay Dylan’s latest single was receiving would help ready the audience for his new musical
direction. But of course, it didn’t.

Dylan’s involvement with the Newport festival has become yet one more legend attached to his name, dissected, reported, and misreported in countless histories. It was at Newport ’63 that he first cemented his stardom, following a guest set on Joan Baez’s stage. At Newport ’64 he elicited the first stirrings of discomfort among folk purists by replacing the “finger-pointing” songs they expected with the more personal ballads of Another Side. His appearance at the 1965 festival, in a mod black leather jacket and Carnaby Street peg legs instead of faded blue denim, Stratocaster in hand (like his teen idol Buddy Holly) and band in tow, constituted a slap in the face whose violence is barely comprehensible today. After that, Dylan would not play Newport for another thirty-seven years.57

When Dylan stepped onstage on the evening of July 25, 1965, he was the undisputed star of the Newport event. He had already performed the acoustic “All I Really Want to Do” the previous afternoon at a songwriters’ workshop, his fame draining so much of the crowd away from the other workshops that he had to cut short his appearance. Soon afterward, he met up with members of the Butterfield Blues Band, who were also performing at Newport (earning them a snide introduction by Alan Lomax about white boys playing the blues—which earned Lomax a fistfight with Dylan’s and Butterfield’s manager Albert Grossman). It is unclear whether this inspired Dylan to prepare an electric set or whether he already had one in mind—chances are, the latter—but that night he, Bloomfield, Butterfield bassist and drummer Jerome Arnold and Sam Lay, pianist Barry Goldberg, and Al Kooper (who had come as a regular concert-goer, only to find himself drafted ad hoc) quickly rehearsed three numbers in a borrowed mansion. The following afternoon they did a cursory sound check (which quashes theories that Dylan’s electric music was a complete surprise even to the festival organizers), and at a little after nine o’clock Peter Yarrow of Peter, Paul and Mary came out to introduce the man of the hour:

The person that’s coming up now is a person who in a sense has changed the face of folk music to the large American public, because he has brought to it a point of view of a poet. Ladies and gentlemen, the person that’s gonna come up now has a limited amount of time [protests from the audience]. His name is Bob Dylan.

You can hear the crowd’s cheering fade as the band starts to plug in behind
Dylan. A few test notes on the keyboard, some rapid strumming on an electric guitar, and Dylan shouts, “Let’s roll!” The band launches into an especially raucous version of “Maggie’s Farm,” its already grating cadences made sandpaper rough by Bloomfield’s deafening, insistently, attention-hogging guitar licks, constantly pushing themselves forward, screaming to be heard. This wasn’t the first electric music ever played at Newport, but it was surely the loudest. At the end the audience is still cheering, though some dissent is audible. Then a slow, almost lilting build-up to “Like a Rolling Stone,” which must have placated at least some of the fans. Then one more song, a rapid-fire version of “Phantom Engineer,” and it’s over, almost as soon as it has begun.

Though circulating tapes of the concert suggest that the audience’s response was more positive than legend would have it, by now the fury is unmistakable. After some coaxing by an audibly shaken Peter Yarrow, Dylan returns to the stage holding a borrowed Martin (“he’s coming: he’s gotta get an acoustic guitar,” Yarrow reassures) and sings “It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue,” according to some reports with tears in his eyes. (Footage of the concert does in fact show water running down his face, but it might have been sweat: Dylan, too, sounds a bit shaken at this point.) Mollified, the audience now cheers without reservation, believing they’ve won their champion back from the Dark Side. No one seems to have recognized this as another restless farewell.

Some have claimed that it was the brevity of Dylan’s performance that caused the protests: most acts played for a good forty-five minutes as opposed to Dylan’s fifteen, and he was the headliner to boot (there are clear chants of “We want Dylan” from the crowd as Yarrow tries to pacify them). Others have blamed the painful volume, or the poor sound system that made his singing inaudible. Listening carefully, one can hear booing mixed in with applause from the moment Dylan appeared in what the purists branded his “sellout jacket”—and even then, it was the attitude that rankled more than the clothes: Dylan had performed in the same leather jacket throughout his ecstatically received tour of England that April. (When the British booed the following April, he was wearing a houndstooth suit.)

The broad, but I think accurate, generalization is that Dylan’s performance drew a sharp dividing line between the Old Left, the children of Woody Guthrie for whom folk music was intimately connected with advancing the people’s cause, and the younger generation who felt the emergent new music articulated their concerns in ways that neither “Be-Bop-A-Lula” nor “Kumbaya” had been able to.* As Dylan’s contemporary Richard Fariña put it, “Only when popular music was in its very worst period, when nothing was happening there, did we
Folk music, through no fault of its own, fooled us into certain sympathies and nostalgic alliances with the so-called traditional past… almost as if Chuck Berry and Batman had really nothing to do with who we were, and Uncle Dave Macon or Horton Barker could do a better job of telling us.”

Whether or not Dylan meant to provoke a scandal is, like much surrounding the event, open to speculation. What does seem certain is that, fresh from the thrill of making “Rolling Stone,” he had little interest in endlessly dusting off his old material. “I get very bored,” he told Robert Shelton the following month. “I can’t sing ‘With God on Our Side’ for fifteen years.” But more than this, there was an exhilaration that I believe Dylan genuinely wanted to communicate. Years later, he looked back on the period surrounding Highway 61 as “exciting times. We were doing it before anybody knew we would—or could. We didn’t know what it was going to turn out to be. Nobody thought of it as folk-rock at the time…. It was the sound of the streets…. That ethereal twilight light, you know. It’s the sound of the street with the sunrays, the sun shining down at a particular time, on a particular type of building. A particular type of people walking on a particular type of street. It’s an outdoor sound that drifts even into open windows that you can hear.”

In going onstage that evening, Dylan was both sharing the headiness of his new music and thumbing his nose at those who wouldn’t keep up. What he was either ignoring or intentionally flouting was the “strict and rigid establishment” (as he later said) of the folk community, which didn’t cotton to his new flamboyance; the degree of self-righteous protectionism, at a time when “commitment” was already on the verge of turning into commodity. “It was the antithesis of what the festival was supposed to be doing,” commented folksinger Oscar Brand. “The electric guitar represented capitalism…the people who were selling out.” As with his acceptance speech in December 1963 for the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee’s Tom Paine award—at which he compared himself to Lee Harvey Oswald and denigrated the “old people” in attendance—Dylan’s performance mainly ended up confounding those who would try to pin him down, and ultimately expressed his own refusal to be defined. If Woody’s machine killed fascists, Bobby’s was set to steamroll anyone who got in his way.

Still, other folk musicians were experimenting with electric backing without provoking anywhere near the furor, and ultimately the intensity of the reaction had less to do with the gesture than with Dylan himself. From the moment of his arrival in Greenwich Village, Dylan had managed to project an aura of little-boy-
lost helplessness that drew both women and men toward him. As Joan Baez put it, “He’d bring out the mother instinct in a woman who thought her mother instinct was dead.” Like Robert Johnson before him, Dylan had an extraordinary talent for being taken care of. He had perfected the myth of the itinerant musician reliant on the kindness of strangers, whether fellow entertainers and their wives eager to feed the waif, journalists eager to further his career, or 

eminences grises such as Izzy Young and Howard Leventhal eager to show him off—so many “Jewish mothers,” as Dave Van Ronk said. The Dylan these people saw, aided by his undeniable charisma and adaptive instinct, was a projection made of every frustrated desire by every folksinger scrambling to make a living, every well-meaning pamphleteer striving to make a difference in an indifferent world. When he became a star on the folk circuit, many saw it as a vindication of the Cause. Now, for the “Jewish mothers,” it was as if their honor-roll son had suddenly turned delinquent.

Dylan’s own public reaction to the Newport events was typically noncommittal. “I’m not really bothered by Newport, because I know in my own mind what I’m doing. If anyone has imagination, he’ll know what I’m doing. If they can’t understand my songs, they’re missing something,” he told Shelton. But to the Beatles, in an odd moment of embarrassment, he vehemently denied having been booed at all. And some months later, he allowed that he did “resent somewhat... that everybody that booed said they did it because they were old fans.” For Dylan, too, this was personal.*

Dylan had vented spite in song before: the apocalyptic “When the Ship Comes In,” to take just one example, originated with a hotel clerk who’d refused him a room. Four days after Newport, he returned to the studio with a new musical put-down. Originally named “Black Dalli Rue,” it was retitled—removing all ambiguity—“Positively 4th Street,” after his former Greenwich Village address:

You got a lotta nerve to say you are my friend
When I was down you just stood there grinning
You got a lotta nerve to say you got a helping hand to lend
You just want to be on the side that’s winning

It was as if all the slights Dylan had endured since his arrival in New York, all the resentments that had built up, all the attempts to pigeonhole him—whether by Suze, Baez, Wilson, or his fans—were now condensed in this one blast of
Addressed to a nameless, universal “you,” more an embodiment of the static folk ethos than an actual individual, “Positively 4th Street” is an unremitting piece of character bashing, as if Dylan had taken the motor of “Rolling Stone” and cranked it up to full capacity. In the course of it, the singer lashes back at the subject’s insincerity (“you know as well as me you’d rather see me paralyzed”), dissatisfaction with life (“it’s not my problem”), and, as a finale, utter lack of redeeming virtues:

I wish that for just one time you could stand inside my shoes
And just for that one moment I could be you
Yes, I wish that for just one time you could stand inside my shoes
You’d know what a drag it is to see you

With its unvarying a-b-a-b rhyme scheme and lack of chorus (Dylan called the song “extremely one-dimensional, which I like”63), “Positively 4th Street” is unrelenting, unmerciful, and unforgiving. It is this quasi-monotony that drives some listeners to distraction, and it is also what makes the diatribe so effective. It is a nice irony that Dylan, in striking back at the folk purists, is in fact challenging the rigid verse-chorus-middle eight conventions of pop music much more than the structures of traditional folk, which can easily accommodate such unvarying patterns. In fact, “Positively 4th Street” is practically Dylan’s only song from the Highway 61 sessions that could be considered amplified folk, that would work equally well with just an acoustic guitar. The electric backing seems, more than anything, just one more jab at those who wasted their time heatedly debating the relative demerits of so-called “folk-rock” (a term Dylan despised).

If the theme relays this song back to “Rolling Stone,” the music does even more so. The chord progression and Kooper’s organ strokes unmistakably echo their predecessor, while Dylan’s vocals build with the same triumphant glee. “Positively 4th Street” became his next single, released on September 7 (backed with “From a Buick 6”) and reaching no. 7 on the Billboard chart.

“I don’t write songs to critics,” Dylan later commented on the song. The hostility at Newport proved to be only a prelude, mirrored in the reactions of many of his Greenwich Village cronies (who felt personally targeted by “Positively 4th Street,” and with good reason), continuing in his concert at
Forest Hills on August 28 and in appearances throughout the fall, and exploding in his next British tour. But by combining what began as an angry response to audience incomprehension with a deeper, more personal fury at people’s presumptions of ownership, he showed that hostility was one of the most effective spurs to his performance. As he told Anthony Scaduto, in a different context but one that seems to carry a similar emotional charge, “I’m known to retaliate, you know. You should know I’m known to retaliate.”

4. Gypsy Davy with a Blowtorch

“Mama was in the kitchen, preparing to eat / Sis was in the pantry looking for some yeast / Pa was in the cellar mixing up the hops / And Brother’s at the window, he’s watching for the cops.” The song is “Taking It Easy” by Woody Guthrie, Dylan’s first great model and his “last idol.” Often cited as a basis for “Subterranean Homesick Blues” (“Johnny’s in the basement mixing up the medicine,” etc.), “Taking It Easy” more loudly echoes through “Tombstone Blues’s” famous refrain and in the distorted Depression-era dreamscape that springs up around it:

Mama’s in the factory, she ain’t got not shoes
Daddy’s in the alley, he’s lookin’ for food
I’m in the kitchen with the tombstone blues*

Many of the song’s references, from the tide nod at the Arizona badlands to its name-checking of the nineteenth-century Oklahoma bandit Belle Starr, carry the unmistakable scent of America’s hardscrabble past. “Tombstone Blues” is not about the Depression of the 1930s, the Wild West, or any specific historical period. But in its mood, tempo, and much of its imagery, it conjures up an atmosphere of American hardship, and of Guthrie the Dust Bowl troubadour.

“Woody turned me on romantically,” Dylan told Robert Shelton in 1966. “Woody used his own time, in a way nobody else did…. What drew me to him was that hearing his voice I could tell he was very lonesome, very alone, and very lost out in his time.” Nearly four decades later, he added: “He was so poetic and tough and rhythmic. There was so much intensity, and his voice was like a stiletto. He was like none of the other singers I ever heard…. Woody made each word count. He painted with words. That along with his stylized type singing, the way he phrased, the dusty cowpoke deadpan but amazingly serious and
melodic sense of delivery, was like a buzz-saw in my brain and I tried to emulate it any way I could.”

This was hardly news to anyone who encountered Dylan in his first years as a performer: the “Woody Guthrie jukebox” adopted not only his hero’s set list but his sound, dress, and manner as well. According to Bonnie Beecher, he even insisted for a time on being called “Woody.” “In Guthrie,” writes music historian David Hajdu, “Bob found more than a genre of music, a body of work, or a performance style: he found an image—the hard-travelin’ loner with a guitar and a way with words, the outsider the insiders envied, easy with women, and surely doomed. An amalgam of Bob’s previous heroes, the Guthrie he found in [Guthrie’s autobiography] Bound for Glory was Hank Williams, James Dean, and Buddy Holly—a literate folksinger with a rock and roll attitude.”

Guthrie provided the ideal vessel into which young Dylan poured his self-mythologizing, from his supposed orphanhood to his stint as a circus performer to his travels with various legendary bluesmen. So devoutly did he emulate folk’s elder statesman, both onstage and off, that he was floored to discover another performer, Ramblin’ Jack Elliott, had beaten him to it by several years: it was “like being a doctor who has spent all these years discovering penicillin and suddenly [finding out] someone else had already done it,” he said.

And so we can easily imagine his relief and hilarity at discovering that Ramblin’ Jack was actually Elliott Adnopoz, a Brooklyn doctor’s son, as much a product of the Jewish middle-class as Dylan himself. “As far as Bobby knew, Jack Elliott was absolutely gold coin goyisha cowboy,” recalled Dave Van Ronk. “In the course of the conversation it came out somehow that he was Elliott Adnopoz, a Jewish cat from Ocean Parkway, and Bobby fell off his chair. He rolled under the table, laughing like a madman…. He’d be laying under the table and just recovering from his fit and every once in a while somebody would stick his head under the table and yell Adnopoz!’ and that would start him off roaring again.”

By 1965, Dylan had to a large extent left Guthrie behind, the “last idol” having “taught me / face t’ face / that men are men / shatterin’ even himself / as an idol.” But “Tombstone Blues,” more than practically any other song on Highway 61, revisits the spirit and myth that informed Guthrie’s persona and Dylan’s early fascination with it. Dipping deeper into the wellspring that had earlier produced “Hard Rain” and “It’s Alright, Ma,” Dylan brushes a panorama of distinctly American violence and the venality of its institutions—“the gulf,” as one commentator put it, that “Guthrie saw between America’s ideals and its practices.”
From the start, the topography is established as native. In contrast to the underside of urban sophistication that “Rolling Stone” evokes, this is grassroots America, smalltown, Main Street America, the America of Dylan’s youth, which he once described as “still very ‘straight,’ ‘post-war’ and sort of into a gray-flannel suit thing, McCarthy, commies, puritanical, very claustrophobic.” From the “city fathers” voting “the reincarnation of Paul Revere’s horse” (clinging to long-dead national myths) to the Chamber of Commerce, from shoeless Mama in her non-union factory to the swaggering medicine man, from the National Bank selling road maps for the soul to “Gypsy Davy with a blowtorch” (a nod to a Guthrie standard), the reality sketched here comes straight out of American folklore, the flora and fauna of a thousand time-tested verses underlying thousands of attitudes Americans hold about themselves. (The song also makes reference to the English Jack the Ripper, the Italian Galileo, and the German Beethoven, but even these are absorbed into Dylan’s melting pot.)

One other specifically American reality that hovers behind the song, out of time with the imagery but synchronous with its composition, is the Vietnam War, visible in the verses about the “king of the Philistines” who sends his slaves “out into the jungle” (often read as a swipe at then-president Lyndon Johnson) and about the Commander-in-Chief condemning “all those who would whimper and cry” (a line I can never hear without flashing on Robert Duvall in *Apocalypse Now* rhapsodizing about the “victory” smell of napalm).

But to call it a song about Vietnam would be too limiting, as “Tombstone’s” mini-episodes limn a broad canvas of violence, of innocent flesh ripped from the bone, of jingoism for all seasons, of privilege abused—whether Jack the Ripper masking his atrocities behind his position on the Chamber of Commerce, the doctor who detours the hysterical bride away from her natural desires (unless, like his colleague in “Leopard-Skin Pill-Box Hat,” he is arrogating them for himself), or the National Bank defrauding both old folks and college kids with their bogus guidance. Dylan famously described writing the song in “this one bar I used to play where cops would always come and hang out, mostly off duty, they’d always be talking stuff, saying things like ‘I don’t know who killed him or why, but I’m sure glad he’s gone,’ that kind of stuff.” However fanciful the testimony, Dylan’s recollection captures the sense of corrupt and dangerous power that infuses “Tombstone Blues” (a theme brought into sharper focus in “Tom Thumb’s Blues” and “Desolation Row”). The topology might look different, but the territory hasn’t changed since the early protest songs: a distrust of authority, of the arbitrary exercise of power that invades people’s lives.

A mix of historical, fictional, mythical, and musical figures, the protagonists
of “Tombstone Blues” intermingle to form a world at once recognizable and wholly alien, an out-sized American landscape made up not only of our daily reality, but also of our myths, dreams, cultural archetypes, and barely formed nightmares—“history recast as phantasmagoria.” The landscape traversed is an unholy alliance of the scientific and the spiritual (Galileo throwing his math book at Delilah), the familiar and the uncanny (the city fathers and the ghost of Revere’s horse), the sacred and the abject (John the Baptist torturing a thief), the modern and the classical (Ma Rainey and Beethoven in their bedroll: the same marriage that Dylan was attempting in his music)—a veritable “cast of thousands,” directed by Cecil B. DeMille himself.

Whether traditional ballads or his own tales, the songs Dylan sings are often grounded in specific character and place names, real or imagined; names drawn from song and story, tabloid and history book. In Tarantula, their number is legion, a seemingly endless panorama that ranges from J. Edgar Hoover, James Cagney, Crow Jane, Mae West in a closet, Bat Masterson, and Edgar Allan Poe to Galileo “the regular guy,” Mickey Mantle, Cole Younger, Little Red Riding Hood, John Lee Hooker, Jackie Gleason, Yogi Bear, Elvis, Baby Huey, Lord Buckley, John Wayne, Cardinal Spellman, and the Black Ace. On Highway 61, their fellow denizens jostle in as best they can—names famous and obscure, insistent or overheard, filling out a landscape as vast as the disparities of all America.

This was among a spate of new works Dylan composed in the wake of “Rolling Stone,” between mid-June and late July, when he went back into the studio to record the rest of the album. The songs were written in a newly acquired home in Byrdcliffe, New York, a stone’s roll from Woodstock and from the Grossman home in Bearsville. “Do you know what I did when I got back from England, man?” he asked Shelton. “I bought me a thirty-one room house… can you imagine that?” The Arts and Crafts-style mansion, named Hi Lo Ha and purchased shortly after Dylan’s visit to John Lennon’s English manor, was the site of his new burst of rock ’n’ roll creativity. Dylan later commented that he felt he’d “broken through with [Tombstone Blues’], that nothing like it had been done before. Just a flash, really.” Because of this, however, his dream house soon turned into a “nightmare.” “I wrote Highway 61 Revisited there and I don’t believe in writing some total other thing in the same place twice,” he explained. “I just can’t stand the smell of birth. It just lingers, so I just lived there and tried to go on, but couldn’t.” By the following spring, Hi Lo Ha was back on the market.
“Tombstone Blues” was recorded on July 29, at the same lengthy session that produced “Positively 4th Street” and the remake of “It Takes a Lot to Laugh,” as well as an early version of “Desolation Row.” As the second cut on the album, following the majestic, swelling roll-out of “Rolling Stone,” it comes on like an out-of-control freight train, the fast, bass-heavy strum of Dylan’s acoustic guitar setting the pace like a bandleader’s baton before drums, piano, a fuzzed-up bass, Bloomfield’s electric, and Kooper’s organ come crashing in.

Unlike “Rolling Stone,” “Tombstone” seems to have undergone little revision. The known outtakes sound more or less like the official take (the last completed), and everything—false starts to final cut—was done in one day.* The incomplete Take 9 (the one on the No Direction Home sound track) is notable for the slightly countrified tone of the chorus, in which Dylan harmonizes with members of the band. Another circulated version features the gospel/soul group the Chambers Brothers—whom Dylan had probably heard at Newport, and whose hit “Time Has Come Today” was still three years off—overdubbed on the chorus. “I thought [the Chambers Brothers version] was great,” Kooper later said. “But I think the deciding criterion was that Mike Bloomfield was great on the take they used.”75

As Kooper recognized, the star of this show is Bloomfield, whose between-verse solos build from heated to blistering, jackrabbiting helter-skelter over the fret board, anticipating and pointing the way to Alvin Lee, Johnny Winter, and any other late-sixties guitarist who took blues riffs and fed them uppers. It is practically the only time on the album that he’ll get to shine like this. A photo of Bloomfield and Dylan at Newport catches them grinning at each other in amazed delight at the sounds they’re producing: two Jewish cats making the music come to life, reviving the blues, a faith more real to them than the religion of their fathers.

In “Tombstone,” Bloomfield uses his axe like a flamethrower, spewing liquid fire over the space between the vocals, he and Dylan marauding the tune like twin Gypsy Davies burning out the camps, leaving only scorched earth. Take him away and the song remains lyrically strong but musically weakened, its engine a few cylinders short. You can hear it in the version Dylan attempted on his MTV Unplugged concert. You can hear it in the one he and the Band played at Berkeley in December 1965, in which Robbie Robertson wisely avoids competing with his predecessor. Energetic as these versions are, they lack the heat of Bloomfield’s performance.

Although this first return to the studio came a full six weeks after the “Rolling Stone” sessions, the personnel remained essentially the same, with Bloomfield
and Kooper continuing to develop their distinctive duo, and Gregg and Griffin ably filling in the rhythm. One change involved session bassist Russ Savakus. Bloomfield noted that Savakus, a stand-up player, was intimidated about recording with an electric bass, which he was touching for practically the first time. According to one witness, Savakus “freaked out a bit during the ending” of “Tombstone”—you can hear his bass sliding frantically up the neck several times in the fade-out—and had to be replaced shortly afterward by a friend of Kooper’s, Harvey Goldstein (later known as Harvey Brooks).

But the most significant personnel change happened in the control booth, when Bob Johnston took over for Tom Wilson as Dylan’s producer. Dylan later affected ignorance of the reasons behind the switch: “All I know is that I was out recording one day,” he told Jann Wenner in 1969, “and Tom had always been there—I had no reason to think he wasn’t going to be there—and I looked up one day and Bob was there.” Wilson, for his part, made reference to a huge disagreement with Dylan at around the time of the “Rolling Stone” sessions, prompting Dylan to suggest sarcastically that they bring in “wall of sound” maestro Phil Spector. One hint of such a disagreement revolved around Al Kooper: during playback, Wilson tried to hold Kooper’s part to a minimum, arguing that “that cat’s not an organ player.” But Dylan snapped back at him to turn up the organ track: “Don’t tell me who’s an organ player and who’s not.”

History has come down on Dylan’s side: the guitar-organ-piano blend forged here became one of the most potent elements of his (and, in his wake, others’) sound at the time. As for Wilson, his gentlemanly gesture at letting Kooper sit in might have proved his undoing.

Dylan would always have complicated relationships with his producers: any authority, even one on his side, was suspect. Bob Johnston, who holds the record for the number of Dylan albums produced, claims that he and the singer never had a cross word; but even he would find himself replaced after 1970. Somewhere along the line, there always had to be a restless farewell. Still, while it lasted, there seemed to be a vast difference in tone between Dylan’s relations with the two men—between his and Wilson’s manic laughter at the beginning of “Bob Dylan’s 115th Dream” and the more settled, collegial question he puts to his producer on *Nashville Skyline*: “Is it rolling, Bob?”

A contemporary of Tom Wilson’s, and like him a native Texan, Donald “Bob” Johnston had a family musical pedigree and a brief career as a pop singer under his belt. “I grew up in a musical element and I was very sure of myself when it came to music,” he told an interviewer. After producing for small labels in Nashville, he was hired by Columbia in 1965 and assigned to waning country
singer Patti Page. His success with her established the new kid as someone to watch.

Johnston’s chance to work with Dylan came soon after his arrival at Columbia. Hearing that Wilson was on his way out, and hankering to produce an artist he considered a prophet of the age, Johnston went to see company president Bill Gallagher. “Gallagher said, ‘We don’t know who we’re going to pick, but don’t say anything to Tom Wilson.’ And I said, ‘Great, I promise.’ Then I left his office and went over and told Tom [that he was about to be fired]. He said, ‘I know, man, I know all of that.’ He said, ‘I’ll help you, don’t worry about a thing.’” Johnston lobbied strenuously, ultimately overcoming a rival bid from Terry Melcher, who had produced the Byrds’ covers of Dylan’s songs. “One morning I walked in the back of the studio on West 52nd Street and Dylan was sitting there on his haunches. And I went up to him and said, ‘Hi, I’m Bob Johnston.’ And he said, ‘Hi, I’m Bob, too.’ And he gave me the sweetest smile.” Beginning with *Highway 61*, the two men’s association would stretch over five years and six albums, including the revered *Blonde on Blonde*, the reviled *Self Portrait*, *John Wesley Harding*, and *Nashville Skyline*.

Apart from Dylan, Johnston went on to produce a number of landmark albums, both for Columbia and on his own, including Simon & Garfunkel’s *Sounds of Silence* and *Parsley, Sage, Rosemary and Thyme*, Leonard Cohen’s *Songs from a Room* and *Songs of Love and Hate*, Johnny Cash’s renowned concerts at Folsom and San Quentin prisons (against Columbia’s strict orders), and albums by the Byrds, Marty Robbins, and Willie Nelson, among many others. Now in his seventies, he has retained the engaging manner and mellifluous drawl that must have helped him negotiate some of the craggier corridors of “Black Rock,” CBS’s corporate headquarters on Sixth Avenue. There is a certain modesty in his presentation: to hear Johnston tell it, his main contribution was to provide a support for his artists’ self-explorations and to stay out of the way. “My gig was not to lose anything he came up with,” he says of Dylan, “and I didn’t.” But it’s the modesty of someone who wants you to understand there’s more to the story. “Staying out of the way” doesn’t preclude having set Dylan on his country road in the late sixties, or allowing for experiments such as “Sad-Eyed Lady” and “Rainy Day Women #12 & 35” that are now considered high-water marks. (Al Kooper, no fan of Johnston’s, nonetheless credits him with suggesting the signature Salvation Army band arrangement for “Rainy Day Women.”) In a moment of candor, Johnston was willing to admit, “I just told everybody, all I do is let the tapes roll. But that isn’t true.”
Unlike auteur-style producers like Phil Spector or Don Was, Johnston has always maintained that the artist is the sole valid judge of the work. “Dylan’s king, and I’ll not tell Dylan what I think of his material unless he asks me,” he once remarked, later adding: “If Dylan wanted to record under a palm tree in Hawaii with a ukulele, I’d be there with a tape machine”—a claim fairly borne out by such Johnston-produced oddities as “All the Tired Horses” and “If Dogs Run Free.” This deferent style has won him his share of admirers and detractors: Johnny Cash called Johnston “an artist’s dream,” while Kooper said his “only quality as a producer” was knowing “how to pat the artist on the back.”

Dylan, typically, remained ambivalent. “Bob was an interesting cat...short but with a personality that makes him seem bigger than he really is…. He had that thing that some people call ‘momentum.’ You could see it in his face and he shared that fire, that spirit,” he later wrote. But his recollections of the 1970 New Morning sessions, their last album together, suggest a dissatisfaction similar to what he was feeling toward Wilson in 1965: “He’s thinking that everything I’m recording is fantastic. He always does. He’s thinking that something is gonna strike pay dirt, that everything is totally together. On the contrary. Nothing was ever together.”

One of Johnston’s first actions with Dylan was to put his own stamp on “Like a Rolling Stone” before its final release. As he told Greil Marcus:

“The thing that I tried to do—the first time I walked in with Dylan...I said, ‘Your voice has got to come up.’ He said, ‘I don’t like my voice, my voice is too goddamn loud.’ And I’d say ok, and I’d turn it up a little bit, and he’d say”—and Johnston affects a clipped, effete voice —“‘My voice is too loud’ Finally he quit saying that. My guess is he didn’t want to fuck with me anymore, but that’s what I wanted.”

Credit where credit is due, however: when first copies of the record sleeve came in, with Wilson’s name absent, Johnston insisted it be reprinted and his predecessor restored next to his one contribution.

The curious thing about “Tombstone Blues,” for all intents and purposes the first song Dylan recorded with Johnston, is that it sounds more like a Wilson production than “Like a Rolling Stone.” While the latter boasts an integrated sound in which musicians, vocals, and overall atmosphere blend into a seamless whole, “Tombstone” seems more in the harsh, clattering vein of “Subterranean Homesick Blues” and “Maggie’s Farm.” In this one regard, it would be the last
of its kind: by the end of the June 29 session, a sound unlike any of Dylan’s previous records was being captured on Columbia’s tape decks, and there was no turning back.

5. When Your Train Gets Lost

If there is a recurring thread in Dylan’s music, it is its constant reinvention. Performances, lyrics, genres, tempos—any number of his songs have been subject to intense makeovers, often in public from one concert tour to the next, sometimes on vinyl, more often than not behind the scenes, hidden in the CBS vaults or following the whimsy of bootleg circulation. “Rolling Stone” found its beat when it shifted from 3/4 to 4/4 time. “Desolation Row” started out with electric accompaniment, before a last-minute remake gave it its definitive sound. The most radically redesigned song on Highway 61, however, is the enigmatically titled “It Takes a Lot to Laugh, It Takes a Train to Cry.”

Originally called “Phantom Engineer” (or “Phantom Engineer Number Cloudy” on the studio sheet), this was among the first songs on the album to be attempted at the June 15 session. It was one of three songs Dylan chose to play at Newport, and it was one of the first songs the reconvened musicians tried out on July 29, on their first day back in the studio. The outtakes in circulation show it to have been a close cousin of “Outlaw Blues,” with the same up-tempo Em-F#m-Gm-F#m blues progression (originally carried by Paul Griffin’s pealing organ) and snarling licks from Bloomfield. The overall atmosphere of the early state is jagged, reinforced by the surrealism noir of the lyrics:

Don’t the sun look good, baby, shinin’ down through the trees
Don’t the ghost child look good, mama, sittin’ on this madman’s knee…

Well, I went into the baggage car where the engineer’s been tossed
I stamped on forty compasses, sure don’t know what they cost
Well, I want to be your lover, baby, I don’t want to be your boss
I can’t help it if this train gets lost

Another thing the lyrics show, from the start, is Dylan’s ear for “floating” verses, or lines that travel from song to song as a kind of universal word bank or poacher’s field. Notably a staple of blues and country songs, “floaters” have no
recognized author and are rarely traceable back to their first occurrence, but are familiar to any devotee of the music: “My baby’s gone, she won’t be back no more”; “I woke up this morning, blues around my bed”; “I said please, phase don’t do me wrong”; “Sun’s gonna shine in my back door someday”; and so on. In “It Takes a Lot to Laugh,” the verses “Don’t the sun look good goin’ down over the sea / Don’t my gal look fine when she’s comin’ after me” are closely modeled on lyrics Dylan had sung before, notably in the traditional “Rocks and Gravel.”

Dylan has sometimes played fast and loose with composition, either passing off some early originals of his own as songs learned on the road or, more often, borrowing from traditional songs—to the point where in some cases (particularly on Self Portrait) his claims of authorship are hard to defend. He has also been known to help himself liberally to friends’ melodies, and at one point found himself in Dutch with his Greenwich Village peers for failing to credit his friend Paul Clayton with the melody to “Don’t Think Twice” (he later paid Clayton a settlement). “You have to understand that I’m not a melodist,” he said in 2004, voicing a process that, whether acknowledged or not, has been common currency in folk music for centuries. “My songs are either based on old Protestant hymns or Carter Family songs or variations of the blues form.” (He was nonetheless taken aback at a 1965 press conference when Allen Ginsberg, who was more aware than most of Dylan’s casual approach to intellectual property, puckishly asked if he was afraid of being hanged for a thief. “You weren’t supposed to say that,” Dylan giggled.) Critic Jon Pareles likened Dylan’s lyrics to “magpie’s nests, full of shiny fragments from parts unknown.”

As with Robert Johnson or Woody Guthrie, it is in large part Dylan’s particular way of blending, interpreting, and reinventing lines and melodies from the vast spectrum of American music that has made him one of that music’s true originals.

According to Tony Glover, it was during a lunch break, after yet another fast-paced take of “Phantom Engineer,” that Dylan “reworked the tune alone at the piano and came back with [the] sweeter, bluesy version which appeared on Highway 61 Revisited.” This is possible, given Dylan’s unparalleled abilities as a quick-change artist, and the studio sheets for the 29th do mention further takes that morning. But this might also be a moment to heed Al Kooper’s warning that a title listed on the studio sheets “doesn’t necessarily mean there was a recording session. It could also mean there was a mixing session, a mastering session, or even that acetates were cut. Misreading of session sheets has caused the most misinformation about Columbia recording artists, especially Dylan.”
words, it is also possible that the morning was spent simply trying to mix the June 15 takes, and that Dylan then dropped them to try out a slower, bluesier approach he had already devised in the days following Newport.

The final version, which, once arrived at, was captured fairly quickly, provides the album’s first moment of rolling calm, a needed breather between (in the definitive sequence) the high-energy workouts of “Tombstone” before it and “Buick 6” afterward. Where “Phantom Engineer” is charged, “It Takes a Lot to Laugh” is almost mellow, a loping saloon piano taking the lead in place of Bloomfield’s guitar, which now contents itself with some shuffling fills. Even the lyrics have softened, the eerie “ghost child” line changing to the naturalistic “Don’t the brakemen look good, mama, flagging down the ‘Double E,’” and the final verse from an aggressive tantrum to an almost bucolic lament:

The wintertime is coming, the windows are filled with frost
I went to tell everybody but I could not get across
Well, I wanna be your lover, baby, I don’t wanna be your boss
Don’t say I never warned you when your train gets lost

One of the most noticeable differences between the two versions is Dylan’s use of harmonica, harsh and sketchy in the early takes, but here fluid, melancholic, a key element of the song’s gentler atmosphere, as if we’ve abandoned the highway for a stretch and continued the journey onboard an easy-rolling steam engine. The harmonica has always been a hallmark of Dylan’s performance. Audiences at the Concert for Bangladesh, the Before the Flood tour, and down to his most recent shows have applauded its first appearance as if it were a surprise guest artist brought on for a featured number. The instrument has already been heard on *Highway 61*, but only as punctuation between the verses of “Rolling Stone.” On “It Takes a Lot to Laugh,” it steps out into the limelight, adding strokes of its own to the landscape rolling by, stretching like the plains or whipping like a sudden crosswind.

“It Takes a Lot to Laugh” is also the first song on *Highway 61* to take the measure of Bob Johnston’s influence. Anticipating the Nashville tone of *Blonde on Blonde*, he here injects an inaugural note of country into Dylan’s sound, replacing Wilson’s urbane jazz sophistication with a thicker, fuller, more down-home atmosphere, in which every instrument stands full forward. Crispness is replaced with depth, and perhaps nowhere more obviously than in the drum sound—an echoing, jingle-rich bass drum; a lazy, full-bodied slap, not fancy but
just right, that provides the album with one of its distinctive elements.

The drum, in fact, was one of the starting points in Johnston’s approach to recording:

I tell the engineer I want the best bass drum sound they can come up with. If it’s not as good as Pink Floyd or Stevie Wonder, don’t fuckin’ call me. And when they call me, the drum sounds better than anything…. I get the best possible sound that I could ever get on each instrument. Then I put them up even [in recording volume]…. Once they’re even, I let ’em play. I don’t want four engineers in there, “Bring the guitar up, turn the bass down,” you know? I just let them play, and when we get ready to mix, what will take six months for somebody else takes me three or four hours. Because I can’t get a better sound than I get on each instrument.85

Listening to the song today, in remastered stereo, one can appreciate the brightness and roundness of the album’s sound, the way Dylan’s voice, guitar, and harmonica emerge from the middle (joined late in the first verse by Bloomfield’s electric), while a jingly honky-tonk piano and bass add flourishes to the left and the drums and second piano pound rhythm on the right. This is more or less the same separation used throughout the album (though with certain instruments occasionally bleeding between channels, as if unable to stand still), and it is now the standard way of hearing it. In 1965, on the other hand, many listeners would have heard Highway 61 in mono, with all instruments pushed toward the center—the mix that most faithfully represents what the artist and producer heard in their heads. What’s remarkable is how much, even in the mono mix, the different parts still stand out, and how clearly Dylan’s vocal and guitar emerge, while managing to stay fully integrated in the ensemble.

As audiophiles have noted (and a comparative listen confirms), the mono Highway 61 also differs in length, with nearly every song on the album shorter than its stereo counterpart: the total difference is a full four minutes. With no song is this more the case than “It Takes a Lot to Laugh,” which in stereo continues for forty seconds past the mono fade-out. This time, however, less might have been more: the stereo mix’s additional instrumentals simply repeat the middle break, with Dylan reprising the same harmonica lines, seemingly out of things to play, and Bloomfield reduced at the end to sliding repetitively up the neck of his guitar. Overall, in fact, the mono mix of the album has a slightly punchier feel than the stereo, each song ending the moment it’s said its piece,
without leaving too long an exhaust trail.

Along with the harmonica, Dylan’s singing voice also softens on this song, changing from the rasp of *Bringing It All Back Home* and “Tombstone Blues” into a more expressive instrument—one that conveys spite at a lover’s fickleness (“don’t say I never warned you”), but also tenderness, sadness, and weary detachment. This time out, he replaces fire with simple warmth. To counter Dylan’s well-known tendency to wander from the microphone, Johnston placed “three or four or five mikes, so there would be a left, a right, and a center. That way, with Dylan left, right, and center, you can raise the backgrounds and the band several more decibels. You can walk anywhere in the room and hear it”—which might account for the less tinny vocal quality of this album vis-à-vis its predecessor.

“A prairie dog caught on a barbed-wire fence,” a “barbed yawp”: call it what you will, Dylan’s vocal style remains one of the most distinctive in popular music, the best suited not only to his own songs but to the whole, raw tradition out of which they grew. (Columbia’s advertising slogan, “Nobody sings Dylan like Dylan,” was more truthful than they knew.) Those seeking the dulcet tones of a Johnny Mathis, the crystalline purity of a Joan Baez, are missing the point: as with the blues and roots singers that are his true predecessors, Dylan’s voice conveys emotional nuances that have little to do with, and little to gain from, more standard excellence. His talent lies in finding and exploiting the rough contours that give the songs their bite, and that in his best moments can be devastating.

Part of this ability, almost paradoxically, comes from the nearly affectless quality of Dylan’s vocals, a quasi-deadpan that knows not to overplay emotion, but rather to let it insinuate itself through the lines—what one critic calls a “mixture of sangfroid and barely disguised panic.” Half sung, half spoken (or shouted), his delivery avoids the obvious emotional stretches (just listen to most covers of his songs to hear how much is lost by overplaying them), veering into a less expected inflection at the turn of a syllable. It is Dylan’s singing, as much as his lyrics, that reveals him as an heir to Clarence Ashley, Buell Kazee, and other denizens of the “old, weird America.”

Dylan has frequently waxed defensive about his voice. “I’m just as good a singer as Caruso. Have you heard me sing?” he taunted *Time* magazine’s Horace Judson. “I happen to be just as good as him. A good singer—*have to listen closely* [laughs], but I hit all those notes and I can hold my breath three times as long if I want to.” Perhaps he was responding to the incomprehension of his record label, which was still coming to grips with “Hammond’s folly.”
Bandleader Mitch Miller, one of Columbia’s head A&R men at the time, spoke for many of his colleagues when he commented, “I will admit I did not see the greatness of it…. He has no voice. He doesn’t produce a beautiful sound. I was used to finding guys like Bennett and Damone and Mathis. But when somebody like John Hammond is so confident of somebody’s talent, you have to respect that.”

We might joke about the delivery, the inflection that comes from Mars as much as from any Midwest, the characteristic drawl that makes Dylan, especially the mid-sixties Dylan, as recognizable and imitable as Gregory Peck, Ed Sullivan, or Bette Davis. But the real attraction of Dylan’s voice is that it exists on its own terms, neither pandering to audience expectations—as witnessed by his many changes of voice over the years—nor shutting itself away in impenetrable idiosyncrasy. Like few performers before him, it creates a space that remains entirely its own, that forces you to remember it, to notice it, that invites you in even while holding you at a safe distance.

6. This Graveyard Woman

If Highway 61 is the road we’re on, “From a Buick 6” is the vehicle we’re traveling in. “The white line in the middle of the highway unrolled and hugged our left front tire as if glued to our groove. Dean hunched his muscular neck, T-shirted in the winter night, and blasted the car along” (On the Road). Like Moriarty’s manic driving, this song is fast, and, at three minutes nineteen seconds (3:06 in mono), the shortest cut on the album.

A more robust pendant to “Outlaw Blues,” “Buick 6” is a surrealistic take on the road blues tradition. It kicks off with another Bobby Gregg drum crack (though not as portentous as the one on “Rolling Stone”), peeling out right from the starting line and never slowing down. Bloomfield’s understated lead dances along the side like chrome trim, only coming up to shine in the instrumental break (and in the Batman-like slide breaks during the fade-out). But—to push the metaphor—the real drive train of this car is the up-and-down bass figure, a slightly bouncier variation on a traditional boogie-woogie line that manages to keep the song rocking back and forth and rushing forward at the same time. “From a Buick 6” was recorded on July 30 (at a comparatively light session, given the previous day’s workout), when most sources agree that the bassist on duty was Harvey Goldstein. Or if this was still Russ Savakus, the least we can say is that he had learned a considerable amount since his “freak out” the day before.
The most straightforwardly blues-derived song on *Highway 61*, “Buick 6” takes its place in a line that stretches from “Down the Highway” on *Freewheelin’* through “Pledging My Time,” “One More Weekend,” “Meet Me in the Morning,” “Man of Peace,” and on to “Lonesome Day Blues” from 2001’s “Love and Theft.” Dylan has frequently displayed his indebtedness to the music of the past—“*Love and Theft*” is a virtual catalogue of traditional American styles—but few genres seem to be as deeply rooted in the nearly fifty-year span of his work as the rural blues, and nearly every album of his has contained at least one blues number. Here, and despite the standard twelve-bar structure, it is more than just a matter of form. When the singer remarks that his lover “walks like Bo Diddley,” this is no simple name-checking, but a flag of allegiance to one of his progenitors. (At the Hollywood Bowl in September, the line became “walks like Rimbaud.”)

“From a Buick 6” displays the blues tradition in another way as well. This is the closest we have on *Highway 61* to a love song, but, as with many blues tributes, its terms are as bitter as they are sweet: love in the blues idiom might be earthy and erotic, more often sorrowful, vengeful, even murderous, but almost never unambiguously joyful. *Freewheelin’* rang wistful for Bonnie Beecher on “Girl from the North Country” and lovingly chided Suze on “Don’t Think Twice.” *Bringing It All Back Home* slipped Sara in the back door with “Love Minus Zero,” and *Blonde on Blonde* brought her front-and-center with “Sad-Eyed Lady.” On *Highway 61*, it is as if Dylan were taking a vacation from concern about anyone and anything but his own consuming inner visions—except here. “Buick 6” shovels a rare glimpse of what love might look like on Desolation Row, and it makes the late-night tenement of “Visions of Johanna” and arid sexual politics of “She Belongs to Me” seem positively cozy by comparison.

I got this graveyard woman, you know she keeps my kid
But my soulful mama, you know she keeps me hid
She’s a junkyard angel and she always gives me bread
Well, if I go down dyin’, you know she’s bound to put a blanket on my bed

Beneath the macabre ornaments and gypsy caravan trappings, however, “From a Buick 6” sends a fairly simple message: his “soulful mama,” his “junkyard angel” takes care of him, as she can take care of herself (“She keeps this four-ten all loaded with lead”—a subtle cop from Robert Johnson’s “32-20
Blues”), and in this she stands apart from all the “graveyard women” around him. If he gets injured, his punk Florence Nightingale will fix him up again—or, should worst come to worst, lay a blanket over his body. Robbie Robertson’s Bessie, in “Up on Cripple Creek,” is a not-so-distant cousin, and just as much of an adolescent wet dream.

With all due reservations, we can spot numerous obscured traces in “From a Buick 6” of Dylan’s relationship with Sara Lownds, whom he had met late the previous year through Albert Grossman’s wife Sally. Born Shirley Noznisky in 1939, Sara was separated from fashion photographer Hans Lownds, by whom she had a young daughter, and lived at the Chelsea Hotel, where Dylan soon took a room of his own. Though both Sara’s marriage to Lownds and Dylan’s affair with Baez were already faltering by this point, their meeting seems to have hastened their respective break-ups.

Dark and attractive, a former model and Playboy hostess then working for Time-Life (where she met D. A. Pennebaker, and helped set afoot the *Dont Look Back* documentary), Sara was described as “a mystical kind of chick when Bob met her, into all sorts of Eastern religions.” Her serene nature and “quiet detachment,” and the fact that she “accepted him for what he was, without trying to groove on knowing the great Bob Dylan,” seem to have been major factors in Dylan’s attraction to her. “She is a very private person,” Dylan said of her, admiringly. “She doesn’t have to be on the scene, any scene, to be happy.”

According to Sally Grossman, it was for similar reasons that Dylan kept their relationship secret until well after their marriage in November 1965: “He didn’t like people prying into his family and the things that were really closest to him. If he was really serious about her, she had to be unknown…. He just had a taste of a very public relationship [with Baez], and that wasn’t working out very well, was it?” Secrecy and silence are the watchwords of this relationship, and friends who knew the couple have said that several lines in “Buick 6” —especially “she don’t make me nervous, she don’t talk too much”—accurately reflect Sara. As do the lines about her restorative nature. “Until Sara, I thought it was just a question of time until he died,” remarked Bernard Paturel, Dylan’s personal assistant at the time.

I’m all cracked up on the highway and on the water’s edge
Then she comes down the thruway ready to sew me up with thread

One year after singing this, almost to the day, Dylan flipped over the wheel of
his motorcycle and broke several vertebrae in his neck. Sara, coming down the road behind him, drove him to the doctor.

Given the familiarity of the motif and simplicity of the message, it is not surprising that “Buick 6” was cut in very little time: only two complete takes are known, one of which ended up on the standard release, while the other was included on the Japanese issue of Highway 61, where it remains to this day. In many respects identical to the official track, the alternate version nonetheless features a constant (and slightly annoying) beep-bop guitar figure from Bloomfield and somewhat less steady vocal from Dylan. In place of Gregg’s drumbeat, it opens with a few bars of solo harmonica reminiscent of “On the Road Again,” another song that, perhaps not coincidentally, tries to extract the singer’s love interest from her unwholesome surroundings.

As love songs go, “Buick 6” runs along the dark side of the road, in contrast to the sunnier fare generally available at the time. Its draft title, “Lunatic Princess,” gives an alternate coloration to the same basic tableau: this is hazardous territory, a landscape of wreckage, and even the love of a soulful mama has got barbs in it. “This graveyard woman” might be miles away from “This Magic Moment,” but it reflects much more accurately the tenor of love on Highway 61—and, quite likely, on Main Street as well.

7. Preoccupied with His Vengeance

“Like the wars of primitive tribes, who, according to hippie lore, fought their battles by hurling insults at one another instead of weapons, the Rock Revolution of the ’60s was fought and won with head games as much as with music,” wrote journalist-about-town and one-time Dylan intimate Al Aronowitz. “Call them whatever you like: brain rapes, mind fucks, mental sleight-of-hand, psychic aerobics, noodle-twisting, or the Dirty Dozens.” Largely derived from black culture, the practice (more recently labeled “dissing”) has gone through many incarnations but comes down to the same goal: to out-ridicule your opponent and either reduce him to silence or, better yet, make him lose his cool. Transpose this to the highly creative and competitive circle around a major star and you have what Aronowitz called “a psychic tug-of-war between two sides separated by a mud pit of paranoia.”

In Dylan’s crowd, the name of the game was “truth attack,” and exemplary traces of it are preserved in Dont Look Back. Shot in April and May 1965, D. A. Pennebaker’s documentary ostensibly records Dylan’s tour of Great Britain and, as it happens, his last gasp as an acoustic performer before the advent of “Like a
Rolling Stone.” Even more memorable than the concert footage, however, are the moments that show Dylan’s penchant for head games, both with the press and with his friends. Seconded by his road manager and amanuensis Bobby Neuwirth, in scene after scene Dylan needles would-be interviewers—and soon-to-be ex-lover Joan Baez—with a ferocity at once embarrassing and riveting. And he does it so winningly that, even when you know the target doesn’t deserve this kind of treatment, instinctively you’re laughing with him, on his side.

As a man with a hit record on the air and controversy swirling around his name, Dylan was now a reigning figure in the cafés of Greenwich Village. Many evenings during the summer and fall of 1965, as he held court with Neuwirth egging him on, the chosen activity was deciding who was “in” and who “out,” based on their ability to withstand verbal abuse. “If Dylan got drunk enough, he’d select a target from among the assembled singer/songwriters, and then pick that person apart like a cat toying with a wounded mouse,” Al Kooper recalled. “Making fun of a person’s lyrics, attire, or lack of humor was the gist of his verbal barrage. Dylan was so accomplished at this nasty little game, that if he desired, he could push his victim to the brink of fisticuffs.”

One of those singer/songwriters, David Blue (born David Cohen), took a more philosophical view: “He was really a nice guy. It was his life form at the time to make himself appear hostile…. It was just a banter, a rap…. If you could take it, then it was great.” For others in the circle, however, such as folksinger Phil Ochs, the rap had teeth, though Ochs ascribed much of it to Neuwirth: “He was Dylan’s right hand man and assassin. They were a team sitting at the table doing it. It was also very clever, witty, barbed, and very stimulating, too. But you really had to be on your toes. You’d walk into a threshing machine if you were just a regular guy, naïve and open, you’d be torn to pieces.”

Several witnesses have remarked on Neuwirth’s influence over Dylan, and in *Dont Look Back* one can see how the two play off each other—at least until the following year, when Neuwirth himself fell into the threshing machine of Dylan’s mercurial affections and was replaced by Robbie Robertson, “the only mathematical guitar genius I’ve ever run into who does not offend my intestinal nervousness with his rear-guard sound.” The portrait Dylan later painted of his former companion was nostalgic without being overly warm: “Like Kerouac had immortalized Neal Cassady in *On the Road*, somebody should have immortalized Neuwirth. He was that kind of character. He could talk to anybody until they felt like all their intelligence was gone. With his tongue, he ripped and slashed and could make anybody uneasy…. Neuwirth was a bulldog. He didn’t provoke me, though, not in any way.”
The public, generalized version of Dylan’s truth attacks found expression in “Positively 4th Street.” But there was another, less well known song written at the time that gives an even better idea of what it must have been like to sit at Dylan’s table. Recorded on the same day as “From a Buick 6,” “Can You Please Crawl Out Your Window?” was originally scheduled for inclusion on *Highway 61*, then dropped in the final sequencing. Both its title, taken from the chorus, and its original name (“The Continuing Saga of Baby Blue”) underscore that the “you” addressed in the lyrics is a woman. But the real subject of the song, and of the singer’s spite, is (for once) not the girl but her lover, an abusive and self-important little twit made all the more pathetic by the trappings of his success, as is she by her complicity:

He sits in your room, his tomb, with a fist full of tacks
Preoccupied with his vengeance
Cursing the dead that can’t answer him back
You know that he has no intentions
Of looking your way, unless it’s to say
That he needs you to test his inventions

Hey, crawl out your window
Use your arms and legs, it won’t ruin you
Come on, don’t say he will haunt you
You can go back to him any time you want to

As with “Rolling Stone’s” reference to the aristocrat, some have interpreted this song as a diatribe against Hans Lownds, who at around this time threatened his estranged wife with a legal battle over custody of their daughter and made no secret of his disdain for “Zimmerman.” Personally, and given the Village ambience it reflects, I’ve always heard “Crawl Out Your Window” as a comment on another of Dylan’s rivals at the time, Richard Fariña.

According to the legend he helped propagate, the Cuban-Irish Fariña spent his childhood roaming the world with his parents, had run guns for Castro in his youth, been expelled from Cornell University for leading a campus riot, joined the IRA (for whom he swam the Irish Sea strapped to a load of explosives), and
hunted and cavorted with Hemingway. The heritage was accurate, as was his matriculation at Cornell (where he befriended Thomas Pynchon), but the fabulous exploits existed only in the telling. In fact, Fariña had had a comfortable childhood in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn, and had spent only a few weeks in Cuba, as a child and sans Hemingway. Friends remembered him as an unrepentant fabulist but extremely charismatic, with the kind of charm and talent that never failed to dazzle newcomers.

By 1960, Fariña was a familiar Village figure, publishing poems, endlessly writing a novel that eventually became *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up to Me* (1966), and trying to work his way into the folk boom. He met folksinger Carolyn Hester and married her after an eighteen-day courtship, she because she’d fallen under his spell, he quite likely because of her rising fame. It was through Hester that Fariña managed to get his first exposure as a singer, accompanying his wife—to her not unalloyed pleasure—on vocals and the dulcimer, the only instrument he could (barely) play. And it was through Hester that Fariña met the slightly younger Dylan, another aspiring star with a tendency toward self-mythology and remarkable charisma, in 1961.

In January 1963, Fariña, Dylan, and their mutual friend Eric von Schmidt were in London, where the three cut a record together. By the end of that year, when Dylan was involved with Joan Baez, Fariña had divorced Hester and married Joan’s younger sister Mimi, with whom he soon began performing professionally. Before long, the couple was a fixture on the folk scene.

Initially, at least, Dylan seems to have been taken with Fariña’s resourcefulness and Dean Moriarty-like lust for life, while Fariña was clearly fascinated by Dylan, and in mid-1964 published a profile of him in *Mademoiselle* that nearly hyperventilates with admiration. Even from early on, however, there was a distinct element of rivalry between the two highly competitive men. “It was pretty obvious that there were two huge egos butting heads there,” commented von Schmidt. According to music historian David Hajdu, in his absorbing if occasionally suspect study of Dylan, Fariña, and the Baez sisters, the rivalry extended beyond the professional, in that Dylan had a crush on Mimi, and in fact had originally set his sights on her. Before that, by his own admission, he had envied Fariña his marriage to Carolyn Hester.

Fariña, for his part, clearly coveted the pop success Dylan had won for himself, though it always seemed to elude his grasp. Already in early performances he had gained notice, and controversy, for pounding at his dulcimer as if it were a Stratocaster. When he and Mimi recorded their first album, *Celebrations for a Grey Day*, in autumn 1964, they featured discreet
electric backing by Dylan’s session guitarist Bruce Langhorne and acoustic bass by Russ Savakus on two of the numbers (producing a skiffle-like sound reminiscent of Dylan’s “Mixed Up Confusion”). But whatever statement Fariña hoped to make with his relative innovation was drowned out by Dylan’s blaring *Bringing It All Back Home*, released at around the same time as *Celebrations* in spring 1965. Toward the end of that year, on their second album, *Reflections in a Crystal Wind*, Fariña upped the ante by putting Langhorne (and occasionally future hard-rock bassist Felix Pappalardi) on all but a few of the songs—managing at best to imitate *Bringing It All Back Home*, at a time when Dylan had already shot forward with *Highway 61*. And that summer, at Newport, the Fariñas had planned a joyous electric dance party (replete with Al Kooper on guitar) for the Sunday afternoon showcase—their debut on a national stage—only to have their plans washed out by a heavy downpour. When Fariña nonetheless managed, by sheer force of will, to rally the audience with a rousing acoustic set, turning it into the most memorable performance yet seen that weekend, his triumph was quashed a mere few hours later by Dylan’s infamous three-song blitz. Dylan’s comment on Fariña’s performance: “I hope he gets recognition till he puffs his face out.”

The snub is apposite. While Dylan has managed through much of his career to embody cool, Fariña was clearly anxious to please, to fit in, and you can indeed see it in his face. Performer Mitch Greenhill recalled that Dylan could “really be rude to people,” but that it was Fariña who made him uncomfortable: “Dick was like ‘Look at me—here I am. Dig me!’ Dylan was like, ‘Look all you want. You’ll never see me.’” You can also hear it in Fariña’s music, which today sounds pleasant enough (when it isn’t being irritatingly showoffy) but very dated, ill at ease with itself for all the bravado. While *Highway 61* even now gives the feeling of a Buick 6 speeding down the thruway, Fariña’s experiments with the new “folk-rock” sound suggest a man perched uncomfortably on a kiddy car.

Apart from the blatant competitiveness (and perhaps the sight of Mimi vocalizing with his rival onstage), one reason for Dylan’s sarcasm at Newport might have been a new Fariña composition, “Hard-Loving Loser,” which he debuted that afternoon. A sardonic portrait of an all-around incompetent good only at scoring with the ladies, the song seemed to be making constant jabs at Dylan, from its comparatively rock ’n’ roll rhythm to the staccato vocals (clearly derived from “Subterranean Homesick Blues”), and even including a possible reference to Dylan’s slight physical build and predilection for leather outerwear:
He’s the kinda guy puts on a motorcycle jacket and he weighs about a hundred and five, man
He’s the kinda surfer got a ho-daddy haircut and you wonder how he’ll ever survive…
But when the frost’s on the pumpkin and the little girls are jumpin’
He’s a hard-loving son of a gun…

“I don’t have any respect for [Fariña’s] writing,” Dylan said at around this time. “I used to dig him a lot more when he wasn’t so really uptight. He has nothing to say. He’s the best of all the bullshitters, that’s really where it is at with him.” As for Baez, who had recently announced plans to turn the other cheek and record a rock album of her own, to be produced by Fariña: “She hasn’t got that much in common with the street vagabonds who play insane instruments. She’s not that kind of person…. She’s talking about making a rock-and-roll record, and she thinks it’s so easy….—I resent that.” For Mimi, Fariña’s co-conspirator on “Hard-Loving Loser,” Dylan’s only comment was, “Mimi is a lamp—that’s all she is.”

While the similarly inspired “Positively 4th Street” seems to take aim at many potential targets and none in particular, the sharp personalization of “Crawl Out Your Window” seems to focus the drama much more tightly on the vainglorious Fariña and overly acquiescent Mimi. Couched though it may be in the guise of a seduction plea, the real prize here is the other man’s humiliation. Even the supposed come-on of the chorus seems aimed less at winning the girl away from her lover (“you can go back to him any time you want to”) than at borrowing her just long enough to screw him over. In Dylan’s acerbic summer 1965 trilogy of “Rolling Stone,” “4th Street,” and “Window,” this one seems the most preoccupied with its vengeance.

It is also the catchiest of the three. Recorded on July 30 after the hastily dispatched “From a Buick 6” and taking up the bulk of that day’s session, “Crawl Out Your Window” features the by-now familiar backing of Bloomfield, Kooper, Gregg, et al., and a lilting but steady-rocking drive. Like “Rolling Stone,” most of the circulated versions begin with a drumbeat (or several), and like “Rolling Stone,” they contain a joyfully explosive refrain and more than a whiff of “La Bamba”—further accentuated by the descending quintuplets in the verses (Kooper on celesta) and, on one version, a cha-cha-cha piano at the turnaround. The song’s main weakness is that it sounds too much like “Son of Rolling Stone” or “4th Street Revisited Again.”
It was no doubt partly for this reason that “Window” was finally omitted from *Highway 61*. Dylan returned to it in October, by which time he was working with the Band on the early *Blonde on Blonde* sessions. The official version, released as a single on November 30 and backed with “Highway 61 Revisited,” features a stop-time drum, some driving barrelhouse piano by Richard Manuel, and nails-on-the-chalkboard guitar solos by Robbie Robertson (as representative in its way of Dylan’s work with the Band as the first version is of his pioneering months with Kooper and Bloomfield). It fades out with Dylan referencing his earlier words of wisdom, in his best bad-Dylan-imitator-does-Dylan imitation: “You’ve got a lotta nerve to say you are my friend if you won’t come out your WINdow…” Meanwhile, the Kooper-Bloomfield version had accidentally seen the light of day when an engineer pressed a single of it in place of “Positively 4th Street” (an honest mistake, given the two songs’ similarity in sound).

Regardless of who, if anyone, was the intended target of “Crawl Out Your Window,” the song’s ultimate victim was Phil Ochs. Despite his regular drubbing at Dylan’s roundtable, Ochs remained one of Dylan’s most loyal supporters, and one of the first to champion this new sound. “I laughed and said it’s so ridiculous. It’s impossibly good, it just can’t be that good…. He’s done something that’s left the whole field ridiculously in back of him,” he’d written of *Highway 61* shortly after its release. But Ochs also felt, perhaps foolishly, that friends owed friends their candor. That fall, when Dylan proudly played the acetate of “Window” for his circle of intimates, Ochs opined that it wasn’t distinct enough from the earlier songs to be a hit. Dylan was furious. Shortly afterward a limousine arrived to take them all uptown, but after only a few blocks Dylan ordered the driver to pull over and said coldly, “Get out, Ochs. You’re not a folksinger. You’re just a journalist.” With a few brief exceptions, the two men never saw each other again.

In the event, Ochs was right: the single barely reached no. 58 on the charts, Dylan’s worst commercial performance since he’d gone electric. Ochs himself went on to make his mark with such songs as “I Ain’t Marching Anymore,” “Crucifixion,” and “There But for Fortune,” but never reached anywhere near Dylan’s level of fame or influence. By the early 1970s he had descended into alcoholism, and in 1976 his life ended in suicide.

“Using a blowtorch on the middle of the candle is less aesthetic than burning it at both ends, but more people see the flame,” Richard Fariña had written in his 1964 *Mademoiselle* profile of Dylan, adding: “Catch him now…. Next week he might be mangled on a motorcycle.” On April 30, 1966, Mimi’s twenty-first birthday and two days after the long-awaited publication of Richard’s novel,
Fariña went for a motorcycle joyride with a friend along the cliff roads of Carmel. Missing one hairpin turn, the cycle crashed into an embankment, spilling both riders. The friend suffered multiple lacerations, but Fariña was thrown headfirst into the jagged rocks below and killed almost instantly.

Dylan at the time was in Denmark on his world tour with the Band. Three months later, he would suffer his own fabled motorcycle crash, which effectively ended the rock visionary phase of his career and made worldwide news. But for once, Fariña had squarely outperformed his rival.

8. You Don’t Know What It Is

After a weekend break, Dylan and the band returned to the studio on August 2 for what would prove the longest of the Highway 61 sessions: four different songs, yielding final takes of “Highway 61 Revisited,” “Just Like Tom Thumb’s Blues,” “Queen Jane Approximately,” and “Ballad of a Thin Man,” most likely in that order.

Unlike the other songs on Side 1, “Ballad of a Thin Man” begins not with a sharp drum rap or guitar strum, but with somber piano chords in the minor key. Much of Dylan’s audience at the time was probably unaware that he had first performed on piano, banging out Little Richard imitations in high school and briefly backing teen idol Bobby Vee soon afterward. He’d accompanied himself on piano on only one previously released track, “Black Crow Blues” from Another Side. So on “Thin Man,” the piano comes as a bit of a shock—not only because it’s the first song on the album to begin this way but also because the funereal opening seems to stop all the built-up momentum of the four preceding numbers in its tracks.

“Ballad of a Thin Man” pursues the prosecutorial vein of “Rolling Stone” and “4th Street,” with Dylan now shifting from the role of sideline heckler to that of grand inquisitor, distant and implacable, his change in status signaled both by the increased hardness of his vocals and by the introductory chords that seem lifted straight out of Perry Mason:

You walk into the room with your pencil in your hand
You see somebody naked and you say, “Who is that man?”
You try so hard but you don’t understand
Just what you will say when you get home
Each verse leaves the hapless protagonist abandoned to his own useless devices, skewered at the end of every sentence (Dylan’s laugh on the phrase “you try so hard” only shoves it in deeper) and impaled on the repeated, inevitable terminal couplet:

Because something is happening but you don’t know what it is

Do you, Mister Jones?

In stanza after stanza, the once self-impressed Mr. Jones is repelled ever more frantically around an alternate reality that he can neither escape nor fathom, confronted with a parade of characters out of some mad carnival (“the geek,” “the sword swallower,” the “one-eyed midget”), each one demonstrating how utterly out of place he is in this Gehenna of his own making (“And you say, ‘Oh my God am I here all alone?’”). “Mr. Jones’s loneliness can easily be covered up to the point where he can’t recognize that he is alone,” Dylan later tried to explain. “Mr. Jones is suddenly locked in a room…. God knows, we all do that! It’s not so incredibly absurd and it’s not so imaginative to have Mr. Jones in a room with three walls and a midget and a geek and a naked man. Plus a voice…a voice coming in his dream”100—or, more to the point, a taunt in his nightmare.

While Dylan’s other songs of this period might take aim at limited imagination or capitulation to the safe life, this one goes after knowledge itself, at least the useless and pointless kind acquired by anything other than lived experience:

You have many contacts among the lumberjacks
To get you facts when someone attacks your imagination...
You’ve been with the professors and they’ve all liked your looks
With great lawyers you have discussed lepers and crooks
You’ve been through all of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s books
You’re very well read it’s well known...

As in “The Times They Are A-Changin’,” the crime being prosecuted is not so much Mr. Jones’s lack of hip as his unwillingness to recognize change, his willful blindness:
You walk into the room like a camel and then you frown
You put your eyes in your pocket and your nose on the ground
There oughta be a law against you comin’ around
You should be made to wear earphones...

Mr. Jones has inspired more speculation about his true identity than practically any other Dylan subject. Dylan himself was typically cryptic: “It’s just about a fella that came into a truck stop once,” he told one reporter, and to another that same year: “He’s actually a person. Like I saw him come into the room one night and he looked like a camel. He proceeded to put his eyes in his pocket.” Other, less fanciful, candidates have included Pete Seeger, Tom Wilson, the all-purpose Joan Baez, Rolling Stone Brian Jones (whom Dylan most likely did tweak as the “dancing child with his Chinese suit” in “I Want You”), and writer LeRoi Jones (though lord knows why). He might have been inspired by Terry Ellis, the befuddled “science student” whom Dylan badgers ruthlessly in Don’t Look Back, or by the patently unpleasant Time reporter Horace Judson, to whom Dylan acts the brat in the same film.

One of the more persistent contenders is journalist Jeffrey Jones, later of the Village Voice, who as a student reporter, with his pencil in his hand, clumsily interviewed Dylan at Newport about the use of the harmonica in contemporary folk music. That evening, Dylan with entourage spied Jones across the hotel dining room and called out above the din: “Mr. Jones! Gettin’ it all down, Mr. Jones?” “When I heard Hallad of a Thin Man’ I knew right then who Mr. Jones was,” the putative namesake recalled in Rolling Stone ten years later. “I was thrilled—in the tinted way I suppose felon is thrilled to see his name in the newspaper.” Such was Dylan’s stature that it was an honor just to be insulted by the man.

But as with “Rolling Stone” and any other such lyric, trying to assign a specific individual to the character is ultimately a fool’s game, and it is just as valid to say that Mr. Jones is all of us—as Oliver Trager calls him, a “composite irritant.” By presenting an endlessly changing array of threatening figures with Mr. Jones as the only constant, Dylan forces us to enter his viewpoint, to absorb his claustrophobia and disorientation. On the one hand, as listeners we are (in Greil Marcus’s phrase) “set up to imagine him as whoever [we’re] not.” On the other, as Tim Riley notes, in this song Dylan is quite likely “talking about the arrogant stranger in all of us, who needs a dressing down every so often.”

Given that Dylan’s audience tends to be generally literate and fairly well heeled,
Miss Lonely’s peers if not her kin, it is not such a leap to imagine ourselves suddenly standing in Mr. Jones’s dung-smeared loafers.

As Dylan said in response to the umpteenth interview query about the man, “He’s a real person. You know him, but not by that name.” We do know Mr. Jones; we see him every day, in the 2000s just as much as in the 1960s. He’s the “gray flannel dwarf” who screams in “Gates of Eden.” He’s John Lennon’s “suicidal” alter ego in “Yer Blues.” He’s the Walt Cleaver, Father-Knows-Best, very claustrophobic gent who catches the train every morning—“Mr. C. W. Jones on the subway going to work,” Dylan had said to Horace Judson some three months before. He is lacking in substance, thin-blooded and thin-skinned, but still imagining he knows what’s happening; the man Dylan’s listeners swore to themselves they’d never become, and with whom most eventually grew all too familiar. (All that said, the choice of the name “Jones” might have been merely a matter of practicality, one that carries appropriate connotations of ordinariness while affording far more opportunity for rhyme than, say, “Smith.”)

Among the odder interpretations of “Thin Man”—but one that seems to have currency with some critics—is that the song describes a homosexual encounter, in which “somebody naked” becomes an object of desire rather than discomfiture and a pencil is not just a pencil. A debate topic for the old folks’ home or the college, perhaps. As the man said, “If you’re lookin’ to get silly...”

The songs on Highway 61 split roughly into two types: those addressed to someone (“Rolling Stone,” “Lot to Laugh,” “Buick 6,” “Queen Jane”), and those, like “Tombstone Blues,” “Highway 61,” “Tom Thumb,” and “Desolation Row,” that flash by like glimpses through a car’s window as it speeds across this frantic carnival of a nation. “Thin Man” is a kind of hinge between the two: the verve with which it lacerates its subject links it to the “truth attack” songs, but the overall atmosphere and population of grotesques puts it in the latter camp. The sound of it is hallucinatory and chilling, a raunchy slow blues that crawls under the listener’s skin and erupts like boils. The atmosphere is smoky, shut in; it is impossible to imagine this scene as being at any time but the dead of night. Kooper’s organ weaves eerie coils (which under Garth Hudson’s hands the following year become positively demonic), adding to the sense of paranoia and enclosure. Once we have walked into this room, it is not certain we will ever find our way out. This is also practically the only song of Dylan’s that, although frequently performed live, has never significantly changed: even the music is trapped in one place.

The rhyme scheme contributes its own touch of inescapability, an exemplary
instance of a Dylan trademark: verses built around a single, repetitive rhyme, ending with a couplet based on a single tag line (in this case, a-a-a-b-b, the first “b” always rhyming with “Jones”: alone, bone, known...). Dylan had already used this kind of rhyme structure in “My Back Pages” and “Maggie’s Farm” and to pound home the message of “Only a Pawn in Their Game.” It constitutes a kind of bravura performance, in which the songwriter is forced to come up with as many rhymes for the tag line as there are verses. It can also (as with the seven-line variation on “-ode” at the end of “Visions of Johanna”) be a device of breathtaking effect. In “Ballad of a Thin Man,” it creates a feeling of inevitability, a knowledge that no matter where the verse begins, it will always end at the same preordained place.

Every great song has one moment that stands out above the rest, sometimes just a bar or two, even a note or two, but something the ear strains to catch at every listening. In “Thin Man,” this moment comes toward the end of the last verse, from the electric piano figure after “there ought to be a law against you comin’ around” to Bloomfield’s answering lick following “earphones”—one of the few times on the album when he gets to use his South Chicago chops, playing the “B.B. King shit” at last. A few seconds later the song fades out, with a moan from Dylan and one last, wailing figure from Bloomfield, taking Side 1 with it.

And after the tape stops rolling, drummer Gregg: “That is a nasty song, Bob.” Dylan laughs.105
Side Two

9. Somebody You Don’t Have to Speak To

After the aural assault of “Thin Man,” Side 2 opens with the comparatively benign “Queen Jane Approximately”—recorded immediately before “Thin Man,” and showing that the band, professionals all, were adept at changing registers from one moment to the next. For the listener, the song is a chance to catch one’s breath, a rest stop along the way, relatively lighthearted and lightweight. Even the music sounds friendlier, kicking off with a bouncy piano riff (all instruments starting together, for once) that wouldn’t be out of place in a hotel lobby or wedding reception.

Though in roughly the same vein as “Rolling Stone,” “Queen Jane” takes a gentler line with its heroine, offering a touch of sympathy and even comfort in place of relentless mockery:

When your mother sends back all your invitations
And your father to your sister he explains
That you’re tired of yourself and all of your creations
Won’t you come see me, Queen Jane?
Won’t you come see me, Queen Jane?

As the tableau unfolds, Queen Jane is revealed to be the helpless ruler of a kingdom in disarray. Her “flower ladies” want their wares back, her children resent her, her advisers throw up their hands in defeat, even the bandits that she “turned [her] other cheek to / All lay down their bandanas and complain.” Queen Jane is Mr. Jones’s female counterpart, another stranger in a strange land she thought her own, but spared his drastic fate because of her humility—or simply because of her gender. And unlike the exhortation of “Crawl Out Your Window,” this invitation seems genuine, a promise of comfort rather than the emotional wringer, with perhaps just a mild smirk of I-told-you-so.

However cautious we should be in matching song characters with real-life figures, it is hard not to see shades of Joan, Queen of Folk—Jane, approximately—behind this portrait. (Dylan’s typically arch comment to the inevitable question: “Queen Jane is a man.”106)
It is common knowledge that Baez gave Dylan’s early career a large boost, both by championing his songs and by inviting the then-unknown singer to share her spotlight. But it was also no secret that what most people admired about Baez—her clear voice and earnest commitment—were precisely what Dylan appreciated least in her. The tribute he penned for the liner notes of *Joan Baez in Concert, Part 2* in fall 1963 is a masterpiece of ambiguity:

A girl I met on common ground
Who like me strummed lonesome tunes
With a “lovely voice” so I first heard...
“I hate that kind of sound” said I
“The only beauty’s ugly, man
The crackin shakin breakin sounds’re
The only beauty I understand”

(Less ambiguous is the clip in *Dont Look Back* of Dylan and Neuwirth holding their ears in mock pain, as Baez half-jok-ingly, half-desperately hits exaggerated falsettos.)

To believe folksinger Fred Neil, the entire relationship was one of opportunity, largely instigated by Richard Fariña in the early days of the two men’s friendship: “She’s your ticket, man. All you need to do, man, is start screwing Joan Baez,” Fariña reportedly urged, to which Dylan responded: “That’s a good idea—I think I’ll do that. But I don’t want her singing none of my songs.” In reality, Dylan seems to have been as smitten with Baez, at least at first, as he was with her show-biz success. After their breakup, he had no hesitation dismissing her with a mix of brutality and compassion reminiscent of his lyrics: “I feel bad for her because she has nobody that’s going to be straight with her.... She’s very fragile and very sick.”

By the summer of 1965, the Dylan-Baez couple was legendary in folk circles and, for a number of fans not up with the times, still ongoing. As recently as March, her photo had figured on the back cover of *Bringing It All Back Home* (an album she considered “sloppy and too negative,” while *Highway 61* was “a bunch of crap”\footnote{\url{https://www.rollingstone.com/magazine/gallery/6531297}}, and she had accompanied Dylan to England for his spring tour, albeit to her undying regret.

For the two of them, however, the philosophical parting of the ways had
already become apparent during their last series of shared concerts early that year, when Dylan proposed playing Madison Square Garden over the more intimate venues Baez fancied. “I froze up and said to him: ‘Bobby, you’d be doing it as rock ’n’ roll king, but I’d be doing it as peace queen,’” she recalled. What was becoming clear was that Dylan wanted no part of the heart-on-the-sleeve empathy that would define so much of Baez’s career and music.

Their emotional parting was not so clear-cut, as Dylan, who had begun courting Sara in late 1964, nonetheless maintained at least a semblance of a relationship with Baez well into 1965. Unaware of her new rival, Baez endured Dylan’s abusive behavior throughout the British tour, finally fleeing at the beginning of May. “I can’t stand to be around him,” she wrote to Mimi:

Everyone traveling with him is going mad—He walks around in new clothes with a cane—Has tantrums, orders fish, gets drunk, plays his record.... He doesn’t speak to me, or anyone, really, unless it’s “business,” how many records he’s selling, will his record be #1, etc. It’s shocked me completely out of my senses and I’m fed up. Pride enters, too—it would be so great to have him invite me onstage the way I did with him in the states, and I realize that I can’t take being completely ignored all the time...

When later that month Baez returned to visit Dylan in a London hospital, where he was recovering from a bout of food poisoning, she was met at the door by an unknown dark-haired woman. “And that’s how I found out that there was a Sara.”

Eventually the two women would become friendly, and Dylan would replay the hospital primal scene with embarrassing transparency in his celluloid tantrum Renaldo & Clara, filmed while the two ex-lovers were reuniting onstage for Rolling Thunder and Dylan and his wife were soon to be divorced. Baez herself replayed portions of their past relationship, those parts of it she cared to remember, down through the 1970s, in songs like “To Bobby” (“Do you hear the voices in the night, Bobby / They’re crying for you”) and “Diamonds and Rust.” “Queen Jane,” while not nearly so direct (or lachrymose) as Baez’s calls in the night, pursues a similar debate about society and responsibility. It seems to push the point, in a tone somewhere between condescension and compassion—at any rate, more compassion than he showed in England that spring, or in the press
that fall—that all the queen’s naive altruism will earn nothing from her needy subjects but their contempt. And when that happens, he and his soft shoulder will be waiting. Maybe.

“My songs are just me talking to myself,” Dylan had told a British journalist in April. Against the onslaught of words—his own, those around him, those he perhaps imagined assailing Saint Joan—silence truly is golden. In “Queen Jane,” perhaps the greatest comfort he can offer is that he’ll be “somebody you don’t have to speak to,” putting himself on a par with the idealized women of his songs, the lover who “speaks like silence,” who “don’t talk too much.”

Musically, too, “Queen Jane Approximately” stays low-key, its most distinguishing characteristic being the Spanish-inflected bass figure and plain-Jane guitar strum at each turnaround. Though some have criticized Bloomfield for being out of tune (and his playing here does flirt dangerously with its own scale), that simple, rolling strum is the part that sticks in the mind after the song has gone its unassuming way.

There have been several conjectures about the meaning of the title. One school of thought relates the song to the sixteenth-century Child ballad “The Death of Queen Jane,” which recounts the nine-day mini-reign of Henry VIII’s wife Jane Seymour—Queen Jane momentarily. The charitable supposition would be that Dylan was unfamiliar with the ballad and meant no association, but since Baez had recorded it in 1964, during the height of their relationship, this is unlikely. Which means that not only was Dylan aware of Baez’s connection to the song, but he also knew his ex-lover would get the reference. And get the point, which time will most likely bear out: that in the years to come, Queen Joan will be remembered primarily, if at all, for her association with the man she once nicknamed the Dada King.

10. Kill Me a Son

Toward the end of the London press conference that opens Don’t Look Back, journalist Maureen Cleave leans in conspiratorially to ask, “Do you ever read the Bible?” Dylan, after some smirking and evasion, replies, “I’ve glanced through it. I haven’t read it.” But as even a casual listen to his lyrics reveals, Dylan had more than a passing knowledge of the Good Book, and references both direct and oblique show up in songs from “Hard Rain” to “The Times They Are A-Changin’” to “Gates of Eden.” In the late sixties, visitors to his Woodstock house would find a large Bible open on a lectern in the hallway. Less known at the time was that the thirteen-year-old Bobby Zimmerman had
received religious instruction back in Hibbing from an elderly Orthodox rabbi (a mysterious figure, in Dylan’s telling, who one day appeared from the East Coast, then vanished again shortly after his pupil’s Bar Mitzvah), and some Bible training at home.

It doesn’t take much catechism to spot Dylan’s reference in the first line of “Highway 61 Revisited,” when God tells Abraham to sacrifice his son:

And God said,
Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac,
whom thou lovest,
and get thee into the land of Moriah;
and offer him there for a burnt-offering...
And Abraham stretched forth his hand,
and took the knife to slay his son... (Genesis 22:2-10)

—the difference being that in the original, Abraham is all too willing to comply (a highly touted sign of faith that in the current day would get the old man committed), whereas in Dylan’s rewrite he answers with a double-take of smartass street jive:

Oh, God said to Abraham, “Kill me a son”
Abe said, “Man, you must be puttin’ me on”
God say, “No.” Abe say, “What?”
God say, “You can do what you want Abe, but
Next time you see me comin’ you better run”
Abe says, “Where do you want this killin’ done?”
God says, “Out on Highway 61”

Dylan was hardly the first to translate Old Testament theology into the contemporary vernacular. Just within his immediate circle of influence, his antecedents have notably been traced to the scatological comic Lenny Bruce and the hipster raconteur Lord Buckley—one of whose albums can be glimpsed on the cover of Bringing It All Back Home, and whose routine “Black Cross” Dylan
had performed in 1962. Buckley, the “hipster bebop preacher...a raging storyteller who did riffs on all kinds of things from supermarkets to bombs and the crucifixion,”\textsuperscript{113} shows through especially clearly in these lines.

But “Highway 61” is more than just the King Bob Version, for as with so many of Dylan’s songs at the time, cultural references crowd in from a variety of sources: in this case, Georgia Sam (a probable pseudonym of the bluesman Blind Willie McTell), the folk-blues stock characters Poor Howard (“dead and gone,” according to Leadbelly) and the Seventh Son, the Shakespearean “fifth daughter on the twelfth night,” the historical Louie the King, and the unscrupulous promoter (too much a part of Dylan’s daily life to require explanation). Dylan also pointed to Robert Johnson’s influence in writing the song.

The notion of antecedents is crucial, as it frames the central drama being played out here: the conflict between a son and his real or symbolic fathers, in a perpetual imbalance of power usually involving some piece of shady business. Many have noted the fact that “Abraham” calls forth not only the biblical patriarch but also Abram Zimmerman, the father with whom Dylan was barely on speaking terms at this stage in his life. “Mr. Zimmerman was a traditional kind of middle class American father; he believed in the American Dream,” wrote Anthony Scaduto. “Like most fathers whose teenage sons developed more than a listening interest in the new rock-and-roll sounds and began to play the music themselves, Mr. Zimmerman didn’t approve. Apparently he felt it was all just a phase and Bob was wasting time he should have been devoting to an education and a career.”\textsuperscript{114}

Having once lost his livelihood and been forced to go into business with his brothers, Abe Zimmerman was perhaps more anxious than most that his son be financially secure and eventually take over the family appliance store—a prospect that predictably filled the young Dylan with horror. A short, stocky man who wore glasses, smoked cigars, and was “usually described as witty, quiet, [and] gently unassuming,” Zimmerman père had simple goals: to support his family, fit into the best of Hibbing society (he belonged to the Hibbing Rotary and the local B’Nai B’Rith lodge), and see to it that his offspring did the same. Robert Shelton quotes him as mouthing a father’s time-honored litany to his feckless teenager: “We’ve given you a good home. We buy you the best of everything. What more do you want? I never had it so soft when I was your age.”\textsuperscript{115} But in retrospect, his outbursts against Dylan’s infatuation with Little Richard and James Dean seem mainly an expression of apprehension over the boy’s prospects. Later, when Dylan had achieved fame and fortune on his own terms, Abe proudly hung his pictures around the family store and displayed his
albums in the window.

For Dylan, however, things were not so simple, and his relations with his father were marked by ambivalence from early on. A Father’s Day poem written when he was ten goes, in part:

Though it’s hard for him to believe
That I try each day to please him in every little way,
When sometimes he gets real mad at me
I think it best to keep quiet
So that he doesn’t get more angry...
I’m very lucky to have a Dad this good...
You just can’t beat him at any cost.
And without my dad, I’d be very lost.116

By a few years later, Abe had lost his unbeatable status, and it seemed to most who knew the teenage Dylan that he didn’t much care for his dad. As late as October 1963, and even while secretly flying his parents to New York for his Carnegie Hall concert, Dylan was still killing him a father by publicly maintaining that he was an orphan.117 Shades of the deliberate, cigar-smoking Abe can be seen in various characterizations, from Maggie’s pa (“he puts his cigar out in your face just for kicks”) to the forlorn C. W. Jones on his way to work. The irony is that while Abram Z. (in Dylan’s estimation) would be just the type to murder his son at the boss’s command, in “Highway 61” it’s his stand-in who gives the Big Guy some lip.

And as with many rebellious sons, a time came when the prodigal revisited his own feelings. When Abe Zimmerman died in 1968, Dylan keenly regretted the longstanding chill between them, realizing at the funeral that “my father was the best man in the world and probably worth a hundred of me.” In the acceptance speech for his Lifetime Achievement Grammy in 1991, he paid this ambiguous tribute: “My daddy once said to me, he said, ‘Son, it is possible for you to become so defiled in this world that your own Mother and Father will abandon you. If that happens, God will believe in your own ability to mend your own ways.’”118

Just as biblical allusions in the first verse open onto a host of others, so the Oedipal drama between Abraham/Abram and Isaac/Bob masks several
analogous relations between young Dylan and the other father figures in his life. The line “Man, you must be putting me on” might sound strange in Mr. Zimmerman’s mouth, but it is a dead ringer for the kind of jive one got from Tom Wilson—a man who, as numerous studio tapes suggest, spent much of his time trying to coax his charge into acting “responsibly” (just like Tom Wilson’s blues). The promoter who “nearly fell off the floor,” meanwhile, inevitably calls to mind the most present of Dylan’s surrogate dads, Albert Grossman.

The stories about Dylan’s own Colonel Tom Parker are too numerous and contradictory to be sorted out here. According to some he was a consummate crook, to others brutally honest (although the details of his business arrangements with Dylan would suggest otherwise). Some claim Grossman moved Dylan to Woodstock to get him away from drugs, others insist he fed his client narcotics to keep him dependent. Among the few things most people agree on are that Dylan’s early career benefited enormously from Grossman’s savvy, and that the promoter could be a fearsome opponent. “Next to Albert, Dylan was an amateur at cutting people down,” remarked Peter Yarrow, another Grossman client. “Bobby was imitating everyone at one stage, and he naturally began to imitate and learn a lot of Albert’s tricks.” A sample of Grossman’s business tactics has been preserved in a scene from *Dont Look Back*, which shows him manipulating his British homologue Tito Burns into doubling Dylan’s performance fee—a scenario fit for the promoter who helps stage World War III by setting bleachers out along Highway 61.

Grossman’s nicknames included “Floating Buddha,” “Cumulus Nimbus,” or simply “The Bear” because of his imposing physical presence, flowing gray locks, and flagrantly noncommittal manner. Among the Village folkies he was an object of envy—he could win his clients far better contracts than the other managers—or of scorn for commercializing the lily-pure world of folk (the symbolism of his fistfight with Alan Lomax at Newport was lost on no one). He also helped change the face of the popular music business by obtaining an unheard-of level of control for the artist. And in being the first of his milieu to make a home in Woodstock, then inducing his star client to do the same, he helped turn a quiet corner of New York State into the rock Mecca it would become by decade’s end. As Robbie Robertson quipped, “If it hadn’t been for Albert, we’d probably be known as the Poughkeepsie Generation.”

For several years, Grossman’s and Dylan’s relations blurred the line between agent-client and father-son, with the manager hovering protectively nearby, seemingly at every turn, and the performer making free use of his elder’s belongings (including the Woodstock house and Gramercy Park apartment) as if
they were a birthright. But eventually, and inevitably, these relations cooled, and when Grossman’s contract expired in August 1969 (ironically, the same weekend as the Woodstock festival), Dylan opted not to renew. This would have been no surprise to those who had listened carefully to “Dear Landlord” the previous year, a song that, despite Dylan’s many denials, seems clearly inspired by his waning affections for Grossman. A tangle of publishing interests, clauses, and subclauses kept the two men in protracted negotiations and countersuits throughout the next two decades, finally ending with a settlement payment by Dylan of two million dollars in 1987. Grossman never saw the money: he died of a heart attack the previous year, at age fifty-nine, while on a flight to London.

As Highway 61 Revisited sketches a panoramic sweep of Dylan’s musical, emotional, and psychological landscape at the time, so “Highway 61 Revisited” offers a bird’s-eye view of Nightmare USA ca. 1965. Like “Talking World War III Blues” and “Bob Dylan’s 115th Dream,” it throws the American Dream out into the street, a hunk of festering road kill. In place of a benevolent state succoring the huddled masses, we have a Welfare Department that won’t dispense any welfare. Instead of flags and bunting, we have the unwanted surplus of “red white and blue shoestrings.” For national growth, substitute unhindered profiteering, and for faith and compassion, threats and intimidation. This is the album’s title piece, the heart of this road trip through Dylan’s America, and all we can glimpse through the windows are corruption, venality, and violence, the mere sight of which is enough to breed more violence.

But despite the underlying bleakness, “Highway 61” is also the album’s funniest song, featuring cruelly comical vignettes and some of its most cleverly interconnected turns of phrase. The mood is established from the start, as Kooper’s lightly, fantastically tripping electric piano and a zany police whistle (played by Dylan) introduce a fast blues shuffle. Like “Buick 6,” the album’s other up-tempo blues, the song is quick (3:30) and energetic, pushed along by Bloomfield’s slashing bottleneck guitar.

An earlier take, similar to the final cut but less pumped-up, features slightly more complex and interesting slide work, as well as a few giggles from Dylan at the black absurdity of his lyrics. What it doesn’t feature is the signature police whistle, which Al Kooper habitually wore around his neck “to shed some humorous paranoia into the various clandestine drug gatherings I might find myself attending.” After a few run-throughs, Kooper recalled, he walked over to Dylan “and suggested he forgo the harmonica and put the police siren in his harp holder. ‘A little variety for your album—suits the lyric better as well,’ I suggested. Suggestion taken, recorded, and archived forever.”

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“Highway 61” has since become a staple of Dylan’s stage shows, outstripping every other song in number of live performances except “Rolling Stone” and “All Along the Watchtower.” Through the many years and changes in touring band, it has undergone comparatively little revision—except once. As Paul Williams noted, when Dylan performed it at the Isle of Wight in 1969, he changed the first line to “give me a son.” With four children at home and a pregnant Sara in the audience, Dylan at that point was apparently loath to sacrifice any offspring.

11. I Do Believe I’ve Had Enough

Having touched the northernmost tip of Highway 61, the part reaching back to Dylan’s childhood, the album now makes a sharp detour, with an ever-growing crew of chimerical figures in tow. “Just Like Tom Thumb’s Blues” starts with a vision of destitution on rain-soaked Mexican streets, Juarez on a gray Easter, but with our directional and moral compasses broken and all reference points gone: “your gravity fails and negativity don’t pull you through.” At this point, we have somehow skidded off the road, past the highway’s ending point at the Gulf, some 1,000 miles west, clear across Texas and into the desolate badlands.

Dylan once told Robert Shelton that he’d visited Mexico in his youth, and that this inspired some of the Latin musical motifs in his work. The Mexico sketched here, however, is a country of the mind as much as of any geography. Part Malcolm Lowry’s Under the Volcano, part Orson Welles’s A Touch of Evil, part Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” part Kerouac’s Desolation Angels (published that same year, and from which Dylan borrowed the phrase “Housing Project Hill”), these Mexican streets are a composite of every South of the Border menace to haunt the American psyche, a more sinister rendering of the landscape Dylan later revisited in his cover of Gordon Lightfoot’s “Early Mornin’ Rain.” The towns that lead to Ciudad Juarez from Highway 61—Houston, Laredo, El Paso (its neighbor across the Rio Grande)—are musical and cultural markers more than cartographic ones, as is Juarez itself, a town on the borders of our darkest imaginings. As Andy Gill writes, Juarez is “used here in much the same way pulp novelist Jim Thompson and filmmaker Sam Peckinpah have used Mexico, both as a symbol of escape from the strict regimentation of American society, and as an index of how far down a person might have been forced to go—fallen so low, they’ve literally dropped out of America into the Third World.”

Until this point, Dylan’s iconography has been solidly North American,
whether the New York of his actual surroundings or rural territories borrowed from old ballads. Here, however, we are squarely on foreign turf, with all of its attendant dangers—from predatory women to narcotic dissolution (“I don’t have the strength to get up and take another shot”) to rampant corruption and indifference (“the cops don’t need you and man they expect the same”). The opening bars establish this clearly, with Paul Griffin’s barroom piano setting an Old West flavor against Bobby Gregg’s heavy-reverb drums, a mix of the cowboy past and hotrod present—as potently American a sound as can be imagined, introducing a disturbingly alien tableau.

As for the eponymous Tom Thumb (as several critics have noted), he no doubt harks back less to the pint-sized hero of folklore than to Rimbaud’s “My Bohemian Life,” in which the vagabond poet wanders down the highway, destitute but unfettered:

My only pair of trousers had a big hole.
Tom Thumb in a daze, I sowed rhymes
As I went along. My inn was at the Big Dipper...

But there is a warning contained here, for escape from boundaries comes at a price, and stepping off the road can leave you very lost. Unlike the comic dysfunction parading by in “Highway 61 Revisited,” this is deadly serious, an escape literally and figuratively gone south—leading to a prison far worse than any looming back home, in which the authorities (always suspect for Dylan) boast of blackmail, and thrill-seeking visitors, like Angel the good-time girl, look “just like a ghost” by the time they get out.

The warning was not hypothetical, for by this point Dylan had begun exploring Rimbaud’s “derangement of all the senses” in his songwriting and his lifestyle, and, from the evidence of “Tom Thumb’s Blues,” he was already becoming conversant with its risks. He had always had a fondness for Beaujolais and had first tried marijuana several years earlier. By this point, as the song put it, he was “hitting the harder stuff,” and the following spring he would fuel his grueling world tour with copious amounts of “medicine to keep up this pace.”

In part it was a matter of endurance, of facing up to the increasingly punishing schedule that Grossman was setting for his prize client. In part it was the influence of the Beat milieu in which Dylan circulated, which looked toward the use of mind-expanding drugs by past visionaries such as Rimbaud, Coleridge, and Baudelaire to favor creativity. In part it was simply the nature of
the fledgling rock music scene—a scene into which Dylan had been drawn almost before he realized it, and that in many ways finds its twisted reflection in the vignettes of “Tom Thumb’s Blues.” What is clear is that altered awareness, and the panic that comes of disorientation, play an unusually strong role in this song, the second panel of a progressively darkening triptych that begins with “Highway 61” and ends with “Desolation Row.” As with “Positively 4th Street,” the sense of claustrophobia is furthered by the unvarying quatrains, in this case with each stanza’s four lines ending on the same rhyme.

On *Highway 61*, “Tom Thumb” plays between Griffin’s honky-tonk acoustic piano and Kooper’s vibrato-laden Hohner Pianet—an innovative use of two keyboards that would help define Dylan’s sound over the coming year—along with Bloomfield’s lazy Latino fills, to create an atmosphere of hopeless anomie, “an absolutely gorgeous evocation of muddied consciousness.” For the 1966 tour, on which it was a nightly ritual, the song becomes turgid, grinding, strung out, over the edge. Although Dylan generally denied taking hard drugs at the time, dismissing rumors of his heroin use as “*baby talk*” it was clear to anyone who saw him perform (or who hears the concert tapes now) that the medicine had turned harsh, and likely included some combination of amphetamines, hashish, LSD, cocaine, sleeping pills, vitamin injections, and possibly, indeed, heroin or opium.¹²⁴

It was also during this tour—in Melbourne, Australia—that Dylan gave his only “explanation” of what “Tom Thumb” meant to him:

This is about a painter down in Mexico City who travels from North Mexico up to Del Rio, Texas, all the time; his name is Tom Thumb, and, uh, right now he’s about 125 years old but he’s still going.... And, uh, this is when he was going through his blue period, painting, and uh, he’s made countless amount of paintings, you couldn’t think of them all. This is his blue period painting, I just dedicate this song to him, it’s called “Just Like Tom Thumb’s Blues.”

(At that moment, a woman in the audience lets out a prolonged squeal, which brings laughter and applause from the crowd. Dylan, amiably: “You know Tom Thumb?”)

“Tom Thumb’s Blues” paints a picture of bluffing and loss, of being in over your head, of fearing that you can never return home. When one has strayed so far away from the road, the only recourse is to go all the way back, as north and
east as Juarez is south and west. “I’m going back to New York City, I do believe I’ve had enough,” the weary narrator laments at the end, conceding that even the decadence of the Naked City is preferable to what he’s just experienced. Having come this far down, it seems that there is nothing left of Highway 61 to explore.

At the end of the August 2 session, Bob Johnston made a rough mix of the album as it stood. The sequence was “Like a Rolling Stone,” “Ballad of a Thin Man,” “Just Like Tom Thumb’s Blues,” “Highway 61 Revisited,” “Positively 4th Street,” “It Takes a Lot to Laugh,” “Tombstone Blues,” “Can You Please Crawl Out Your Window?,” “Desolation Row” (a first version, recorded several days earlier), “Queen Jane Approximately,” and “From a Buick 6.” The acetate pressing of this mix, a few copies of which circulated among Dylan’s intimates, has since been widely boogedged under the titles *I Never Talked to Bruce Springsteen* (vinyl) and *Highway 61 Revisited Again* (CD).¹²⁵

Dylan took the acetate away with him to hear his new album before final mixing and commitment to vinyl. Among those for whom he played the test pressing, according to Al Aronowitz, were the Beatles, during a visit with them at New York’s Warwick Hotel on August 15. Dylan had met the Fab Four the previous year. He had been a guest at John Lennon’s home at the end of his British tour a few months earlier, and the group had visited him at the Savoy Hotel in London (can-nily staying shy of Pennebaker’s camera). But although they had been copying Dylan’s tricks and citing his influence for months, their response to the new record was lukewarm.

Whether or not the Beatles’ reaction factored into this, it was in the same space of days that Dylan and Johnston radically revised the order of songs, eliminating “Positively 4th Street” and “Crawl Out Your Window” and reshuffling the others into their definitive sequence. The result is an unusually symmetrical album, a diptych in which each side mirrors the other with remarkable precision. As with “Rolling Stone” on Side 1, “Queen Jane” starts off the flip side on a bouncy, keyboard-driven note (with similar “La Bamba” bassline); “Highway 61” echoes the frenetic pace and sweep of “Tombstone Blues”; “Tom Thumb” is, like “Lot to Laugh,” a loping barroom blues powered forward by a heavy-reverb drum slap; and “Desolation Row” reprises the black threat of “Thin Man.” Only “Buick 6” is the odd song out, in what is ultimately, in the midst of so much emotional imbalance, a beautifully balanced distribution, an eternal return of musical motifs.

With hindsight, it seems inevitable: how could Side 1 not close with the late-night moan of “Thin Man,” or the Mexican detour of “Tom Thumb’s Blues” not
bring the road trip to its conclusion? How could the album end with anything other than the epic, exhausting panorama of “Desolation Row”? Though this feeling is no doubt largely a matter of familiarity, it is also true that with this final arrangement, Dylan brought into focus the sense of the album as a journey, a mad exploration of Highway 61 in all its registers. But there was still one more stop on the road.

12. Postcards of the Hanging

Desolation Row? Dylan said later that year. “Oh, that’s someplace in Mexico. It’s across the border. It’s noted for its Coke factory.” Al Kooper later suggested that Desolation Row was a stretch of Eighth Avenue in Manhattan, “an area infested with whore houses, sleazy bars, and porno-supermarkets totally beyond renovation or redemption.” Part of the inspiration (and tide) might also have come from Steinbeck’s *Cannery Row* (an early Dylan enthusiasm), and some of it was almost surely derived from Kerouac’s *Desolation Angels*. But as with Juarez, the New York that the narrator has gone back to for this final song is a city of the mind, one that encompasses all of Dylan’s Highway 61 and the terrain surrounding it, a funhouse America that is everywhere and nowhere.

After a long pause, as if giving us a chance to prepare, the song begins with a simple strum in drop-C tuning. This time, however, instead of a full band, what joins Dylan’s guitar after the first two seconds is a Mexican-flavored acoustic motif straight out of Marty Robbins’s 1959 hit “El Paso” and other ballads with a Southwest flavor. The second guitarist is Charlie McCoy, a Nashville-based session man who had previously worked with Bob Johnston. Apart from some subde contrabass by Russ Savakus, McCoy’s is the only accompaniment Dylan will have on this song—distinguishing it from the outset as a departure, a detour from the road we’ve been traveling.

It begins with a grisly view recollected from the singer’s childhood:

They’re selling postcards of the hanging
They’re painting the passports brown
The beauty parlor is filled with sailors
The circus is in town
Here comes the blind commissioner
They’ve got him in a trance...
And the riot squad they’re resdess
They need somewhere to go...

Neither the hanging nor the postcards are figments of the imagination, but a
cultural memory: On June 14, 1920, in Duluth, several young black hands from
the John Robinson Show Circus, which had just been in town, were arrested on
charges of sexual assault after a white teenager accused them of raping his
female companion and forcing him to watch. Despite contradictory evidence,
three of the men, Elmer Jackson, Elias Clayton, and Isaac McGhie, were forcibly
removed from custody on the evening of the 15th by a restless mob numbering,
some said, in the thousands. They were beaten and dragged to a lamppost on the
corner of First Street and Second Avenue East, a block from the jailhouse,
where, despite the entreaties of a local reverend, they were hanged. A
photograph of the incident, which circulated widely for years afterward as a
commemorative postcard, shows a crowd of Duluthians proudly posing around
the three limp bodies. Eventually the police, who had so far turned a blind eye,
dispersed the rioters, several of whom were fined for disorderly conduct. Two
decades later, at around the time of Dylan’s birth, an employee of the local
historical society threw out the official records of the case as being too
“unseemly,” and it wasn’t until 2003, eighty-three years after the fact and nearly
forty after “Desolation Row,” that the City of Duluth publicly honored the three
men.127

Circuses and carnivals haunt the collective imagination as places of freakish
horror. Here, associated with what must be the ugliest incident in Duluth’s
history, the circus provides a backdrop for the most unremitting display of
grotesqueries we’ve yet encountered on this journey. Dylan had already used a
similar setting to convey Mr. Jones’s descent into panic. He had been struck by
Fellini’s La Strada and La Dolce Vita (“life in a carnival mirror,” he called it),
and later recalled the sights and sounds of the traveling circus he went to as a
child: “You could see guys in blackface. George Washington in blackface,
Napoleon in blackface. It was weird Shakespearean things, stuff that didn’t
really make any sense at the time.” Among the more curious aspects of carny life
was the fluidity of roles and identities. “I saw somebody putting makeup on,
going back from running the Ferris wheel once. I thought that was pretty
interesting.”128 In “Desolation Row,” most of the characters seem to lead
mysterious alternate lives, to perform other, darker functions on the side.

On an immediate level, “Desolation Row” is a sustained nightmare, a
motorpsychodrama in ten tableaux, an “opera of death” (Kerouac), a Baedeker of Hell. Dylan had explored similar phantasmagoria in pieces such as “Talking World War III Blues” and “It’s Alright, Ma” (as he would, somewhat more jocularly, in “Memphis Blues Again”). Here, they attain the atmospheric intensity of a full-fledged terror dream, thick with death and cruelty, an impalpable aura of horror at the limits of human devising. With its relentless images of communal torture and execution, its litany of fallen giants and triumphant local losers—and following upon other songs of dissolution, desolation, and destitution such as “Tombstone Blues” and “Tom Thumb”—this is one of the most immaculately frightful visions ever set to music.

As in “Tombstone,” characters from history and legend parade by, sometimes the authors of unspeakable crimes, more often the victims of the small-minded locals and unregulated thugs who have assumed authority. Einstein “disguised as Robin Hood” is a ghoulish, drug-addled wreck, a shadow of the man “famous long ago for playing the electric violin” (this is, for modernizing physics the way Dylan modernized the folk tradition, but also for helping create the “duck and cover” paranoia that colored his childhood). Virginal Cinderella is “easy,” casually dismissing the lovesick Romeo and blithely sweeping up “after the ambulances go,” presumably with him inside. Dr. Filth is an ineffectual drunk, while his sociopathic nurse, “in charge of the cyanide hole,” emotionlessly dispatches his patients, a caricature of every minor functionary exerting her nickel’s-worth of power over a world too indifferent to rebel. The death-obsessed old maid Ophelia spends her time watching for the apocalypse (“her sin is her lifelessness”—a line lifted from Desolation Angels), while the Phantom of the Opera (“a perfect image of a priest”—another lift from Kerouac) presides over the torture of Casanova, the libido principle:

They are spoonfeeding Casanova
To get him to feel more assured
Then they’ll kill him with self-confidence
After poisoning him with words...*

Meanwhile, in a wink to Kafka, the forces of order deal with independent thinkers by spiriting them away to a gruesome factory

Where the heart-attack machine
Is strapped across their shoulders
And then the kerosene
Is brought down from the cases
By insurance men who go
Check to see that nobody is escaping
To Desolation Row

This is the song of the rubber stamp and the jackboot, the chant of those who would remake the world to suit their own limited, belligerent vision. The common comparison between Dylan and Charlie Chaplin springs to mind: this is a world run by all the Bigs, boxers, and bullies that habitually plagued the Little Tramp. Any thought of a better tomorrow here withers, for the one lesson to be learned by all who enter is that the fault lies not in our political or social institutions, but hopelessly, irrevocably in ourselves. The song works because, beneath the extravagance, it is no mere fantasy. (Not even on an immediate level: Einstein did look like a ghoulish wreck; Cinderella, bought for a shoe, didn’t exactly play hard to get.)

On “Desolation Row,” individuality is eradicated in favor of bland anonymity ("they’re painting the passports brown"), its denizens either processed or eliminated by the faceless powers that be. One by one, the famous figures emerge—castrated Casanova, amnesiac Einstein, silenced Pound and Eliot (who would rather fight like preschoolers than “use their words”)—only to be negated by the machinery of state. When identity and memory are expunged, there is little to prevent authority from running amok. And just as the narrator’s physical position vis-à-vis Desolation Row is ambiguous (is he among those going to? leaning out from?), so is his moral stance in this murky universe—for he, too, participates in this erasure of history, rearranging people’s faces and giving them all another name.

Dylan once joked to Nat Hentoff that if he were president, “little school children, instead of memorizing ‘America the Beautiful,’ would have to memorize ‘Desolation Row.’” In these Dysfunctional States of America, the Know-Nothings are the ruling party, and mediocrity its own reward. Whether motivating a riotous lynch mob in 1920 or the escalating hubris of LBJ’s bellicose administration in 1965, the prevailing zeitgeist seems to have changed very little. The pioneer spirit that founded this country goes hand-in-hand with a dangerous and willful ignorance, a smug arrogance that underlies such slogans.
as “America right or wrong,” and that Dylan had been castigating as far back as “With God on Our Side” and “Talking John Birch Paranoid Blues.” Nor is this smugness endemic to conservatism: when Dylan has the passengers of the *Titanic* shout, “Which side are you on,” he is also taking aim, through one of its most cherished slogans, at the self-congratulatory stances of the Left. In either case, the target is what Shelton calls “simpleminded political commitment. What difference which side you’re on if you’re sailing on the *Titanic*?”

In this sense, and despite the eclecticism of its imagery, “Desolation Row” might be considered the ultimate cowboy song, the “Home on the Range” of the frightening territory that was mid-sixties America, a distillation of all the frontier ballads, cowpoke’s laments, tales of murder and of gamblers on the run that help frame the most enduring of all our national myths. It can be heard not only in the Western sound of the arrangement and simple three-chord structure, but even more so in the mournfulness of the tone, a tone that seems to absorb the melancholy of all the old ballads into one; that embraces the entire culture of “outlaw women, super thugs, demon lovers, and gospel truths.”

“The Streets of Laredo,” “Jesse James,” “Ghost Riders in the Sky”; tales of love lost and death found in “The House Carpenter,” “Ommie Wise,” “John Hardy,” “Stackalee,” “East Virginia,” and “The Coo Coo Bird”; the Depression-era hard-luck sagas; and even such modern incarnations as Marty Robbins’s *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs*. In each of these, as in so many others, one can hear the preternatural sadness, a sound not only of impending demise but of destiny and promise gone astray, a premonition that all the discarded dreams, tragic injustices, horrific genocides, and banal inhumanities filling out the American epic will ultimately serve only to transform the open range into some petty bureaucrat’s office cubicle. The real horror resides in the fact that, from there, it’s only a short walk to the cyanide hole.

“Desolation Row” is the soundtrack to an imaginary western, with its sepia tones, flimsy prop saloons, and corpses in the dust. Dylan was a fan of such westerns in his youth, a watcher of shows like *Wagon Train*, *Rawhide*, and *Gunsmoke* (whose Sheriff Matt Dillon is a more likely inspiration for the famous name change than Dylan Thomas). Their sadness is one that reaches through the years, into the deepest, smallest, most frightened core of the self, where one’s fears, hopes, and anxieties live. In “Desolation Row,” Dylan dredges up all the haunting visions and ghosts of childhood and adulthood, the monsters that once lived in his closet and now populated his dreams. By setting it to a musical motif so rich in resonance for those who, like him, grew up with the cowboy myths, he found a sound to match his night terrors, and it can send chills up the spine.
“Laredo was a sinister town,” Kerouac wrote in On the Road. “It was the bottom and dregs of America where all the heavy villains sink, where disoriented people have to go to be near a specific elsewhere they can slip into unnoticed.” This is the Wild West from which “Desolation Row” is fashioned. In the end, this is where Highway 61 leads.

Dylan had already cut one version of “Desolation Row,” late at night, at the end of the same July 29 session that produced “4th Street,” “Tombstone,” and “Lot to Laugh.” In keeping with the rest of the album, he did it with electric backing, Al Kooper on lead guitar and Harvey Goldstein on electric bass (the only sound that was left, after the other musicians went home), producing a version that, in Kooper’s estimation, “marries that song with the punkiness of the rest of the album”—the version included on the August 2 acetate. On August 4, dissatisfied with the result, he tried it again, discarding Kooper’s and Goldstein’s contributions in favor of acoustic backing by McCoy and Savakus.*

“I thought Charlie McCoy was one of the major talents of the world, but nobody knew it,” said Bob Johnston. “And I told him, if you ever come to New York, give me a call.” When McCoy did call, Dylan and Johnston suggested he come to that day’s work session. A consummate musician who can play a number of instruments (simultaneously, if need be), McCoy was unused to the informality of Dylan’s recording methods: “They just told me to go out and pick up a guitar and play what I felt like playing. I finished and I went in and asked Dylan if it suited him. And he said, Yeah, that’s fine’... We just did one song. The only one I played on was eleven minutes long... We just did two takes and... [I] left.”

Kooper, among others, maintains categorically that there were no overdubs on Highway 61, though given the unusual segregation of McCoy’s part on the stereo mix, this might have been the one exception. Regardless, McCoy’s participation is another of the album’s great moments of inspired accident. While Dylan’s panoramic lyrics and hypnotic melody sketch out the vast canvas, it is McCoy’s fills that give it their shading. The combined performance on this rendition is breathtaking, heartbreaking, and impossible to duplicate. “Desolation Row” is what “Hellhound on My Trail” is to Robert Johnson, “Parasite” to Nick Drake, or “Venus in Furs” to the Velvet Underground: a song so dark with atmosphere, so perfect in its delivery that it’s hard to imagine another version adding anything further.

It’s not only the various covers by other artists that have failed to capture the power of the Highway 61 performance—too frantic, or wistful, or terrified,
contrast to the original’s disaffected hoarseness—but even Dylan’s own subsequent renditions. He nearly conveyed it on the 1966 tour, when it was a standard part of his acoustic set, but something was lost in the prim, sibylline quality of his singing. After that, Dylan performed the song during his 1974 tour with the Band (on February 4), infusing his solo guitar and vocals with accelerated energy, but to lessened emotional effect. In the late 1980s, accompanied by Tom Petty and the Grateful Dead, he took the song electric, returning to the “punkier” version Kooper preferred. In 1995, for his Unplugged appearance, it shape-shifted into a bottleneck blues with conspiratorially desperate vocals, and by 2000 it had mutated into percussive soft rock. There are undeniable merits to all of these. Dylan, moreover, has expressed a preference for his live performances over his recorded ones—no doubt, as these live versions allow him to experiment, bend the song to his mood, recapture an emotional bond he no longer feels with a studio track made several decades in the past. But for me, no other version can match the sheer power of those eleven minutes and nineteen seconds that transpired between Dylan, McCoy, and Savakus at Columbia’s Studio A, August 4, 1965.

One of the strangest performances was Dylan’s public unveiling of the song, at Forest Hills on August 28, two days before Highway 61 was released—strange not so much for the performance itself as for the laughter it elicited in the audience. Laughter at the predictable points—the commissioner’s hand in his pants, easy Cinderella’s “it takes one to know one”—and the less predictable: “after the ambulances go” (applause), “have mercy on his soul.” Only with the eighth verse, when Dylan straps on the heart-attack machine, does the crowd seem to realize that the joke might be on them.

Kafka’s friends used to howl with laughter when he read his stories aloud. Like the listeners at Forest Hills, they recognized that gallows humor is still humor, however cruel and inhuman, and however much the titters have a distinct echo of whistling past the graveyard. One of Dylan’s great talents is his ability to blend comedy and fear. Just as the sailor’s rollicking odyssey in “115th Dream” suddenly lands him before a funeral director’s accusatory stare, so too the unremitting horrors of “Desolation Row” give way to flashes of black comedy—a humor high-voltage enough to kill you if you lean in too close.

Ending an album with an epic-length piece is a risky but potentially rewarding gambit, one that can either tar the whole thing with bombast (think “In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida”) or lend it gravity and substance. The longer the song goes on—assuming it’s the right song, in the right hands—the more conviction it accrues, and the greater its power to affect. As “Desolation Row” progresses,
detail piles upon detail, image upon image, compelling one to listen, to keep going forward, even as the air through which one is moving darkens to the point of impenetrability. Time after time, it is one of the few songs (along with Johnson’s “Hellhound,” Josh White’s original recording of “Careless Love,” the Lord Invader’s calypso anthem “God Made Us All,” a small handful of others) that can still bring me to tears.

After an exhausting ten stanzas comes the final instrumental verse, a long solo on the harmonica—Dylan’s most sustained yet on Highway 61—seconded by McCoy’s guitar, the two of them in perfect synch, channeling the same Western and Appalachian ballads, bringing it all home and infusing the song with an aching, mournful quality as ancient as human yearning, as old as music itself. With a few last blows and a final strum, the song ends, not fading out but, for the first and only time on this album, coming to a natural halt.

As writers and critics, we rhapsodize with our pens. Faced with music that stays beyond our command, the penetrating emotional charge born of sound, we have only soundless words as our response. And so we push the boundaries, spin our own fantasies, try out ever more grandiose modifiers, in an attempt to deliver even a portion of what the singer has given us. When there are lyrics to analyze or references to catch, we are on familiar streets. But hearing this so simple, so elemental duet of a moaning harmonica and a guitar that carries with it a whole carpet bag full of human sorrows, I am gladly reduced to silence. The engine shuts off, the trip is over, ready at a moment’s notice to start again.
Recording Dates

*June 15*
Phantom Engineer
Sitting on a Barbed-Wire Fence
Like a Rolling Stone (1st version)

*June 16*
Like a Rolling Stone (final version)
Why Should You Have to Be So Frantic (fragment)

*July 25* (Newport Folk Festival)
Maggie’s Farm
Like a Rolling Stone
Phantom Engineer

*July 29*
Tombstone Blues
It Takes a Lot to Laugh, It Takes a Train to Cry (final version)
Positively 4th Street
Desolation Row (1st version)

*July 30*
From a Buick 6
Can You Please Crawl Out Your Window?

*August 2*
Highway 61 Revisited
Just Like Tom Thumb’s Blues
Queen Jane Approximately
Ballad of a Thin Man
Desolation Row (possible)

*August 4*
Desolation Row (probable)
Endnotes

For reasons of space, only direct quotes are cited in these notes.

I.


2. All quotes in this and the next paragraph are from MP, interview with Daniel Kramer, 18 Jan. 2006.


7. “Didn’t write them”: Shelton, 356; “be heard”: booklet accompanying the album *Biograph* (Columbia C5X 38830, 1985), 5, 10.


10. Suze Rotolo, quoted in Scaduto, 137.


12. Oliver Trager, *Keys to the Rain: The Definitive Bob Dylan Encyclopedia*
(New York: Billboard Books, 2004), 244.


14. Hentoff, “Playboy Interview” (published), 130. Folk historian Dick Weissman points out that the whole folk boom was largely sparked by the Kingston Trio’s 1958 hit revival of “Tom Dooley,” a traditional ballad about rape and murder: Which Side Are You On? An Inside History of the Folk Music Revival in America (New York: Continuum, 2005), 11.


22. Hentoff, “Playboy Interview” (published), 142.

23. Dylan, “My Life in a Stolen Moment.”


II.

Side One


27. Hentoff, “Playboy Interview” (published), 129.


31. Marcus, Rolling Stone, 88.
33. Both quotes: Scaduto, 286-87, 245.
34. Ibid., 202.
37. Dylan, Chronicles, 288. Dylan’s introduction of the band at Albert Hall in 1966, in his clipped delivery of the time: “They’re all poets”
38. Shelton, 99.
39. “Nonsensical abstractions”: Dylan, Chronicles, 284-85; “Little Anthony”: Humphries and Bauldie, Absolutely Dylan, 61. The authors claim (p. 173) that around this time, Dylan wrote a song called “The Death of Robert Johnson,” but no known traces of it remain.
42. Jan Mark Wolkin and Bill Keenom, Michael Bloomfield: If You Love These Blues (San Francisco: Miller Freeman Books, 2000), 99400.
43. Ibid., 24.
44. Clinton Heylin, Bob Dylan: Behind the Shades (New York: Summit Books, 1991), 122-23. The one circulating trace of this session is a minute-long “convention speech” to the Columbia sales reps back home, followed by a highly informal snippet of “If You Gotta Go.”
45. Ibid., 134.

47. Portions of the outtakes can be heard on the CD-Rom Highway 61 Interactive (Columbia/Graphix Zone CDAC 085700, 1995), and on the bootleg Now Your Mouth Cries Wolf (Hollow Horn). A detailed description of all the takes is in Marcus, Rolling Stone, 203ff.


50. Quotes in this and next paragraph: ibid, 31-35. Despite the many, many retellings, there is still some confusion over when Kooper joined the sessions. It was the 16th, confirmed by cross-referencing reliable histories with the studio sheets, and by Kooper himself (e-mail to MP, 14 Feb. 2006).

51. Highway 61 Interactive.

52. Kooper, Backstage Passes, 36.


55. Marcus, Rolling Stone, 145, 147.


57. Many sources claim that he also sported Ray-Bans and a polka dot shirt, but this was at the afternoon sound check, not the evening performance.


60. “Rigid establishment”: Biograph booklet, 8; “selling out”: Sounes, Down the Highway, 182. For an insightful analysis of Newport, see Mike Marqusee, Wicked Messenger: Bob Dylan and the 1960s (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005), 149ff.

61. “Instinct was dead”: Scorsese, No Direction Home; “Jewish mothers”: 
64. “Songs to critics”: *Biograph*, liner notes to Side 7; “known to retaliate”: Scaduto, 334.
65. “Taking It Easy” by Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger (alias “Paul Campbell”), as quoted in Shelton, 271. The verse largely echoes an anonymous Prohibition-era poem. The first line might also have been inspired by Kerouac: “sitting in my mother’s house all day while she worked in the shoe factory” (*Desolation Angels*).
69. Scaduto, 81.
71. *Biograph* booklet, 5.
74. “Imagine that” and “go on, but couldn’t”: Shelton, 357-58; “just a flash”: *Biograph*, liner notes to Side 3. Daniel Kramer, who often saw Dylan at the time, told me that some of these songs had already been written by April, the month when the *Highway 61* cover photo was taken and when Dylan left for his UK tour.
75. Gill, *Don’t Think Twice*, 85.
2005.


80. “Artist’s dream”: Younger, interview with Johnston; “on the back”: Gill, *Don’t Think Twice*, 84.

81. Dylan, *Chronicles*, 134, 137.


92. Blue and Ochs quotes: Scaduto, 263, 265.


95. Ibid., 257-59.

96. Ibid., 229.

97. All quotes: ibid., 276-78.


100. Shelton, 281.


104. “By that name”: Ephron and Edmiston, “Dylan Interview,” 60; “going to work”: Pennebaker, Dont Look Back, 125.

105. Gill, Don’t Think Twice, 86.

Side Two


107. “None of my songs”: Hajdu, Positively 4th Street, 100; “very sick”: Shelton, 355.


109. Shelton, 186.

110. Both quotes: Hajdu, Positively 4th Street, 251-53.


112. Pennebaker, Dont Look Back, 25. For an extensive study of Dylan’s Bible references, see Michael J. Gilmour, Tangled Up in the Bible: Bob Dylan & Scripture (New York: Continuum, 2004).

113. Dylan, Chronicles, 260. See also Trager, Keys, 41-44, 254.

114. Scaduto, 23.

115. “Gendy unassuming”: ibid, 23-24; “was your age”: Shelton, 23-24.

116. Shelton, 35

117. Dylan was livid when Newsweek “outed” both his family status and his family name a week after the concert.


119. Shelton, 144.


123. Shelton, 341.


125. There is a certain confusion surrounding the final sessions: some claim that “Tom Thumb” wasn’t recorded until August 4, while others say that the final mix of “Desolation Row” dates from the 2nd. Neither is likely, since on the August 2 acetate “Tom Thumb” is identical to the final cut, and “Desolation Row” is in its earlier, inferior version.


127. The postcard is reproduced in Trager, *Keys*, 140. Greil Marcus (*Rolling Stone*, 28n) points out that such postcards were popular at the time in many areas as “signs of home-town pride.”


129. Dylan: Hentoff, “Playboy Interview” (published), 145; Shelton, 283.

130. Dylan, *Chronicles*, 236.


133. The tape identification data sheet for August 2 (*Highway 61 Interactive*) lists five takes on that date, which might indicate that Dylan’s vocal and guitar tracks were taped then and McCoy’s part overdubbed two days later. Then again, the August 2 takes might have been other, unknown attempts, or simply mixes of the July 29 takes. Some have also claimed that the release take is actually two partial versions spliced together, but if so, the splice is inaudible.
Select Bibliography and Discography

Select Bibliography


The Fiddler Now Upspoke: A Collection of Bob Dylan’s Interviews, Press Conferences and the Like from Throughout the Master’s Career, Compiled by Dr. Filth with the Aid of His leather Cup, vols. 1-3 (privately printed, no date).


Articles

Aquilante, Dan. “Still a-Changin’,” New York Post (27 April 2005), 44.


Crowe, Cameron. Liner notes to Biograph (see discography).


Select Discography

*(all serial numbers refer to CD format unless otherwise noted)*

**By Bob Dylan**

*Official releases:*

*Bob Dylan* (Columbia CK 08579), released 19 March 1962

*The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan* (Columbia CK 8786), released 27 May 1963
The Times They Are A-Changin’ (Columbia CK 8905), released 13 Jan. 1964
Another Side of Bob Dylan (Columbia CK 92402), released 8 Aug. 1964
Bringing It All Back Home (Columbia CK 92401), released 22 March 1965
Highway 61 Revisited (Columbia CL 2389 mono vinyl, CS 9189 stereovinyl, CK 92399 CD), released 30 Aug. 1965
Blonde on Blonde (Columbia CGK 841), released 16 May 1966
Nashville Skyline (Columbia CK 9825), released 9 April 1969
Self Portrait (Columbia C2K 30050), released 8 June 1970
Biograph (Columbia C5X 38830, vinyl), 1985
Rare and Unreleased, 1961-1991 (Bootleg Series, vols. 1-3) (Columbia C3K 65302), 1991
Highway 61 Interactive (Columbia/Graphix Zone CDAC 085700), 1995
No Direction Home: The Soundtrack (Bootleg Series, vol. 7) (Columbia C2X 93937), 2005

Unofficial releases and bootlegs:
1965 Revisited (Great Dane 608 9419/2), boodeg. Selections from the Santa Monica (27 March 1965) and Forest Hills (28 Aug. 1965) concerts, including the first public performance of “Desolation Row.”
The 1965 Interview (Baktabak CBAK 4107), 1997
Dublin, Vicar Street, 13 Sept. 2000 (Crystal Cat 547-48), boodeg
Five Nights at the Beacon Theater, New York, vol. 1, 25 April 2005, bootleg
Freezer Burn (Seth Cole/TMQ vinyl), bootleg. Includes early home recordings and outtakes from the 1965-66 studio sessions.
Genuine Live 1966 (Scorpio GBS 66-1 to 66-10), 2000, boodeg. A 10-CD set of
soundboard recordings from throughout the 1966 UK tour.

*Highway 61 Revisited Again* (Wild Wolf 6506/92-BD-09-04), boodeg. Made from the Aug. 2 acetate, and including in addition “Killing Me Alive” and the later version of “Crawl Out Your Window.”

*Highway 61 Revisited Revisited* (Uncut 2005 09), 2005. A “recreation” of *Highway 61* by various artists, with versions ranging from the truly inspired to the truly indifferent.

*Live in Newport 1965* (Document DR 004 CD), 1988, bootleg. The infamous Newport appearance, plus several performances mislabeled as such (actually from Philharmonic Hall, Oct. 1964).


*Missouri Arena, St. Louis, Missouri, 4th Feb. 1974 (Afternoon)*, bootleg

*Now Ain’t the Time for Your Tears* (The Swingin’ Pig TSP-CD-067), 1990, bootleg. Recorded live at Manchester Free Trade Hall, 7 May 1965.

*Now Your Mouth Cries* (Hollow Horn), boodeg. An indispensable collection of 1965 outtakes, including various stages of “Rolling Stone.”

*Ten of Swords* (7-CD reissue of Matrix CL 16319 10-LP set), boodeg. The mother lode, featuring numerous unreleased recordings from 1961 to 1966. Disc 6 in particular contains rare outtakes from the *Highway 61* sessions.

**By other artists:**

Joan Baez, *Joan Baez in Concert, Tart 2* (Vanguard VRS 9113 vinyl), 1964

———, *Joan Baez/5* (Vanguard VRS 9160 vinyl), 1964


Woody Guthrie, *This Land Is Your Land* (The Asch Recordings, vol. 1) (Smithsonian Folkways 40100), 1997

———, *Hard Travelin’* (The Asch Recordings, vol. 3) (Smithsonian Folkways 40102), 1998


Marty Robbins, *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs* (Columbia CL 1349 vinyl), 1959

Harry Smith, ed. *Anthology of American Folk Music* (Smithsonian Folkways
Films

Bob Dylan: Quest for Newport, bootleg
Dont Look Back (D. A. Pennebaker, 1967)
Eat the Document (D. A. Pennebaker, with Bob Dylan and Howard Alk, 1971)
No Direction Home: Bob Dylan (Martin Scorsese, 2005)

Web Resources

www.bobdylan.com (the official Dylan website)
www.expectingrain.com
www.alkooper.com/index.html
Bob Dylan Bootlegs, www.bobsboots.com
Bob Dylan Live Debuts, http://members.tripod.com/dylandebuts/
Olof’s Yearly Chronicles, www.bjorner.com
The Tant Mieux Project: Bob Dylan, www.tantmieux.squarespace.com/bob-
dylan-welcome-articles-/>
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* Though later retracted, Dylan’s comments in 1984 about the much decried Self Portrait—that it was made specifically to get the Woodstock Nation off his doorstep, as “something they can’t possibly like, they can’t relate to—are possibly among the most revealing personal assessments he has made, a self-portrait indeed (“Kurt Loder Interview,” March 1984, in The Fiddler Now Upspoke, vol. 3 [privately printed], 719).
* See, for instance, his famous explanation to Nat Hentoff as to why he chose the rock ’n’ roll route: “Carelessness. I lost my one true love. I started drinking. The first thing I know, I’m in a card game. Then I’m in a crap game. I wake up in a pool hall…”
* Greil Marcus quotes a snippet of comedian Richard Belzer as Old Man Dylan singing the line in a stereotyped Yiddish accent, showing how easily the words could adapt to parental I-told-you-so’s and suggesting that a dash of Portnoy-esque guilt was not entirely foreign to their composition (Rolling Stone, 149).
* Ever the mythmaker, Dylan denied having heard of Rimbaud when his friend Dave Van Ronk mentioned him at around that time. Later, when Van Ronk visited Dylan’s apartment, he found a volume of Rimbaud’s poetry, “all well-thumbed with passages underlined and notes in the margins. [But] the man wanted to be a primitive…. Being a hayseed, that was part of his image” (Scaduto, 99-100). At bottom, Van Ronk wasn’t wrong: Dylan’s readings tend to be impressionistic for the most part, and his borrowings based on emotional resonance rather than deep familiarity: the artistic process, in short.
Primary among the old guard was Pete Seeger, who has gone down in Dylan lore as the man who threatened to cut the power cables with his woodsman’s axe (the one he had been using shortly before to conduct a labor songs workshop). Seeger had been one of the earliest and most fervent supporters of Dylan the protest singer, and he took his putative protégé’s “going electric” as a personal affront. He has also put a variety of spins on his reaction to Newport, ranging from “I was ready to chop the microphone cord” to “I did say, If I had an axe I’d cut the cable! But they didn’t understand me. I wanted to hear the words. I didn’t mind him going electric.” None of this prevented the Byrds from scoring a hit with an electrified version of Seeger’s “Turn, Turn, Turn,” nor Seeger from recording his own electric album (if you can’t axe ’em, join ’em) with the Blues Project the following year.
* Though maybe not so much as all that: Bloomfield recalled Dylan at a party the evening after the concert, “sitting next to this girl and her husband and he’s got his hand right up her pussy and she’s letting him do this and her husband’s going crazy. So Dylan seemed quite untouched by it the next day” (Nigel Williamson, *The Rough Guide to Bob Dylan* [London: Rough Guides, 2004], 54).
* * * 

Lyrics consistently has Daddy “lookin’ for a fuse” (which Dylan later used in live performances) and places the narrator “in the streets.” But what’s there to hear is what’s there to hear: on Highway 61, Dylan sings “food” and “kitchen,” as any listener for the past forty years can attest.
* The partial vignette “Jet Pilot” (a.k.a. “Jet Pilot Eyes”) is described on *Biograph* as “the original version of Tombstone Blues,” but this seems unlikely—not only because “Jet Pilot’s” stated recording date of October 1965 would have made it the only “original version” to postdate its final draft by three months but also because the two songs have almost nothing in common lyrically or musically. If anything, “Jet Pilot” sounds like a reprise of “From a Buick 6,” with a little of the upcoming “Obviously 5 Believers” thrown in for good measure.
* In an earlier taping of the song, among other lyric changes, Casanova is being spoonfed “the boiled guts of birds.” By revising the line, Dylan turns a simple gross-out image into something far more sinister, in which the agent of the great lover’s undoing is his own bravado and susceptibility to blandishments (as they would be ours).
* There is still a fair amount of confusion, in various writings about “Desolation Row,” over who played second guitar, with some claiming Bloomfield and others Bruce Langhorne. Bob Johnston and Al Kooper are clear on this point, as is the guitarist himself, as are the album credits, as is the playing style: it was Charlie McCoy, end of debate.