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## 'Calling Out From Some Old Familiar Shrine': Living Archivism and Age Performativity in Bob Dylan's Late Period

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Graduate Program in Popular Music and Culture

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Arts

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## Abstract

The release of Bob Dylan's 30<sup>th</sup> studio album in 1997, *Time Out of Mind*, marked an unlikely and triumphant return to critical acclaim following years of personal and creative decline. From this point onward, Dylan would maintain a quality of output comparable to his 1960s catalogue and unprecedented among artists in the twilight of their career. The proceeding albums, from "*Love and Theft*" (2001) to *Triplicate* (2017) would present Dylan as a living archive of traditional American genres – an intersection through which rock and roll, blues, bluegrass, and vocal jazz would pass. The notion of Dylan as a living archive is made possible firstly by a noticeable change in his late period songwriting, as his lifting of lyrics and literary passages becomes more brazen and problematic. An alternative reading offered here posits Dylan working in the vein of modernist cultural curation, a freedom granted to him by his advanced age and authority. Dylan's late period output is also marked by a change in the singing voice and the emergence of two modes, the 'croak' and 'croon,' which are posited as intentional artistic decisions in service of the living archive project. A secondary function of this 'new' old voice is a performance of age intended to establish and solidify Dylan's role as elder statesman and living archive, summoning the artists and genres he seeks to emulate. This suggestion is explored by way of analyses of each album from *Time Out of Mind* to Dylan's standards albums of 2015-2017, followed by a discussion of the role of persona and the relationship between Dylan's late period singing and songwriting.

Keywords: Bob Dylan, ageing, cultural curation, crooning, popular music, songwriting, persona, Never Ending Tour, minstrelsy, blues, rock and roll, archive, experience.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology

### 1.1 Introduction

When the Nobel Committee for Literature selected Bob Dylan as its 2016 laureate “for having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition,” media, fans, and artists alike shared in the celebration of a long-overdue yet widely debated honor. Dylan’s place as perhaps the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s most iconic and influential popular artist was now solidified, garnering him the most prestigious honor available to artists in a discipline for which some argued he did not qualify. Indeed, awarding Dylan the prize, like the moniker of “greatest songwriter,” was perhaps too obvious a choice, akin to “pinning a medal on Mount Everest for being the highest mountain,” as Leonard Cohen joked shortly before his death.

The committee’s statement, at once reverent and understated, nodded to the period for which Dylan is still most widely recognized and celebrated. His evolution from self-mythologized hobo slinging folk standards to reluctant and prophetic protest singer, rock and roll rebel to bohemian Rimbaudian beat poet remains uncontested in popular music, having produced a largely unparalleled catalogue even in isolation from the remaining half-century of Dylan’s career. Interestingly, however, the statement simultaneously alluded to both the pre-and-post-Dylan American song tradition, having fundamentally altered its nature and scope.

Indeed, Dylan’s significant place in the continuum of American popular music entails the transmogrification of the traditionally American genres within which he has always worked - namely the blues, country, spirituals, vocal jazz, folk standards, hillbilly, and rock and roll. While he did and continues to work within those traditions,

however, he now seemingly embodies them as both a living archive of their materials and histories and their elder statesman, claiming the authority to perform and continually renew them – a product, I argue, of his ‘late period’ from 1997 to the present day. When Dylan notoriously ignored the honor bestowed upon him and failed to appear at the acceptance ceremony, it was as though the myth had now entirely subsumed the man, seemingly older than time, the name itself a sufficient presence in the Stockholms Konserthus. Had the entire American song tradition been awarded the prize, one could hardly question the reason for its absence.

This twenty-year period from *Time Out of Mind* (1997) onward, one likely overlooked by those hearing of Dylan being awarded the Nobel prize, has produced arguably the most critically acclaimed run of albums of Dylan’s career, rivaling his 1960s catalogue into the twilight of his career and life. Indeed, Dylan’s advancing age and alchemic concoction of traditional American genres now work reciprocally, one informing and lending credence to the other. This notion, at the very heart of the work at hand, features a dynamic and endlessly rewarding interplay between Dylan’s late period singing voices and songwriting methods and amalgamates in a newly iconic and timeless visual and musical persona.

More specifically, I build on Richard Elliott’s notion of the “living archive,” arguing that beginning in 1997, Bob Dylan consciously reoriented his artistic impetus to act in that capacity: an archive of traditional American genres. This thesis, however, rests on the claim that within this period, Dylan actively and deliberately enacts the ageing process by way of his songwriting, singing, and self icon-making. While the natural ageing process necessarily contributes to Dylan’s evolution as a singer, songwriter, and

performer, I make the distinction that Dylan quite intentionally embellishes the ageing grain of his singing voice in an effort to lend authority to his performances of historically American genres. A necessary, troubling, yet easily defensible element of this ‘performance of age,’ as I refer to it here, is the ‘borrowing’ of other artists’ lyrics and melodies in acts of skillful and playful intertextuality. The ways in which Dylan combines these notions – the performance of the ageing voice as a reflection of themes of advancing age, by way of evolving intertextuality and traditional American genres – are outlined in a discussion of each album from *Time Out of Mind* in 1997 to Dylan’s standards albums (*Shadows in the Night*, *Fallen Angels*, and *Triplicate*) of 2015-2017 and their roles in his late period project.

This thesis divides the argument described here by discussing Dylan’s singing and songwriting separately, outlining the ways in which Dylan’s voice evolves and why, followed by a defense of, and explanation for, his late period habit of borrowing (a method to which he also subscribed in his earliest songwriting). Foregrounding these discussions, however, is an exploration of Bob Dylan’s late period persona in commercial, concert, and radio appearances, and its contribution to Dylan’s project of self icon-making and living archivism. A thorough examination of each, including Dylan’s 21<sup>st</sup> century television commercial appearances for Victoria’s Secret, Cadillac, Chrysler, Apple, in tandem with both the speaking voice and content of his *Theme Time Radio Hour* for Sirius XM (2006-2009), posit Dylan as a self-proclaimed purebred American icon employing an eclectic selection of visual American signifiers and shrouded in carefully constructed mystery. Together, these seemingly disparate



discussions of the hallmarks of Bob Dylan's late period interact to paint a vivid and coherent picture of Dylan's artistry and possible motivations of the last twenty years.

## 1.2. Literature Review

While the academic study of Bob Dylan offers countless publications on Dylan's life and art, work specifically addressing the period from 1997 to the present day represents only a small subsection of modern Dylanology. Richard Elliott's *The Late Voice: Time, Age and Experience in Popular Music* (2015), however, considers Dylan's late period songwriting, placing it within the larger context of his thematic interests and earliest songwriting methods. Elliott offers a convincing defense of Dylan's so-called plagiarism from the release of *Time Out of Mind* onward, suggesting that age has granted Dylan the authority to emulate the blues and folk artists he admired so much as a young man. Similarly, though Dylan's lyrics have always been saturated with themes of displacement, regret, and memory, Elliott infers that Dylan had by 1997 accumulated the wisdom and experience to write from a place of authority. *The Late Voice* offers further valuable insight into Dylan's singing voice, positing the voice heard on *Tempest* (2012) as "[taking] on something of the qualities of the scenes it depicts," thereby recalling events older than Dylan himself by way of both his lyrics and singing.<sup>1</sup> This voice, according to Elliott, reveals "the deep folds of lived experience," telling its own story of advancing age.<sup>2</sup> Elliott appears consistently here, providing a foundation for interpreting Dylan's handling of the ageing process.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Elliot, *The Late Voice: Time, Age and Experience in Popular Music* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 179

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 179

The first chapter serves as an overview of Dylan's late period persona – his attire, his speaking and singing voices, his all-American icon-image in both commercial and concert appearances, and his artistry more broadly between 1997 and 2017. The chapter uses as its theoretical framework the notion of authenticity in rock and performance as outlined by Philip Auslander and Simon Frith. Auslander debunks the widely held perception of rock's claim to authenticity, suggesting that “contra rock's romantic ideology of self-expression, the singer's “self” is determined by the song, not vice-versa,” thereby attributing little agency to the performer.<sup>3</sup> Auslander's theory posits Dylan's late period songs – their structures and adherence to traditional American genres – as informing Dylan's mode of singing.

Frith further debunks the notion of recorded singing representing authenticity, attributing the effects of intimacy and sincerity to modern recording practices and technologies, which he believes “exaggerated this effect by making the vocal performance more intimate, more self-revealing, and more (technologically) determined.”<sup>4</sup> Frith's hypothesis, therefore, calls into question the meditative and tender nature of Dylan's so-called ‘Sinatra albums,’ *Shadows in the Night* (2015), *Fallen Angels* (2016), and *Triplicate* (2017).

Andrew Muir's *One More Night: Bob Dylan's Never Ending Tour* (2013) offers a basis for the chapter's discussion of Dylan in the live context. Muir provides a firsthand account of hundreds of concerts, tracing Dylan's performance techniques, motifs, and vocal evolution. Of particular use is Muir's overview of Dylan's three live vocal

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<sup>3</sup> Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 90.

<sup>4</sup> Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin, *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word*. (London: Routledge, 1990), 210

trademarks: upsinging, repetition, and the ‘wolfman voice.’ The identification of consistent and deliberate modes of singing supports one of the central claims made here that Dylan’s toggling between the croak and croon represent purposive and significant artistic decisions.

Richard F. Thomas’s *Why Bob Dylan Matters* (2017), examining Dylan’s relationship to classical Greek and Roman epic poets, offers invaluable insight into Dylan’s masterful use of intertextuality – a strong counter to claims of plagiarism – and the evolution of his songwriting from *Time Out of Mind* in 1997 to *Tempest* in 2012. Most interestingly, examining Thomas reveals Dylan’s ‘borrowings’ as reaching progressively further back in time, from folk revivalists and blues artists on *Time Out of Mind* to Virgil, Ovid, and Homer on subsequent studio albums. The chapter, exploring the relationship between Dylan’s late period persona, singing, and songwriting, highlights the undeniable correlation between Dylan’s progressively older literary influences, thematic interests, and singing voice.

The following chapter, focusing more specifically on Dylan’s singing voice and its role in his late period image as living archive of traditional American music, employs Dave Laing’s (1985) discussion of punk singing, Eric Lott’s (1993, 2017) work on blackface minstrelsy, and Lee Marshall’s (2007) work on Dylan’s star-image, as well as a slew of published album reviews considering Dylan’s voice. Laing’s *One Chord Wonders: Power and Meaning in Punk Rock* offers the notion of the ‘vocal stance’ as described by Philip Tagg. Referring to “the actual/imagined distance between two persons (transmitter and receiver) in an intimate/confidential dialogue,” the vocal stance

offers a point of entry to Dylan's standards albums of 2015, 2016, and 2017, and the relationship between his much improved crooning voice and themes on ageing.<sup>5</sup>

Steven Connor offers a similar reading of the crooning voice, claiming that "the imaginary closeness of such voices suggests to us that they could be our own" (2000, 38), so intimate as to evoke soul-bearing conversation or internal monologue.<sup>6</sup> Tagg and Connor's discussions of the imagined proximity of the singer to the listener are employed here to analyze Dylan's seemingly improved vocal quality on *Shadows in the Night*, *Fallen Angels*, and *Triplicate*, their role in his late period interest in advancing age, and the relationship between Dylan and Sinatra's 'mature period.' Roland Barthes' *The Grain of the Voice* (1981) offers a supplemental theoretical framework, distinguishing between the 'genotype' and 'phenotype' of the singing voice.

The chapter considers the role of minstrelsy on "*Love and Theft*" (2001) within the framework of blackface as performance tradition. I argue here that rather than emulating blackface minstrelsy hallmarks and performances of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Dylan has inherited the tradition as a mode of performance, or a medium, through which to express adulation for traditionally African American genres and make light of his own hardships. This argument is informed in part by W.T. Lahmon, Jr.'s work on the origins and early motivations of blackface minstrelsy in *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop*, which points to the gallows humor inherent to early minstrel performances.

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<sup>5</sup> Philip Tagg, "Analysing Popular Music: Theory, Method and Practice," *Popular Music* 2 (1982): 37–67. doi:10.1017/S0261143000001227.

<sup>6</sup> Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 38.

The argument at hand also rests on the contention that the blues arrangements of “*Love and Theft*,” paired with the sources from which Dylan borrows, implicate Dylan in the minstrel tradition and highlight the legacy of that tradition in popular music. Richard Middleton (1990), for example, discusses Elvis Presley within the framework of minstrelsy, positing the notion of ‘boogification,’ or the syncopation and slurring of lyrics, as an act of emulation of the African American artists on which Presley based his singing and dancing styles. Both Middleton and Lott highlight the embedded and overlooked nature of minstrelsy’s legacy in American popular culture, and both serve as a foundation for the current discussion of “*Love and Theft*” and its relationship with the performative aspects of minstrelsy.

The discussion of Dylan’s late period singing presented here engages significantly with album reviews and interviews published in respected popular media. Among the journalists cited are Amanda Petrusich, Rob Sheffield, Bill Flannagan, Jon Pareles, Michael Franco, David Fricke, and Jody Rosen. Reviews of *Time Out of Mind* through *Triplicate* are employed to highlight both the perception of Dylan’s recorded voice among critics, as well as the increasing focus on the voice and its evolution with each album.

This research concludes with an exploration and defense of Dylan’s late period ‘plagiarism,’ arguing for a reconsideration based on the folk tradition and the modernist practice of cultural curation – a notion strongly related to that of intertextuality as discussed in the opening chapter. Dylan’s so-called plagiarism, more palatably referred to here as ‘borrowing,’ is perhaps the primary focus of research and published work on Dylan’s late period. The phenomenon of Dylan lifting words and melodies from

traditional folk songs, early-to-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century popular music, poetry, and literature is by now common knowledge. The purpose of the discussion at hand is not to excavate and reveal Dylan's bottomless and eclectic trove of sources, but rather to frame this songwriting practice within the larger context of the tradition from which Dylan emerged.

Both Eugen Banauch and Mark Polizzotti offer thorough overviews of Dylan's habit of borrowing in both the dawn and twilight of his career, each providing accompanying insight and material for a defense of Dylan's practice. Banauch's argument uses the so-called 'folk process' as its impetus, claiming that "traditional folk songs were 'traditional' precisely because they had no single author," but were instead passed along, altered, and adapted by various artists.<sup>7</sup> David Yaffe traces, in part, the optics of Dylan's increased borrowing with each album, noting that the stolen lyrics of *Time Out of Mind* were "allusive, not plagiaristic, and they were yoked together to paint a portrait of a man out of time."<sup>8</sup> He also acknowledges, however, that the album marks a slippery slope from simple allusion to more questionable borrowing on subsequent albums. Ultimately defending Dylan, however, Yaffe calls into question the sources of the very artists from whom Dylan supposedly steals; need the listener question Hambone Willie Newbern or Muddy Waters' claim to authorship of 'Roll and Tumble Blues' and 'Rollin' and Tumblin'?' before targeting Dylan?

An integral element to this defense of Dylan's borrowing is that of cultural curation as modernist tradition, and a discussion of T.S. Eliot as Dylan's modernist

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<sup>7</sup> Eugen Banauch, *Refractions of Bob Dylan: Cultural Appropriations of an American Icon*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 189.

<sup>8</sup> David Yaffe, *Bob Dylan: Like a complete unknown* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 113.

ancestor for the practice. David Chinitz (2004) outlines Eliot's practice as an expression of personal nostalgia, positing his plagiarism as the manifestation of the sources on which he was raised and a deep affection for those sources. Chinitz also raises the notion of historical nostalgia, or an intent to revive historical settings, contexts, and works from bygone eras. The parallel between Eliot and Dylan's writing practices, then, becomes apparent given Dylan's seemingly revived interest in the American past and its cultural products as he entered the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Similarly, Barry Faulk (2001) frames modernist cultural curation and the modernist artist as a kind of cultural tutor, seeing his role as that of a tour guide through cultural landmarks of the past. Banauch bolsters this supposition, claiming that Dylan understands the scrutiny under which his work is examined and seeks to include the listener in a kind of 'catch me if you can' game of finding the sources embedded in his texts.

The arguments made throughout consistently return to the notion of 'living archive,' a term which demands a brief but necessary conceptualization. Derived from Richard Elliott's *The Late Voice: Time, Age and Experience in Popular Music* (2015) and featuring prominently here, 'living archive,' lies at the core of this thesis, offering a foundation on which to build. Elliott, discussing Dylan's Sirius XM radio program running from 2006 to 2009, suggests, "Theme Time Radio Hour gave Dylan's fans another character, or persona, to get to know, while reinforcing his position as a living archive of old, obscure, classic or plain weird vernacular music"—a hypothesis that informs the central argument of this thesis.<sup>9</sup> I expand on Elliott's use of the term, however, to suggest quite broadly that via his use of intertextuality and the range of

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Elliott, *The Late Voice: Time, Age and Experience in Popular Music*, 177.

genres with which he works throughout his late period, Dylan demonstrates an archival and seemingly comprehensive knowledge and understanding of the American song tradition. While Dylan's fascination with and memory for innumerable traditional folk songs is well established, 'living archive' as it is used here suggests a more all-encompassing function as the de facto keeper of American songs, as though Dylan had personally experienced and stored all the "obscure, classic, or plain weird" music to which Elliot refers.

### **1.3 Methodology**

Given the scope of discourse and study of Bob Dylan both academic and popular, it is the intention of this thesis to focus nearly exclusively on work pertaining to Dylan's late period from 1997 onward, with the addition of some overview of Dylan's earliest songwriting methods. For this reason, and quite intentionally, biographical information and research pertaining to Dylan's career and discography from approximately 1965 to 1997 will be largely absent. The work at hand concerns itself primarily with Dylan's songwriting methods and singing voice from the release of *Time Out Of Mind* (1997) onward.

More specifically, it is Dylan's recorded vocal performances that are of interest, with a minimal focus on live performances on the Never Ending Tour. Despite the importance of the Never Ending Tour in Dylan's late period, the reasons for its limited presence here are twofold: the tour, which predates Dylan's 'late period' by nine years (having begun in 1988), is simply far too long and diverse in its setlists, voices, bands, and personae to be discussed with a credible degree of consistency. Dylan's vocal performances in a live setting are also too unpredictable, more spontaneous, and perhaps



more dependent on Dylan's vocal health and touring schedule than those of his studio albums.

The past two decades have arguably been the busiest period of Dylan's nearly six-decade-long career, involving no less than nine studio albums (including 2009's *Christmas in the Heart*, which will be ignored throughout), twelve volumes of the revered *Bootleg Series*, near-constant touring, a universally acclaimed and canonical memoir, promotional magazine interviews, film projects, commercial appearances, the *Theme Time Radio Hour* radio show airing from 2006 to 2009, numerous art exhibitions, welding projects, and whiskey ventures. Given the diversity and eclecticism of Dylan's late period interests, only a select few are explored here. While *Chronicles: Volume One* is referenced throughout and Dylan's radio program and live performances do feature minimally but significantly, the primary materials of study here are studio recordings, song lyrics, magazine interviews, album reviews, and published work on Dylan's late period songwriting, singing, and persona.

## Chapter 2

### ‘That Old Black Magic’: Persona and the Intersection of Singing and Songwriting in Dylan’s Late Period Artistry

I’m not like you, am I? I’m not like him, either. I’m not like too many others. I’m only like another person who’s been transfigured. How many people like that or like me do you know?

-Bob Dylan, Rolling Stone interview, 2012

#### 2.1. ‘You Can’t Fake True Cool’: Outlining Dylan’s Late Period Persona

A wiry silhouette half-sits at the edge of a barstool against a white backdrop. Wispy curls of hair emerge from a cowboy hat; the figure’s head fixates subtly downward toward an acoustic guitar resting slightly below the chest. As the scene cuts suddenly closer to the figure, the unmistakable profile of Bob Dylan reveals itself, 65 years old and unchanged from the covers of *Blood on The Tracks* and *Desire*. Little else, however, signals the Dylan of yore; this was the ‘new’ old Dylan who had now fully realized a carefully crafted and curated persona for the twilight of his career: cowboy hat, embroidered western shirt, a cawing voice rasping stolen lovelorn blues quips, and a removed demeanor simultaneously at ease in a new disguise and uncomfortable under the gaze of a mainstream audience. This was the paradox of Bob Dylan in 2006 – a mystical silhouette rooted in a vaguely bygone American era, featuring in Apple’s latest iTunes advertisement campaign, promoting an album titled *Modern Times*.

This would be neither Dylan's first nor last commercial appearance under this guise; features for Victoria's Secret, Cadillac, Chrysler, and IBM would come to mark perhaps the most surprising and oftentimes comically confounding moments of Dylan's late period. Despite the seemingly insignificant and economically driven nature of such commercial appearances, however, the figure presented in these advertisements is consistent and noteworthy, illustrating the hallmarks of Dylan's late-period persona and its role in his late period project. While the central focus of this chapter remains the intersection of Dylan's late period singing and songwriting, a brief discussion of the late period persona will serve to advance the argument for the intention of Dylan's performance of advancing age.

Dylan's first commercial appearance of the 21<sup>st</sup> century precedes those hocking cars and lingerie. On September 3, 2001, Columbia Records debuted a short television advertisement promoting Dylan's forthcoming album, *"Love and Theft."* The commercial, conceived as a short film, features Dylan donning a pencil moustache, silver overcoat, black cravat, and cowboy hat, seated at a poker table. His playing partners include a crooked dealer, a shoddily made-up temptress, a vaguely criminal mystery man, and a Playboy bunny, all crowded together in a dark dinner club while the album opener 'Tweedle Dee & Tweedle Dum' blares through an old radio.<sup>10</sup> The advertisement frames both the forthcoming album and Dylan's visual and thematic late period interests: film noir, criminality, forbidden lust, secret pacts, vintage Americana, and violence, all set to a surrealist rockabilly shuffle. Despite Dylan's request of director Kinka Usher that the video not be 'corporate,' the 30-second film represents not only a new promotional

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<sup>10</sup> "Bob Dylan Love and Theft HD," YouTube video, 0:29, posted by Paul Best, February 28, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zRo3r8g-w30>.

technique for a new Bob Dylan album in a new millennium, but the promotion of an entirely ‘new’ Dylan – a living collage of old American imagery.

An eclectic array of television ads would follow suit. Despite the variety of brands and merchandise to whom Dylan offered his icon status, however, each commercial from 2001 to 2015 would feature a consistent persona – a mysterious, sometimes silent, smartly-clad Dylan in distinctly and classically American settings. His first such appearance for Victoria’s Secret in 2004 features Dylan silently “stalking an angel-winged lingerie model in a deserted Venetian palazzo,” decked in black suit, silver cravat, and carrying a black cowboy hat all in the style of his “*Love and Theft*” commercial three years prior.<sup>11</sup> The appearance is a confounding one in terms of both Dylan’s motivation to participate and his actual role in the advertisement. Indeed, Dylan says nothing throughout the minute-long clip, instead walking in slow motion and staring directly at the camera from close distance as model Adriana Lima dons Dylan’s now-trademark Stetson cowboy hat. The role, however, is one of several significant commercial appearances that serve to posit Dylan as mythical American icon. Dylan’s very silence, his steely gaze cued by the defiant chorus of *Time Out of Mind*’s ‘Love Sick,’ and increasingly iconic cowboy hat and pencil moustache, visually establish Dylan as the mysterious and removed elder statesman of both rock and blues, as integral to American popular music as Marlon Brando and John Wayne are to American film.

Dylan’s 2007 appearance in a television ad for Cadillac follows much the same theme: he drives through a burnt and barren American landscape, past farmland, steel windmills, screeching eagles, freight trains, and tank trucks. The black cowboy hat

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<sup>11</sup> Gary Susman, “What’s Bob Dylan doing in a Victoria’s Secret ad?” *Entertainment Weekly*, April 5, 2004, <https://ew.com/article/2004/04/05/whats-bob-dylan-doing-victorias-secret-ad/>.

makes its third commercial appearance on television, now accompanied by black aviator sunglasses, black leather gloves, and black suit. As the scene draws to a close, Dylan stands at a deserted crossroads, finally uttering his sole line, “what’s life without the occasional detour?”<sup>12</sup> The commercial serves a purpose similar to that of his Victoria’s Secret ad: visual icon-making by way of fetishistic American imagery and mystique. The image of Dylan at a dirt crossroads posits the artist as both aimless wanderer of American terrain and enigmatic icon among the ranks of Robert Johnson (though the argument could be made that Dylan and Johnson sold their souls at the crossroads in very different manners).



Dylan at the crossroads, 2007 Cadillac commercial<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> “2007 Cadillac Escalade TV Commercial w/Bob Dylan,” YouTube video, 0:57, posted by ‘caditalk,’ April 12, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9X3Bcmf3ckQ>.

<sup>13</sup> “Bob Dylan in a TV commercial for the Cadillac Escalade,” Digital image, *New York Times*, Accessed December 5, 2018, <https://wheels.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/11/01/dont-think-twice-yes-thats-dylan-pitching-cadillacs/>

The most brazen instance of Dylan's televised American icon-making came in 2014, when he narrated and appeared in a Super Bowl commercial for Chrysler. The two-minute-long ad features Dylan offering rapid-fire clichéd Americanisms about America as the heart and soul of the automobile industry, communicating American pride by way of a montage of iconography: a young Dylan, cowboys, James Dean, an American flag draped around a young woman, a decrepit gas station, a diner, and a baseball field, among others. Dylan's unmistakable voice asks, "is there anything more American than America?" and proclaims, "Detroit made cars, and cars made America," and that "you can't import the heart and soul of every man and woman workin' on the line" while the signature late period anthem 'Things Have Changed' (2001) elevates the commercial's wistful affect. The ad closes with Dylan in a dark poolroom surrounded by working class men.<sup>14</sup> Dylan, however, remains ever faithful to his signature black suit and loosely tied necktie. The controversial commercial (not only was Dylan hocking cars, but so heavily made-up as to look grotesque), titled 'America's Import,' firmly places Dylan within the fabric of American identity, a pop culture and literary import as reliable and timeless as the cars it promotes.

Despite their seemingly economic motivation on Dylan's part, I argue that his commercial appearances signal both a profound respect for Americana and the American past (is there anything more American than cars, cowboys, and beautiful women?) and an effort to promote American industry. Perhaps less obvious is these commercials' roles in Dylan's late-period project of looking back to a romanticized American past and assembling a collage of visual signifiers that would establish Dylan's new persona from

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<sup>14</sup> Poolrooms and tables feature not only in Dylan's Chrysler commercial, but in promotional photos for his 2018 whiskey venture and his 2012 interview with *Rolling Stone* as well.

*Time Out of Mind* onward. Images of the black cowboy hat, the crossroads, and the desolate American landscape function to assert a more tangible and cohesive icon image than would be possible via recordings and for casual fans who would forego attending Dylan's concerts. In this sense, Dylan's late period persona is a clear and purposive fabrication rooted in the American past and a pastiche of its most recognizable iconography.

## 2.2. The Construction of Mystique on the Never Ending Tour

Of course, the persona of Dylan's commercial roles features prominently on the Never Ending Tour and rare public appearances. While the attire has evolved – the cowboy hat has since retired and been replaced by a wide-brimmed pork pie hat, the cowboy boots swapped for spats – Dylan has remained faithful to the late period persona for over twenty years. The timelessness, collage, detached mystique, and interest in both America's golden age and dark underbelly have come to define Dylan's late period songwriting, visual aesthetic, live performances, and artistry at large, more enduring and recognizable than the polka dots of 1966 and face paint of 1975.



Dylan and his band, 2013<sup>15</sup>

Much like the World Tour 1966 and Rolling Thunder Revue, the Never Ending Tour's incarnation of the last 15 years features a defining visual element, and one that serves Dylan's persona as mythical shaman of Americana. Most notable perhaps is Dylan's stage attire as described above – a collage of bolo ties, hats, stylized suits, and spats referencing both the diversity and unity of American culture and popular music. Simon Frith's contention that "it is the clothes themselves that do the talking; beneath them is a kind of universal (if aged and gendered and racialized) body," is evidenced in Dylan's late-period attire, establishing his timelessness prior to his singing or speaking<sup>16</sup>. Richard F. Thomas, author of *Why Bob Dylan Matters*, similarly draws a parallel between the roles of stage attire on the Rolling Thunder Revue and Never Ending Tour:

His look during the Rolling Thunder Revue...is part of the appeal of those performances: 1970s hipster in his mid-thirties, dressed in denim and leather, sometimes sporting a bandana or turban, sometimes with an ornate floral arrangement in his hatband, frequently with white face paint, or with a straggly beard. And into recent years with his elegant, expressive, weather-beaten face, and his scrupulous attention to costume: outfits and hats that at times turn him into a Civil War officer, at times a cowboy, at times the vaudeville performer.<sup>17</sup>

With this brief commentary, Thomas outlines the relationship between visual aesthetic, persona, and thematic content in Dylan's artistry. More implicit, however, is the notion

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<sup>15</sup> David Oppenheimer, "Bob Dylan and His Band," Digital image, Performance Impressions, May 4, 2013, [http://www.performanceimpressions.com/Bob\\_Dylan\\_Tour\\_Photos\\_2013/content/Bob\\_Dylan\\_Charleston\\_SC\\_opp8449\\_large.html](http://www.performanceimpressions.com/Bob_Dylan_Tour_Photos_2013/content/Bob_Dylan_Charleston_SC_opp8449_large.html)

<sup>16</sup> Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 218.

<sup>17</sup> Richard F. Thomas, *Why Bob Dylan Matters* (New York: Harper Collins, 2017), 40.



of Dylan serving as the embodiment of classically American images and practices – a deliberate performance of bygone American eras both culturally and musically significant.

The notoriously dim stage lighting serves both a pragmatic and atmospheric purpose, simultaneously disabling photography and video recording while enhancing the air of mystery Dylan seeks to evoke. Indeed, the Never Ending Tour has served as Dylan's primary method of self-mythologizing and reinforcing his late period persona on a nightly basis. When in August 2002 Buffalo music journalist Jeff Miers clumsily attempted to summarize Dylan's 45-year-long career, Dylan began (presumably jokingly) employing the passage as an announcement signaling his arrival onstage:

The poet laureate of rock 'n' roll. The voice of the promise of the '60s counterculture. The guy who forced folk into bed with rock, who donned makeup in the '70s and disappeared into a haze of substance abuse, who emerged to 'find Jesus,' who was written off as a has-been by the end of the '80s, and who suddenly shifted gears and released some of the strongest music of his career beginning in the late '90s. Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Columbia recording artist Bob Dylan.

Despite Dylan's likely ironic use of the announcement, its wildly simplified and mythological description effectively serves the late period persona of aged American icon and Dylan's late period role as elder statesman, voice of experience, and living archive. Each proclamation paints Dylan as prophet, spokesman, musical alchemist, actor, resilient and triumphant icon, and above all, legend in the traditional and folkloric sense. Dylan's implicit claim of his own mythological status follows him even as

concerts draw to a close, in what the Dylan fan community refers to as the ‘Formation.’ The term describes “Dylan’s enigmatic staged physical actions when he and the band [stand] impassive in the face of closing applause,” assessing the audience with squinted eyes and hands on hips, before the stage is shrouded in darkness and Dylan seemingly evaporates into thin air.<sup>18</sup> The act, now routine to Dylan’s performances, highlights the calculated and masterfully crafted mystique that is integral to Dylan’s late period persona.

### **2.3. ‘Aint Talkin’’: Speaking as Performance on *Theme Time Radio Hour***

Dylan’s defiant silence and refusal to acknowledge his audience, however, has rendered his speaking voice both a rare thrill and one worthy of dissection. The aforementioned ‘Theme Time Radio Hour,’ serves as the most fertile territory for an examination of Dylan’s enigmatic speaking voice, providing repeated and treasured instances of his technologically unencumbered voice. Frith contends that “a way of speaking can, in itself, signify a performance (which describes both an action and an event) by putting an “interpretive frame” around itself,” as in the case of Dylan’s themed, nostalgic radio show.<sup>19</sup> The program’s “interpretive frame” of both the radio medium and American popular music of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century dictates Dylan’s vocal inflection and accent, constituting a weekly performance to a widespread audience.

The argument for Dylan’s speaking as a performance of living American musical archive, however, necessitates a point of comparison. Dylan’s acceptance speech upon winning the ‘Album of the Year’ Grammy award in 1997, for example, features a

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<sup>18</sup> Andrew Muir, *One More Night: Bob Dylan’s Never Ending Tour*, (Middletown: CreateSpace, 2013), 342.

<sup>19</sup> Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music*, 207.

seemingly plainspoken and unremarkable voice, void of pretense and largely neutral in its accent.<sup>20</sup> This was a voice familiar to viewers – nasal, mildly uncomfortable and inexplicably languid, instantly recognizable in its cadence and timbre.

Conversely, ‘Theme Time Radio Hour’ features an altogether different speaking voice. While its nasal character remains intact, the voice of the program is now hushed, controlled, both coy and transparently exaggerated to emulate radio hosts of decades past. Dylan’s accent is similarly altered; though never recognizably Midwestern or remarkable, he now spoke with a vaguely southern, jazz-age hipster drawl, distinctly American yet unlocatable in any particular time or place. Introducing the song ‘A Pretty Girl (A Cadillac and Some Money)’ by Buddy and Ella Johnson, Dylan states, “That’s from 19 and 54, and you can tell by the way that saxophone roars in that rock and roll was just around the corner,” with a rhythm so precise as to be deliberate and calculated.<sup>21</sup>

The voice of ‘Theme Time Radio Hour’ would re-emerge (though in a subtler incarnation) in Chrysler’s 2014 commercial featuring Dylan in a similarly deliberate effort at icon-making. The combined effect of Dylan’s renewed and conspicuous late period interest in Americana, his role as curator of American songs on ‘Theme Time Radio Hour,’ his eclectic and distinctly American attire, and placeless/timeless speaking voice culminates in a fantastic and contrived persona that serves Dylan’s role as living archive.

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<sup>20</sup> “Bob Dylan Wins Album of the Year,” *Grammy Awards* video, 3:03, February 25, 1998, <https://www.grammy.com/grammys/videos/bob-dylan-wins-album-year>

<sup>21</sup> Bob Dylan, “Episode 56: Cadillac,” Theme Time Radio Hour Archive, October 24, 2007, <http://www.themetimeradio.com/episode-56-cadillac/>

#### 2.4. Upsinging, Repetition, and the Wolfman

Given the present chapter's objective of exploring the intersection of Dylan's singing and songwriting with other notable hallmarks of his late period and their contribution to his archival project, further examination of Dylan's singing as performative of advancing age is necessary. Specifically, the ways in which the recorded singing voice of 1997 onward furthers Dylan's living archive persona are numerous.

The argument for Dylan's late period persona as a performance of advancing age and living archivism rests on the assumption that his self-presentation and 'star image' are the products of deliberate and meticulous curation and selection. While this argument is central to the topic at hand, a consideration of Dylan's late period persona as determined *by* the music itself provides further insight into the complexity of his image and discography from 1997 onward. Philip Auslander dismantles the notion of rock as resting upon *any* foundation of authenticity, claiming that "contra rock's romantic ideology of self-expression, the singer's "self" is determined by the song, not vice-versa," indicating a lack of agency of the performer's self-presentation.<sup>22</sup> While Auslander's claim borders on hyperbole, it serves the claim of the singing voice as the primary conveyor of Dylan's late period persona and project. Given Dylan's adaptation to the defining genres of his late period (blues, early rock and roll, Tin Pan Alley vocal jazz, etc.) it follows that it is his renewed interest in traditional American genres that dictates the songs' structures and arrangements, which in turn inform Dylan's mode of singing. As the most immediate and widely accessible element of Dylan's 21<sup>st</sup>-century

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<sup>22</sup> Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 90.

persona, Auslander's assertion that the performer's persona "is determined by the song" proves viable in the case of Dylan's recorded output.

Frith similarly posits the singing voice as a site of tension and interplay between authenticity and artifice. Given the contention that Dylan's ageing voice is exaggerated and performed, in contrast to the assumption that age has ravaged his voice beyond repair, Frith's illustration of the paradoxical nature of singing is poignant:

The central pop gesture, a sung note, rests on the same inner/outer tension as performance art: it uses the voice as the most taken-for-granted indication of the person, the guarantor of the coherent subject; and it uses the voice as something artificial, posed, its sound determined by the music. The star voice (and, indeed, the star body) thus acts as a mark of both subjectivity and objectivity, freedom and constraint, control and lack of control.<sup>23</sup>

Frith's assertion supports Auslander's analysis of the performativity and artifice of the singing act while simultaneously implicating the assumed natural deterioration of Dylan's voice. Both theories implicitly suggest the separation of the star voice from the star body, thereby buttressing the previous chapter's contention that Dylan exhibits a purposive toggling between his two modes of late period singing. This is the paradox of Dylan's recorded vocal performances from 1997 onward, and the primary vehicle for the late period persona: the masterful control of the voice used to both pleasing and grating effect, with the croak reading as a lack of control as inflicted by advancing age.

Like Auslander, Frith questions the authenticity of the recorded pop performance, attributing emotional sincerity to modern recording technologies. Highlighting the

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<sup>23</sup> Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music*, 210.

artifice of studio recordings, Frith contends that electrical recording has “exaggerated this effect by making the vocal performance more intimate, more self-revealing, and more (technologically) determined,” as in the cases of *Time Out of Mind* and *Shadows in the Night*, *Fallen Angels*, and *Triplicate*.<sup>24</sup> Frith’s claim presents a further paradox, particularly so in the case of Dylan’s late period discography. As suggested in the previous chapter’s discussion of the ‘vocal stance’ in the context of Dylan’s ‘Sinatra albums’ and the crooning aged voice, the technological conditions and production techniques of the albums’ recordings determine, in part, the vocal performances’ perceived intimacy. Frith advances Laing’s contention, however, by pairing the notions of intimacy and artifice. Despite the simulation of intimacy derived from Dylan’s crooning on *Shadows in the Night*, *Fallen Angels*, and *Triplicate*, Frith’s assertion simultaneously validates Laing’s discussion (intimacy as a product of the ‘vocal stance’) and strengthens the present hypothesis of Dylan’s late period vocal modes as elemental to the late period persona of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

While the work at hand concerns itself primarily with Dylan’s studio discography from 1997 onward, a brief discussion of the role of singing on the Never Ending Tour and its addition to Dylan’s late period persona is necessary. Despite the complexity of the Never Ending Tour (which warrants examination beyond the scope of this thesis), Dylan has exhibited perhaps the most blatant and exaggerated examples of his singing voice as a significant component of the late period persona to which age is a central contributor. Indeed, Dylan’s singing in the live setting presents an entirely new set of modes beyond

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 210.

the croak and croon, all of which mark significant (and notorious) tropes of both the Never Ending Tour and Dylan's late period singing at large.

One such mode, and perhaps the most instantly recognizable and widely scorned among Dylan's fan community, consists of Dylan raising his voice an octave at the end of each phrase of a song. The vocal technique, which emerged circa 2002 and instantly named 'upsinging,' is described by Andrew Muir:

The main problem many of us were having was with Dylan's voice. In an effort to convey emotion without further damaging his already fragile and torn vocal chords, Dylan was ever increasingly 'singing up' at the end of every line. This kind of vocal trickery does not go down well with those who remember his voice from the past when he was always the indisputable master of timing and phrasing.<sup>25</sup>

Muir's description speaks to the seemingly universal experience of attendees of the Never Ending Tour of the early-2000s. While Dylan had garnered a reputation as a mercurial and inconsistent performer well before this period, the 'upsinging' technique tested audiences' patience for songs delivered uniformly and unconvincingly. While both Muir and the fan community would attribute the technique to Dylan's weathered vocal chords (Dylan would play a staggering 106 shows in 2001 and 107 in 2002)<sup>26</sup> and an attempt to relieve himself from the monotony of performing night after night, 'upsinging,' considered in tandem with techniques that would emerge in the following years of the tour, complicates this supposition.

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<sup>25</sup> Andrew Muir, *One More Night: Bob Dylan's Never Ending Tour*, 279.

<sup>26</sup> "Tour Statistics," *Setlist.fm*, <https://www.setlist.fm/stats/bob-dylan-1bd6adb8.html?tour=3bd6d010>

It should be noted, however, that the present argument makes no attempt at countering the reading of Dylan's 'upsinging' as lazy and thoroughly irritating; rather, the objective is to consider the ways in which the various modes of singing of Dylan's 21<sup>st</sup> century Never Ending Tour performances contribute to an intentional performance of advancing age. While the example of 'upsinging' considered independently of Dylan's other stylistic flourishes in the live setting offers little to the case, an argument for the intention of his more notorious vocal mannerisms on the Never Ending Tour as a performance of ageing and elder statesmanship emerges. Muir's discussion of Dylan's 'upsinging' involves a criticism of one of his more subtle and equally controversial habits, "repeating half a line en route to the end of it – 'Gave her my heart: gave her my heart but she wanted my soul' – a device so crudely portentous it's always been the preserve of the world's Vic Damones," alluding to the artifice of Dylan's repetition.<sup>27</sup> The habit remains a mainstay of Dylan's live singing, rendering it unmistakably intentional and integral to the argument for the consciousness of Dylan's portrayal of the ageing process. While the purpose of Dylan's faux-spontaneous repetitive delivery remains largely undiscussed in both popular criticism and academic study, repetition offers several points of inquiry.

Perhaps the most immediate signified of Dylan's repetition is breathlessness – the notion that delivering even short lyrics ("Gave her my heart; gave her my heart but she wanted my soul" or "Tangled up in; tangled up in blue", for example) requires a pneumatic fortitude beyond Dylan's advanced years. Indeed, the notion that Dylan, now in his late-70s, is incapable of summoning the breath to deliver his most iconic lyrics, is a

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<sup>27</sup> Muir, *One More Night: Bob Dylan's Never Ending Tour*, 279.



harrowing one. Given his relentless touring schedule and skillful live renditions of his American Songbook recordings, however, the act of repetition is revealed as contrived – a calculated effort to emulate advancing age. Muir provides an alternative reading:

When Dylan first introduced the trick of repeating the last line in a vain attempt to achieve dramatic effect, it was hammy in the extreme; but also it was almost endearing to hear him be so gauche...However, when it continued to spread to chorus and other important lines that he had once sung with such exquisite, time-defying phrasing, it became clear that Dylan actually meant you to accept it as signifying passion.<sup>28</sup>

While Muir successfully conveys the irritation of the fan community in response to Dylan's repetition, the suggestion of passion as the intended signified is perhaps oversimplified. Dylan has rarely, if ever, concerned himself with exuding passion to either a live audience or the media at large. Indeed, Dylan does express excitement in concert, be it by twisting one leg in a restless shuffle or standing up from the piano bench as a song builds. Despite his subtle body language, however, Dylan consistently presents a largely distant and aloof stage persona. Though the recognition of an intended signified is productive in considering Dylan's late period vocal mannerisms, his repetition fits more neatly within a framework of the late period project: living archivism by way of the deliberate portrayal of advancing age.

This reading of Dylan's vocal repetition offers additional tangible explanations. The mannerism invokes the phenomenon of memory loss and the need for pause in order to summon lyrics that once came effortlessly. When he sings, "Gave her my heart; gave

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 353.

her my heart but she wanted my soul,” the pause between repetitions conveys a sense of searching hurriedly for the subsequent lyric. When the lyric does return to memory, it is delivered quickly, its tempo adjusted to stay in time with his band. The potential loss of memory, paired with the breathless effect of repetition, represents the senility with which Dylan seeks to present himself. A final explanation is referenced in Muir’s sharp criticism of Dylan’s ‘gauche’ vocal trickery. The notion of Dylan summoning the stylings of Vic Damone and Sinatra (who similarly repeated lyrics for emphasis) contributes to an argument for Dylan’s vocal archivism in a live performance setting as he seeks to emulate the mannerisms of crooners and bandleaders upon whom he has partly modeled his late period persona. Of course, like the mode of singing – the chosen grain of the voice – and vocal stance, the decisions to ‘upsing’ and repeat lyrics are just that – deliberate artistic choices serving Dylan’s late period project.

The final and most recent installation of Dylan’s Never Ending Tour vocal gimmicks, crudely termed the ‘Wolfman voice,’ offers a supplemental reading of the ‘croak’ discussed in chapter two. Muir hilariously outlines the technique:

Dylan threw in a third ‘voice,’ one born in Australia but ‘ripening’ as 2003 progressed. Someone, somewhere on the Internet dubbed this the ‘wolfman’ voice... and every fan knew exactly what to call it when hearing the desperately hoarse, gruff growl. So ugly was it that one would not have been surprised if the lycanthrope community had felt defamed by the term and sued for compensation.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 300.

Whereas on studio albums from *Time Out of Mind* onward featured a croak employed strategically and selectively, the ‘wolfman’ voice of live performances is seemingly applied primarily to Dylan’s most canonical songs of the 1960s. The technique, emerging in 2003 and outstaying its welcome to the present day, presents itself as a method by which Dylan may muddle the songs his fans most anticipate and shift attention toward his late period material. Footage of Dylan’s 2011 performance in Esch-sur-Alzette, Luxembourg, posted in a series of videos on YouTube, features mangled renditions of his back catalogue and more engaged vocal performances of his 21<sup>st</sup>-century output. The ‘wolfman’ voice features most prominently on ‘It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue,’ wherein Dylan’s subsonic gurgle overshoots the realm of listenable.<sup>30</sup> The ‘wolfman’ re-emerges on ‘Tangled Up in Blue;’ Dylan is removed, uninterested, and seemingly intent on conveying his disdain for his audience’s expectations via a grating, distorted growl. The *Together Through Life* track ‘Forgetful Heart,’ *Time Out of Mind*’s ‘Make You Feel My Love,’ and the *Modern Times* blues shuffle ‘The Levee’s Gonna Break,’ however, are delivered with more care and nuance.

In this context, the ‘wolfman’ voice – delivered intentionally – works to highlight Dylan’s advancing age and more rapidly advancing *performance* of age. By mangling the most celebrated songs of his earlier catalogue, Dylan implicitly and inherently highlights (whether consciously or not) his vocal evolution between 1965, 1975, and 2011 – an evolution most easily read as deterioration. Granted, the argument here is not that Dylan

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<sup>30</sup> Michel Antoine, “Bob Dylan & Mark Knopfler - "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue" @ Rockhal Esch Luxembourg 21.10.2011,” Filmed [October 11], YouTube video, 5:30, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NdnST\\_PyW08](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NdnST_PyW08).

consciously seeks to do so; rather, the ‘wolfman,’ like his ‘upsinging’ and repetition, is delivered intentionally. The work at hand has sought to explore *why*, arguing for his live vocal mannerisms’ roles within the context of Dylan’s late period persona and project.

Despite a widespread recognition of Dylan’s image and self-mythologizing as the enactment of a calculated late period persona, the voices described here – the ‘upsinging,’ the repetition, the ‘wolfman,’ and indeed the croak and croon more broadly – are seldom considered for their service to that persona. While Chapter Three deals primarily with the intention of these modes and the tendency of critics and scholars to overlook it, it is worth noting that these vocal techniques, for better or worse, are as deliberate and elemental to Dylan’s latter-day persona as the cowboy hat, the bolo tie, and the pencil moustache. Amanda Petrusich, approaching the relationship between the voice and the persona, writes:

Dylan’s voice, sinking further into grit, is all wheeze and mew, rolled in salt but still instantly recognizable. And now that he’s eyebrows-deep in the rock ‘n’ roll canon, maybe the heart-stopping appeal of Bob Dylan has less to do with his output – which, tangentially, remains outstanding – and more to do with his cowboy boot saunter. Maybe we all want a little bit of Dylan’s superhuman restraint, and whether it’s real or brutally calculated doesn’t actually matter: The fuck-off detachment, the unconcerned genius, the squinty-eyed disdain...he’s the boy who doesn’t love us back...the Holy Grail, the last American hero.<sup>31</sup>

Petrusich’s assessment, with which any informed Dylan disciple would surely agree, beautifully illustrates the intended mystique of the late period persona. The missing link,

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<sup>31</sup> Amanda Petrusich, “Bob Dylan: Modern Times,” *Pitchfork*, August 29, 2006, <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/9361-modern-times/>

however, the missing plank in the restless rope bridge that is Bob Dylan's unlikely resurgence, is the notion that it occurred not despite the wheezing voice "rolled in salt," but *because* of it.

## 2.5. Singing and Songwriting at the Crossroads

Given the examination of Dylan's late period return to acclaim by way of his changing singing and songwriting practices from 1997 onward, the final concern here is the ways in which the two interact as evidence of Dylan's central project. Because the two broad hallmarks of Dylan's artistry – singing and songwriting – noticeably shift with the release of *Time Out of Mind*, the contention here is that both Dylan's authorial and singing voice change in tandem to assert his position as both elder statesman and living archive.

Chapter Four of this study outlines Dylan's career-spanning (though intensified late period) theft of other artists' words as a method of modernist cultural curation: a collage of obscure references intended, in part, to both create an entirely new product and to draw the listener into conversation with the past. Similarly, the preceding chapter, addressing specifically Dylan's singing voice, asserts that by the release of "*Love and Theft*" in 2001, age had granted Dylan the authority to adopt and perform an array of American genres' vocal mannerisms. The present chapter, then, foregrounds those arguments with the notion that Dylan's late period artistry and project employ collage and intertextuality as their primary vehicle for both the singing and songwriting acts. Elliot makes a start at outlining the role of collage in the ageing voice:

I wish to retain the notion of sounded experience...and expand it to take in more than our immediate surroundings; [one can] think of it more broadly as a kind of

intertextuality, a way we come to know texts (including songs) through their relationship with, and our knowledge of, other texts.<sup>32</sup>

The notion of experience represented as sound and grounded in knowledge of both songs and texts is of particular use in examining the intersection of Dylan's late period singing and songwriting, and an apt summarization of his singing functioning as collage.

The dimensions of this contention are twofold, the first of which centers on Dylan's increasing reliance on (or use of) other artists' words. As Dylan's songwriting from 1997 onward features the most conspicuous instances of 'borrowing' of his career, his singing voice simultaneously becomes more evocative of those artists he seeks to emulate. Thomas acknowledges the changes in songwriting, stating, "this comeback for Bob Dylan has now lasted twenty years...and in this period he again found his intertextual voice, embarking on a new mode of songwriting that has given his work a more conscious allusive and literary focus."<sup>33</sup> It is worth adding, however, that this rediscovery of the power of intertextuality is accompanied by the discovery of new modes of singing. As previously outlined, Dylan's late period voice toggles between the croak and croon, which are employed to summon traditional American genres: early rock and roll, delta and Chicago blues, crooning, and vocal jazz. The relationship between Dylan's late period singing and songwriting, then, is a mutually symbiotic one; the increasingly 'borrowed' lyrics demand a voice to emulate the traditions from which they are lifted, while the voice, now able to emulate those traditions, is best served by Dylan's technique of curation.

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<sup>32</sup> Elliott, *The Late Voice: Time, Age and Experience in Popular Music*, 39.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas, *Why Bob Dylan Matters*, 162.

The second function of the relationship between Dylan's authorial and singing voices works similarly, but centers more particularly on the ageing voice. The 'borrowing' and collage of other artists' words employs the ageing voice as its primary vehicle, while the ageing voice grants Dylan the authority to curate the works from which he borrows. More simply, as Dylan lifts from the artists of bygone eras, his singing voice ages simultaneously. Indeed, this contention rests on the concession that Dylan participated in the 'folk tradition' from the dawn of his career, appropriating traditional melodies and lyrics and claiming them as his own. What is notable about the technique in Dylan's late period, however, is the way in which it now intersects with the ageing voice. Marshall contends that "this is not about 'Dylan and the folk tradition'... but, rather, how Dylan has come to stand for and represent the maintenance of a link with the past, of the importance of a tie with an idealized tradition for reclaiming the authenticity of the present" - an integral facet of the living archive project and persona.<sup>34</sup>

The 'link with the past' is achieved not solely by way of Dylan's late period songwriting or singing voice, but by the pairing of the two as a function of both a performance of ageing and living archivism. Furthermore, Marshall's commentary on authenticity speaks to the suggestion raised in chapter two that the ageing grain of Dylan's voice authenticates his adoption of traditional American genres, or that Dylan's employment of intertextuality to convey themes on ageing authenticates his late period singing.

Thomas notes that with the release of *Time Out of Mind* in 1997, "...Dylan creates a voice whose songs look back across the years from a place of artistic

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<sup>34</sup> Lee Marshall, *Bob Dylan: The Never Ending Star*, 252.

confidence,” and while Dylan’s songwriting is the subject of Thomas’s praise, the very same is true of the singing voice.<sup>35</sup> The supposition in chapter two that age grants Dylan the confidence to sing from “back across the years” is affirmed here, and the interaction between his new writing and singing voices is central to the argument. Indeed, Dylan sings and writes in the voice and settings of the American past, but it is the vantage point of an artist looking back across his *own* years that authorizes this change in his songwriting.

Furthermore, Thomas’s exploration of Dylan’s late period intertextuality in *Why Bob Dylan Matters* offers revelatory insight into both the sources and extent of his intensified ‘borrowing’ from 1997 onward. Central to Thomas’s thesis is Dylan’s affinity for and relationship to classical Greek and Roman poets and his increasing incorporation of their works into his own. Whereas beat poetry and the work of Arthur Rimbaud inspired his mid-sixties shift toward surreal imagery, however, Dylan’s late period features intertextuality reaching increasingly further back in time.

Beginning in 1997, Dylan’s use of collage on *Time Out of Mind* is rampant – particularly on ‘Tryin’ To Get to Heaven.’ Thomas notes that the song “has at least ten intertexts that Dylan arranges and reworks to produce a song whose elements speak from their own original contexts, while at the same time becoming integral and vital parts of the new song;” the texts “that haunt it and form its backdrop” are the following:

1. Furry Lewis, “Turn Your Money Green”
2. Alan Lomax, “The Old Ark’s A-Moverin”
3. Byron Arnold, “Golden Chain”
3. Alan Lomax, “John the Revelator”

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<sup>35</sup> Thomas, *Why Bob Dylan Matters*, 187.



4. “Lonesome Valley,” African American spiritual
5. Woody Guthrie, “Hard Travelling”
6. Alan Lomax, “The Rising Sun Blues”
7. Woody Guthrie, “Poor Boy”
8. Woody Guthrie, “Going Down the Road Feeling Bad”
9. Alan Lomax, “Miss Mary Jane”
10. Woody Guthrie, “Bound for Glory”
11. Byron Arnold, “Buck-Eye Rabbit”<sup>36</sup>

While Thomas offers a more comprehensive overview of the particular lyrics stitched together from the songs listed here, it is worth noting that nine of the eleven are authored in the early-to-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. This interest in returning to Dylan’s early 1960s inspirations and songwriting practice coincides with Lanois’s understanding of Dylan’s mission on *Time Out of Mind*: “A new birth with the old dogs under your arm, like a stack of classic books.”<sup>37</sup> While the following chapter expands upon this discussion of the relationship between the “old dogs” and Dylan’s singing voice, it is now necessary to tie both singing and songwriting more closely together. A comparison of “Tryin’ to Get to Heaven” with the evolution of Dylan’s literary interests and borrowings, for example, furthers the claim that as the intertexts continue reach further back in time, so does Dylan’s voice.

While the presence of Junichi Saga’s *Confessions of a Yakuza* (1991) and Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) on “*Love and Theft*” is well established and widely known, Dylan’s use of the Roman poet Virgil (70-19 BCE) is less so.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 168-173.

<sup>37</sup> Daniel Lanois, *Soul Mining*, quoted by Currin, “Bob Dylan: Time Out Of Mind,” *Pitchfork*.

Thomas points to the lyrics of ‘Lonesome Day Blues’ in comparison to Book 6 of Virgil’s *Aenid*:

Dylan:

I’m gonna **spare** the **defeated**, boys I’m gonna speak to the crowd

I am goin’ to **teach peace** to the **conquered**

I’m gonna **tame the proud**

Virgil:

remember Roman, these will be your arts:

to **teach** the ways of **peace** to those you **conquer**,

to **spare defeated peoples, tame the proud**<sup>38</sup>

Dylan’s interest in Virgil would manifest itself far beyond the release of “*Love and Theft*,” his words sneakily finding their way into his interview responses (“And if you think it is so easy to quote [Henry Timrod]...**do it yourself and see how far you can get**”)<sup>39</sup> as well as those of Virgil historian Tacitus (c. 56-120) in Dylan’s description of Hank Williams’s influence: “In time, I became aware that in Hank’s recorded songs were the archetype rules of poetic songwriting. The architectural forms are like marble pillars and they had to be there.”<sup>40</sup> In the cases of “*Love and Theft*,” the *Rolling Stone* interview, and *Chronicles: Volume One* discussed here, Dylan’s literary interests have evolved from the folk revivalists haunting *Time Out of Mind* to the classical Roman poetry of Virgil from 2001 onward. The evolution of Dylan’s singing voice, then, reflects

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<sup>38</sup> Bob Dylan, ‘Lonesome Day Blues,’ “*Love and Theft*” (New York: Columbia, 2001) and Virgil, *Aenid*, cited in Thomas, *Why Bob Dylan Matters*, 194.

<sup>39</sup> Bob Dylan in Mikal Gilmore, “Dylan Unleashed,” *Rolling Stone*, September 27, 2012, cited in Thomas, *Why Bob Dylan Matters*, 204.

<sup>40</sup> Bob Dylan, *Chronicles: Volume One* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2004), 96, cited in Thomas, *Why Bob Dylan Matters*, 2012.

this progressive reaching-back in time for both inspiration and intertexts as it becomes ever older, more timeless and all-encompassing.

Similarly, as his lyrics and inspirations draw from successively older eras, Dylan's thematic interests become progressively more mystical and rootless yet both vaguely and unmistakably American, as on *Modern Times* and *Tempest*. Indeed, while it may seem that Dylan's employment of Saga and Virgil betrays the classically American persona for which this chapter has argued, Thomas appropriately asserts that the authors of "these nations and ages include imperial Rome and imperial Japan, but always America, particularly America of the nineteenth century, a time in which many of Dylan's lyrics, even he himself, have taken up residence"<sup>41</sup> in both his authorial and singing voices.<sup>42</sup>

The trend toward progressively earlier classical poetry would continue with *Modern Times* (2006), *Together Through Life* (2009), and *Tempest* (2012). As in the case of "Love and Theft," Dylan's use of Henry Timrod, Tin Pan Alley, and blues artists on *Modern Times* is common knowledge within the Dylan fan community. Thomas, however, posits the Augustan poet Ovid (43 BCE-17 AD) as equally present throughout.<sup>43</sup> Thomas outlines the extent of Dylan's 'borrowing' from Ovid's *Tristia* (8 AD), particularly on the track 'Workingman's Blues #2':

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<sup>41</sup> Thomas, *Why Dylan Matters*, 202.

<sup>42</sup> When in 2012 Mikal Gilmore asked Dylan about whether he considered himself "a particularly American voice," Dylan responded, "[The songs are] historical. But they're also biographical and geographical. They represent a particular state of mind. A particular territory."

<sup>43</sup> New Zealand poet Cliff Fell was first to uncover Dylan's borrowing of Ovid, according to Richard F. Thomas

<p><b>Bob Dylan, “Ain’t Talkin’</b> Heart burnin’, still yearning’ In the last outback at the world’s end</p>	<p><b>Ovid, <i>Black Sea Letters</i>, 2.7.66</b> 39 I’m in the last outback, at the world’s end</p>
<p><b>Bob Dylan, “Workingman’s Blues #2”</b> To lead me off in a cheerful dance.</p>	<p><b>Ovid, <i>Tristia</i>, 5.12.8</b> Or Niobe, bereaved, lead off some cheerful dance</p>
<p><b>Bob Dylan, “Workingman’s Blues #2”</b> Tell me now, am I wrong in thinking That you have forgotten me?</p>	<p><b>Ovid, <i>Tristia</i>, 5.13.18</b> May the gods grant... / that I’m wrong In thinking you’ve forgotten me!</p>
<p><b>Bob Dylan, “Workingman’s Blues #2”</b> My cruel weapons have Been put on the shelf / Come sit down on my knee</p>	<p><b>Ovid, <i>Tristia</i>, 2.179</b> Show mercy, I beg you, shelve your cruel weapons.</p>
<p><b>Bob Dylan, “Workingman’s Blues #2”</b> You are dearer to me than Myself / As you yourself can see.</p>	<p><b>Ovid, <i>Tristia</i> 5.14.2</b> Wife, dearer to me than myself, you yourself can see.<sup>44</sup></p>

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<sup>44</sup> Recreation of a chart presented in Thomas’s *Why Bob Dylan Matters*

References to Ovid would abound in years to come; Dylan's 2009 album *Together Through Life* begins with references to the *Tristia* on the opening track, 'Beyond Here Lies Nothin'.<sup>45</sup> In the cases of *Time Out of Mind*, "*Love and Theft*," and *Modern Times*, then, it is no coincidence that as Dylan's literary interests become progressively 'older,' so do both his authorial and singing voices.

Interestingly, the interiority of the ageing process (to be discussed in chapter four) – the nostalgia, self-reflection, and oftentimes, bitterness about decisions made and opportunities squandered – is reflected in Dylan's interest in Ovid. Thomas asserts that despite Ovid's classification as an 'exile poet,' there is little evidence indicating that the Augustan poet was ever indeed exiled from Rome.<sup>46</sup> Instead, he suggests an alternative explanation for Ovid's depiction of his own exile:

Ovid's exile poems are exercises in the genre of exile poetry, artistic creations of the voice of one suffering from solitude in a hostile, unwelcoming setting at the ends of the earth. That is how and why Dylan was attracted to them as he created the masks and voices of the songs on *Modern Times* that look back to the Roman poet.<sup>47</sup>

Thomas's two-part hypothesis is both reasonable and of particular relevance to a discussion of the intersection between Dylan's songwriting, singing, and late period persona from 1997 onward. The significance of Thomas's supposition is threefold. To begin, it suggests that whether or not Ovid was indeed writing from a place of exile, it is his *portrayal* of that experience that is significant and lasting. It is Ovid's adoption of the voice of solitude and suffering that conveys his hypothetical exile, rendering the verity of

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 245.

that experience irrelevant. Dylan's performance of the ageing process functions in much the same way; he is working in a genre of his own – one borne of the gamut of traditional American genres – and adopting ever-evolving authorial and singing voices in a performance of ageing to convey that authority. As in the case of Ovid, the legitimacy of Dylan's vocal deterioration is rendered secondary to his ability to create affect by way of his late period singing, songwriting, and performing. Quite simply, Ovid and Dylan's renditions of their respective experiences are just that – deliberate performances of thematic interests.

The “masks and voices” to which Thomas refers (likely metaphorically) are the very ones described throughout this study; it is the late period persona and its visual, sonic, and thematic representations of the ageing process that further Dylan's position as living archive. It is both his authorial voice, summoning Ovid from the ether, and his singing voice reflecting progressively more ancient interests, that constitute Dylan's late period discography. On *Modern Times*, however, Dylan perfects the formula. The nuance and subtlety of his artistry from 1997 onward – the performance of age by way of both the singing and authorial voices – is most elegantly enacted here as the deepening of Dylan's croak and the softening of his croon are handled with all the skill of classical epic poets and revered vocalists.

Dylan's most recent studio album of original material, *Tempest* (2012), completes the trend toward older and older literary interests in conjunction with a progressively older-sounding singing voice. Here, on an album where Dylan's voice is now both timeless and placeless in its age and imagery, his classical poet of choice transitions from Ovid (43 BCE -17 AD) to Homer (ca. 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE). Thomas outlines Homer's

numerous appearances on the album, most notably on ‘Tin Angel,’ ‘Narrow Way,’ ‘Pay in Blood,’ and ‘Early Roman Kings.’ Additionally, he likens Dylan and his newfound interest in transfiguration in 2012 to Odysseus, the “victim of enmity” and resilient hero of Homer’s *Iliad*.<sup>48</sup> Dylan would go on to liken himself to the mythological protagonist in both a promotional interview for the release of *Triplicate* in 2017 (“you’d have to get yourself strapped to the mast like Odysseus and plug up your ears so you wouldn’t hear her. She’d make you forget who you were,” Dylan says of Joan Baez) and multiple times throughout his Nobel lecture in the same year.<sup>49</sup> The notion raised previously that Dylan had intentionally emphasized the raggedness of his croak to reflect the ‘older’ or more timeless themes of *Tempest* is brought into clearer focus here; Dylan, having now “transfigured into Odysseus, the wandering survivor of so many blows,” sings with all the scorn, resilience, and experience of an ancient man escaped from Hades or Death Valley.<sup>50</sup>

## 2.6. Conclusion

It has been the intention of this chapter to outline the ways in which Bob Dylan reimagined his role in popular music, and indeed American popular culture, as a living archive of both traditional American music and iconography. The transition of Dylan’s image from rock and roll has-been throughout the 1980s and first half of the 1990s involves, quite broadly, a reconsideration and overhaul of Dylan’s singing voice, his songwriting practice and thematic interests, and his public image. The wildly complex ways in which the three work together, placing Dylan in both a forgotten American past

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<sup>48</sup> Mark Cartwright, “Odysseus,” *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, December 31, 2012, <https://www.ancient.eu/odysseus/>

<sup>49</sup> Thomas, *Why Bob Dylan Matters*.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 259.

in a new millennium and the twilight of his career - one that continues to yield remarkable material - are of central concern here. Of utmost importance in understanding the ways in which Dylan works toward establishing his new role is his performance of the ageing process. This enactment of advancing age, I argue, is the common hallmark of Dylan's late period singing and authorial voices, as well as his public persona from 1997 onward, linking each element to form a cohesive and authoritative whole. Elliott, considering the roles of both the singing and authorial voice in the representation of age in popular music, states:

The writing of time, age and experience into popular song is...found in what the hand writes and the voice sings and these processes [take on]...a variety of manifestations: the writing of songs, the construction of public persona, the reporting of the self in interview, memoir and other means.<sup>51</sup>

Bob Dylan's creative and critical renaissance, primarily centered on the releases of consecutive critically lauded studio albums from 1997 to 2017, has also notably been constructed through the process of self-mythologizing to which Elliott alludes. The intersection of Dylan's late period songwriting and singing in the creation of a mystical American icon persona, paired with high-profile commercial appearances and enigmatic 21<sup>st</sup>-century Never Ending Tour, have arguably played an equally important role in establishing Dylan's role of living archive and elder statesman.

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<sup>51</sup> Elliott, *The Late Voice: Time, Age and Experience in Popular Music*, 50.



### Chapter 3: 'My Bell Still Rings':

#### Advancing Age, Intentionality, and Dylan's Vocal Archivism

Some of the music critics say I can't sing. I croak. Sound like a frog. Why don't these same critics say similar things about Tom Waits? They say my voice is shot. That I have no voice. Why don't they say those things about Leonard Cohen?

-Bob Dylan, 2015 MusiCares speech

#### 3.1. 'I Aint Dead Yet': The Role of Singing in Dylan's Late Period

To discuss Bob Dylan's singing voice exclusively in terms of its myriad personae – “the new Woody Guthrie, the voice of the Movement, the rock-and-roll Fellini, the poet of the bad trip and the doomed love affair, the minimalist mystic, the back-to-basics country boy” and gospel preacher - would be to both retread stale and clichéd Dylanological territory and to undermine the various *signifiers* of those voices as they relate to the biographical and thematic eras of Dylan's career and discography.<sup>52</sup> By this I mean that with each new vocal character throughout his discography, and as Dylan's voice continues to evolve, much of the academic and critical discourse has remained firmly within the framework of persona: as his artistry progresses and evolves, Dylan adopts new vocal techniques and styles such as those mentioned previously.

While this is undeniably the case (see *Blonde on Blonde*, *Nashville Skyline*, and *Saved*), those concerned often fail to consider the underlying motives of each 'new' voice. Ever a source of debate, “Dylan's assault on musical conventions precedes his words and music; it begins with his delivery. His voice (or voices) and the way he used it (them) generate the first visceral responses of attraction or revulsion,” a suggestion perhaps

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<sup>52</sup> Benjamin Hedin, *Studio A: The Bob Dylan Reader* (New York: Norton, 2006), 239.

never more true than in the last twenty years of Dylan's career.<sup>53</sup> Granted, Bob Dylan's singing voice has rarely, if ever, been lauded for its technical mastery as in the case of Frank Sinatra. Dave Laing posits, however, that "deprived of the conventional beauties of singing as a place for identification, for distraction, the listener may shift to some other aspect of the voice," that which Roland Barthes terms the 'third meaning' or 'genosong.'<sup>54</sup> Barthes describes this dimension of the voice as "not what it says, but the voluptuousness of its sound-signifiers – where melody explores how the language works and identifies with that work."<sup>55</sup> Of interest here, then, is not *what* Dylan sings, or even *how* he sings it. Rather, the work at hand concerns itself with *why* he sings it *that way*.

This discussion is inspired in large part by the most recent installment of Dylan's late period, and one that merits close inspection and contextualization within Dylan's portrayal of advancing age. The so-called 'standards albums', consisting largely of songs from the American Songbook performed by Frank Sinatra, feature vocal performances of a quality not heard since perhaps *Blood on The Tracks* (1975), so intimate and convincing as to merit comparison to even America's finest crooners. Indeed, both Dylan's much improved vocal technique and the project at large – American standards albums often signaling a waning muse, record contract fulfillment, or easy cash-in, as in the cases of Paul McCartney and Rod Stewart – surprised and repelled much of even Dylan's most devout fanbase. I argue, however, that *Shadows in the Night* (2015), *Fallen Angels* (2016), and *Triplicate* (2017) mark a logical progression within Dylan's recorded

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 286.

<sup>54</sup> Laing, Dave, *One Chord Wonders: Power and Meaning in Punk Rock*, (Oakland: Pm Press, 2015), 54.

<sup>55</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice." In *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word*, edited by Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (London: Routledge, 1990), 295.

output and central project from 1997 onward.

This chapter addresses more specifically Bob Dylan's singing voice as a primary conveyor of advancing age and his newly claimed role as elder statesman and living archive of American music from the release of *Time Out of Mind* (1997) to the present day. Throughout this twenty-year period Dylan's singing voice has been the source of derision, scrutiny, and curiosity, by turns gratingly husky and charmingly sweet. In fact, Dylan's latter-day singing may well be most easily categorized as either a croak or a croon – the former representing the sandpaper bark for which Dylan's late period has so often been maligned by casual fans (hear 'Honest With Me,' 'My Wife's Home Town,' and 'Pay In Blood for examples), and the latter, the refined and wistful singing as heard on 'Spirit On The Water' 'Autumn Leaves,' and 'I Could Have Told You.' Of particular interest here is Dylan's apparent ability to toggle between the two extremes and the ways in which the two defining modes of his late period singing serve each album and Dylan's central late-period project at large.

One contention of this chapter is that Bob Dylan has intentionally and somewhat strategically employed both modes to serve and convey his position as a living archive of American vernacular music. This is in contrast to the popular narrative that time and age have ravaged Dylan's ability to sing effectively. Indeed, Dylan's advancing age is evidenced by the ever-changing character of his singing voice; I posit however, that scholarship and criticism of Dylan's late-period voice frequently, and perhaps naively, assign too little intention to Dylan's vocal performances from *Time Out of Mind* onward.

The latter argument, one rooted in traditional tropes of advancing age as necessarily indicative of decline and deterioration, provides an all-too-easy explanation

for detractors of Dylan's late period, and one lacking in the nuance that "ageing is simultaneously a collective human condition and an individualized subjective experience" rather than a direct trajectory toward physical and intellectual decline.<sup>56</sup> Though Dylan's singing is commonly read as the rapid deterioration of a once-iconic voice (a phenomenon to be discussed throughout the chapter), I assert that his late period singing exhibits a *portrayal* of advancing age as decline rather than the *actual* withering of his voice.<sup>57</sup> While such an assertion may be met with resistance (and a difficulty separating the two notions), the skillful and controlled voice of *Shadows In The Night*, *Fallen Angels*, and *Triplicate* implicates the 'croaking' mode of singing as an intentional artistic decision on Dylan's part.

The chapter at hand concerns itself with Dylan's late-period singing voice as it serves the albums *Time Out Of Mind* (1997), *"Love and Theft"* (2001), *Modern Times* (2006), *Together Through Life* (2009), *Tempest* (2012), *Shadows In The Night* (2015), *Fallen Angels* (2016), and *Triplicate* (2017), framing the evolution of Dylan's singing within the larger context of his late-period project of embodying various genres of traditional American music. The discourse employs academic Dylanological commentary on Dylan's singing in tandem with reviews of each album by major publications as a means of distilling the principal and most common evaluations of Bob Dylan's ageing voice. Of further interest here are the ways in which Dylan's evolving singing voice reflects both the physical and psychological ageing process, as well as the roles of genre

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<sup>56</sup> Mike Hepworth, *Stories of Ageing* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000), 1

<sup>57</sup> While Dylan's singing voice has seldom been recognized for its technical beauty, deterioration here refers to the physical weakening of the voice, its breaking and cracking, rather than its technical delivery. Per Roland Barthes's theory of the "Grain of the voice," it is the geno-song of Dylan's voice (not "what it says, but the voluptuousness of its sound-signifiers") rather than its pheno-song ("everything in the performance which is in the service of communication, representation, expression...") that is in question here.

convention, minstrelsy, and experience in Dylan's projection of advancing age.

### 3.2. 'Tryin' to Get to Heaven': *Time Out of Mind* and the New Old Voice

The release of *Time Out of Mind* in 1997 introduced the latest installment of Dylan's ever-evolving singing voice to his most widespread audience since *Oh Mercy* (1989). Certainly, Dylan's 'new old' voice had begun to rear its head throughout the 1990s on *Good As I Been To You* (1992), *World Gone Wrong* (1993), and *MTV Unplugged* (1995), but Lee Marshall contends that because those albums failed to reach a large audience, the voice of *Time Out of Mind* sounded "way older than Dylan himself" and bore "no relation to what Bob Dylan's voice was supposed to sound like," particularly given Dylan's age of fifty-six.<sup>58</sup> Dylan's singing scratches and gargles throughout, revealing every wrinkle in his weary, road-worn voice. Despite the nasality of this new, aged voice, little else in Dylan's singing harkened back to previous decades; it was too raw, too throaty, and too coarse to recall any of his previous vocal characters. Marshall describes the aged voice as sounding "as old as Methuselah...this voice certainly has a grain, a thick, coarse grain with a natural dignity and beauty: the grain of a 400-year-old tree burning with the bark still on," the voice of a man ravaged and trapped in the merciless undertow of time.<sup>59</sup>

While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to deconstruct the album's lyrical themes ad nauseam, it is both obvious and essential to note that *Time Out of Mind* marked a style of songwriting defined by concise lyrics addressing mortality, impending death, the afterlife, and similarly morbid and desolate themes. Critics were quick to connect Dylan's newfound concern with mortality with his recent hospitalization for a

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<sup>58</sup> Lee Marshall, *Bob Dylan: The Never Ending Star* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 236.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 236-7.

potentially life-threatening heart infection earlier in the year.<sup>60</sup> While such conclusions were mistaken – Dylan had recorded the album before his brush with death had taken place - there was little doubt that the new voice both reflected and effectively conveyed the album’s macabre subject matter.

Reviews of *Time Out of Mind* were universally laudatory, hailing the release as a significant contribution to Dylan’s discography and a long-awaited and seemingly impossible return to glory following the false start of *Oh Mercy* eight years earlier. Critics cited the early rock and roll and blues instrumentation, Daniel Lanois’ murky, reverb-laden production, Dylan’s vocal performance and the album’s subject matter as *Time Out of Mind*’s most revolutionary features. More specifically, Dylan’s singing voice was frequently described as complementing and enacting the songs’ claustrophobic and desolate lyrics, as in *Billboard*’s celebratory retrospective:

The album opens with pulsing Farfisa organ on ‘Love Sick,’ Dylan groaning, “I’m sick of love. I’m love sick.” Guitars recoil like a Slinky as he croaks, “My feet are so tired, my brain is so wired...” On slo-mo country rocker ‘Million Miles,’ he croons, “I try to get closer but I’m still a million miles away from you...”<sup>61</sup>

Highlighting Dylan’s groaning, croaking, and crooning, Goodman posits the singing voice as a vehicle for the lyrical subject matter, which speaks of illness, fatigue, and longing. It is therefore Dylan’s withered voice that authenticates the experience of age that permeates *Time Out of Mind*. Similarly, Grayson Currin notes that “even as Dylan

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 235.

<sup>61</sup> William Goodman, “Bob Dylan’s Career-Reviving Classic ‘Time Out Of Mind’ Turns 20,” *Billboard*, September 30, 2017, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/rock/7981868/bob-dylan-time-out-of-mind-album>

plays tender piano above a pillow-top organ, he sounds absolutely broken, the cracks of his voice widening into chasms,” a comment that alludes to both the physical decline that accompanies advancing age and the interpretive nature of Dylan’s rendition.<sup>62</sup>

While Currin and other critics frequently mentioned the quality of Dylan’s voice as an appropriate expression of his lyrics, none venture to suggest that Dylan’s croaking, crooning, and groaning were more than serendipitous. Such vocal quirks were framed within the notion that Dylan simply sounded older than his years as he sang “I just don’t see why I should even care / It’s not dark yet, but it’s getting there” and similar sentiments of resignation.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, Lee Marshall attributes the album’s success to “a consistent and coherent sound that was in harmony with Dylan’s star-image. This occurs primarily through the voice...and in the lyrics,” without considering the role of *intention* in Dylan’s elderly-sounding vocals.<sup>64</sup>

While age and touring would certainly have contributed to the evolution of Dylan’s voice on *Time Out of Mind*, the creaks and clogs in the vocal performances are too many to be a coincidental accompaniment to the album’s subject matter. Rather, I suggest that Dylan sought to embellish and showcase those characteristics of his voice that are so commonly read as deterioration. A necessary aid to such a decision is Daniel Lanois’ muddy, reverb-soaked production which renders Dylan’s voice simultaneously timeless and buried in a graveyard of rock and roll and blues instrumentation. Lanois himself acknowledged Dylan’s vision for the album’s vintage sound:

Dylan sent Lanois home with a list of reference records to study – Charlie Patton,

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<sup>62</sup> Grayson Haver Currin, “Bob Dylan: Time Out Of Mind,” *Pitchfork*, May 13, 2018, <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/bob-dylan-time-out-of-mind/>

<sup>63</sup> Bob Dylan, ‘Not Dark Yet,’ *Time Out of Mind* (New York: Columbia Records, 1997).

<sup>64</sup> Marshall, *The Never Ending Star*, 233.

Little Walter, Little Willie John, a mix of ragged blues and primordial rock. “I listened to these records, and I understood,” Lanois wrote in his memoir, *Soul Mining*. “A new birth with the old dogs under your arm, like a stack of classic books.”<sup>65</sup>

The suggestion that Dylan and Lanois consciously sought to distill and recreate the production of old blues records is a fruitful one, and perhaps the strongest indication that Lanois’ trademark production purposely served to embellish the less refined qualities of Dylan’s elderly-sounding voice.

Further evidence is provided by demos and outtakes for *Time Out of Mind*, released on *The Bootleg Series, Vol.8: Tell Tale Signs* (2006). Demo versions of ‘Mississippi’ (to be omitted from the album and released on “*Love and Theft*”), ‘Red River Shore’ (also omitted), and ‘Can’t Wait’ reveal a voice years, if not decades younger bereft of Lanois’ production. Gone is the reverb that renders Dylan’s voice the echo of a man trapped in the past, and with it, the cracks and scratches that convey the sense of decay that permeates *Time Out of Mind*. Interestingly, the process of returning to a bygone era of musical recording entailed the use of such modern “technological conveniences as tape-looped rhythm tracks,” in a sense demanding “Bob to step into the future,” per Lanois’ own admission.<sup>66</sup> Resistant to Lanois’ suggestion, “Dylan hoped to push back the clock...he wanted his vocals to pack the punch of old recordings,” resulting in the album’s distinctive sonic quality.<sup>67</sup> In this sense *Time Out of Mind* is notable for its sonic references to a forgotten time, which necessarily entailed the expediting of the ageing process in Dylan’s voice.

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<sup>65</sup> Currin, “Bob Dylan: Time Out Of Mind,” *Pitchfork*.

<sup>66</sup> Hedin, *Studio A: The Bob Dylan Reader*, 238.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*



Dylan's newfound role as a living archive of American music would likely be diminished, if not impossible, were it not for this rapidly ageing singing voice. Marshall points to 1997 as the year in which this project takes fruition, establishing Dylan as the elder statesman of the gamut of American musics:

The events of 1997 provided a finishing point to the linear narrative of Dylan's career. That neatness, that linear packaging that normally occurs after an artist is dead and gone, happens to Dylan in 1997. Even though he doesn't die, Dylan's history stops. He has a history, an important one that gives his current status gravitas, but now he is not making history but encompassing history.<sup>68</sup>

While Marshall's claim references Dylan's brush with death, I argue that the voice of *Time Out of Mind* and its subsequent influence on the album's reception are inseparable from Dylan's dramatic hospitalization and the solidification of his apotheosis to his current status. His near-death experience, paired with a voice that enacts that experience and gives credence to Dylan's mortality, are integral to the authentication of Dylan as a living historical archive.

In a *New York Times* interview in promotion of *Time Out of Mind*, Dylan outlined the basis for the new album and the tradition within which he had always worked: "My songs come out of folk music...I love that whole pantheon. To me there's no difference between Muddy Waters and Bill Monroe," he says, before highlighting various sonic elements (namely rockabilly and country-blues guitar licks) that he had lifted from artists before him.<sup>69</sup> While Dylan's history of borrowing lyrics and sonic references to blues

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<sup>68</sup> Marshall, *The Never Ending Star*, 267.

<sup>69</sup> Bob Dylan quoted in Jon Pareles, "A Wiser Voice Blowin' In the Autumn Wind," *New York Times*, September 28, 1997. <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/09/28/arts/pop-jazz-a-wiser-voice-blowin-in-the-autumn-wind.html>.

instrumentation are widely known, it follows that both his vocal delivery and the very grain of Dylan's voice intentionally point to the likes of Waters and Monroe (both of whom performed until shortly before their deaths) – a possibility largely overlooked among critics and scholars of Dylan's late period.

Simon Frith posits that as artists age, “we assume that we can hear someone's life in their voice – a life that's there despite and not because of the singer's craft,” a suggestion that may well apply to artists less manipulative than Dylan.<sup>70</sup> Rather, the sound of age is a hallmark of Dylan's late discography and vocal ability, and a defining characteristic of his late period - because and not despite of Dylan's craft. Marshall posits that his “dignity and defiance in the face of age, is a key feature...of Dylan's post-'97 stardom generally,” though a more nuanced reading would conclude that it is not “in the face of age” in which Dylan thrives but in the acceptance, projection, and embellishment of that age that renders Dylan unique among his peers and serves as the central project of his post-'97 rebirth.<sup>71</sup>

### **3.3. 'From the Dark Room of His Mind': “*Love and Theft*” and Minstrelsy as Ethnography**

The release of “*Love and Theft*” marked both the continuation of Dylan's interest in channeling the roots of America's musical landscape, and a more varied repertoire of vocal stylings to convey that historical interest. More eclectic than its predecessor, “*Love and Theft*” “brings together elements of bluegrass, country, rock, folk and blues...like a deep and brightly colored stratigraphy that reveals the history of a geological age” with

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<sup>70</sup> Simon Frith in Marshall, *The Never Ending Star*, 237.

<sup>71</sup> This is in stark contrast to many of Dylan's 1960s peers including Paul McCartney, Elton John, and the Rolling Stones, who continue to perform as “nostalgia acts” retreading their 1960s and 70s hits and seeking to emulate the performance styles of their youths.

Dylan exploring not only the American past, but the potential of his own voice to summon that past as well.<sup>72</sup>

Now free of the weight and murk of Daniel Lanois' heavy-handed production, Dylan's voice rings out crystal clear, revealing a more multi-dimensional aged voice than the uniformly nasal croak of *Time Out of Mind*. While Dylan's production (under the pseudonym Jack Frost) lightens his voice of the bile heard on *Time Out of Mind*, however, "*Love and Theft*" serves Dylan's late period project in a different manner. From the rockabilly opening track 'Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum,' the listener is "whirled into a maelstrom of voices and perspectives, as though Dylan is a human switchboard, directing the babble of history and culture through his music," affecting the delivery and mannerisms typical of the genres and traditions he seeks to emulate.<sup>73</sup>

Of particular interest to Dylan here is early rock and roll ('Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum,' 'Summer Days'), Delta blues ('Lonesome Day Blues,' 'Honest With Me,' 'High Water (For Charlie Patton),' 'Cry A While,') , Tin Pan Alley vocal jazz ('Bye and Bye,' 'Floater (Too Much to Ask),' 'Moonlight,') and hillbilly balladry ('Po Boy,' 'Sugar Baby'). Indeed, Dylan's vocal delivery shifts and adapts to different genres so rapidly throughout "*Love and Theft*" that the album "comes on as a musical autobiography that also sounds like a casual, almost accidental history of the country" as Dylan unreservedly acts out his lifelong musical interests.<sup>74</sup> In the rockabilly opener, for example, he sings, "living in the land of Nooooooohhhhh / Trustin' their fate to the hands

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<sup>72</sup> Hedin, *Studio A: The Bob Dylan Reader*, 263.

<sup>73</sup> Michael Stevens, "Bob Dylan, Love and Theft," *PopMatters*, September 10, 2001, <https://www.popmatters.com/dylanbob-love-2495888307.html>.

<sup>74</sup> Rob Sheffield, "Love and Theft," *Rolling Stone*, September 27, 2001, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-album-reviews/love-and-theft-252644/>.

of God” with palpable enjoyment, tasting the elongated word on his tongue as sliding double stops ring out on guitar.<sup>75</sup> On the swinging early rock and roll shuffle ‘Summer Days,’ Dylan playfully (and somewhat breathlessly) raps, “Well I’m drivin’ in the flats in a Cadillac car / The girls all say, ‘You’re a worn out star’” with the verve of Little Richard and Chuck Berry – only to be followed by the breezy jazz crooning of ‘Bye and Bye.’<sup>76</sup>

While examples of Dylan’s eclectic singing ability abound, it is the versatility of the singing voice on “*Love and Theft*” that is of concern here. Back from the brink of death, Dylan’s singing and the songs of “*Love and Theft*” delve more thoroughly into the American musical past than that of its predecessor. While he sounded older than his years in 1997, Dylan sounded older than time itself in 2001, guiding his audience through a tour of a forgotten America. Whereas the late-period project was served best by Dylan’s sounding near death on *Time Out of Mind*, Dylan here serves his role as archive of American music by way of the versatility of his ageing voice.

Interestingly, reviews of “*Love and Theft*” took the same approach to Dylan’s voice as those of *Time Out of Mind*, highlighting the withering voice as complementary to the songs but failing to consider the possibility of intention:

Bob treats us to a, frankly, sprightly jog through just about every style available to a man of his experience. Sure, the voice is now barely more than a croak and the words don’t have the weight that used to be termed...Dylanesque, but only a

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<sup>75</sup> Bob Dylan, ‘Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum,’ “*Love and Theft*,” (New York: Columbia, 2001).

<sup>76</sup> Bob Dylan, ‘Summer Days,’ “*Love and Theft*,” (New York: Columbia, 2001).

churl would begrudge the pleasures to be had in songs as bouncy as ‘Bye and Bye’ and the nonsensical opener ‘Tweedle Dee.’<sup>77</sup>

Here, Dylan’s age, stylistic versatility, and voice are emphasized, yet any indication of the voice as a conscious artistic decision is overlooked. I propose, however, that if Dylan’s age grants him the experience needed to emulate different genres of American music, it then follows that the voice serves as the primary vehicle for that experience and the archival work of *“Love and Theft.”* Sheffield hints at a potential relationship between Dylan’s recent songwriting and voice, stating that “after those last few creaky floorboards gave way, the man came up with a whole new songwriting style for the voice he was left with,” though I posit that the reverse is true.<sup>78</sup> Sheffield’s assertion would indeed make little sense in the case of ‘Po’ Boy,’ on which Dylan harkens back to the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with a soft, acoustic jazz chord progression. It is unlikely that a diminished vocal ability would prompt any songwriter to concoct an arrangement and lyrical delivery as eccentric and evocative of a specific historical moment as ‘Po’ Boy.’ Rather, a more intuitive reading of the song (and indeed *“Love and Theft”* at large) would suggest that Dylan’s strained yet nuanced performance is intended to evoke the genre’s conventions.

Of particular interest here is *“Love and Theft”*’s fascination with Delta blues and the appropriation of traditionally southern African American genre and language. Whereas critics often failed to investigate the relationship between the album’s eclecticism, historical work, and Dylan’s vocal performances, academic research largely overlooks the potential of Dylan’s singing as a vital component of his particular brand of

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<sup>77</sup> Chris Jones, “Bob Dylan Love and Theft Review,” *BBC*, 2002, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/music/reviews/54hj/>.

<sup>78</sup> Sheffield, “Love and Theft,” *Rolling Stone*.

minstrelsy. Such work often frames Dylan's late period songwriting within the minstrel tradition (a practice in which he has arguably participated throughout his career), but of concern here is the notion of his late period singing as a missing piece of the complex and uncomfortable puzzle that is Dylan's modern minstrelsy.

The theorization presented here rests on the concession that the singing style of "*Love and Theft*" does not directly recall that of 19<sup>th</sup> century minstrelsy as heard in blackface performances and 'coon songs.' Rather, Dylan's engagement with the predominantly African American genres of "*Love and Theft*" and the sources from which he borrows implicate Dylan's singing and delivery in his participation in the tradition. For modern Dylanology to consider Dylan's place within the minstrel tradition responsibly, however, his transmogrification of a once-sinister and ill-natured practice should be outlined carefully. For this reason, I argue that Dylan inherited or adapted minstrelsy as a mode of performance, with its own complex set of origins, motivations, and purposes, while shedding minstrelsy's cruel and patronizing intentions.

It should also be noted that Dylan's expertly branded 'authenticity' in the performance of "*Love and Theft's*" styles is born of a profound respect for the artists he seeks to revive. This notion works not in contrast to, but in tandem with, "the position favoring minstrelsy as a people's culture typically celebrat[ing] the minstrel show's folk authenticity, its elevation of black types and black culture...to a place in the national mythology" despite its overtly racist depictions.<sup>79</sup> This is not to say that "*Love and Theft*," or other instances of Dylan's conspicuous mimicry and emulation of African American genres is without ethical or cultural implications. Despite Hedin's claim that "there's no message to this modern minstrel style. It is a style, a long-evolving style, not

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<sup>79</sup> Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, 30.

a doctrine or an ideology,” research on Dylan’s late period must continue to dissect, problematize, and examine the complex ways in which Dylan’s role as living archive of American music evokes and participates in modern minstrelsy.<sup>80</sup>

Indeed, considering Dylan and the minstrel tradition within the framework of a mode of performance transformed with the passage of time offers a particularly fertile theory for his impetus and attraction to minstrelsy. W.T. Lahmon, Jr. suggests that minstrelsy in its early-to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century form often featured blackface performers – or African American characters – making light of their own dire circumstances:

Blackface action [was] usually slashing back at the pretensions and politesse of authority more than at blackness. Instead, there was laughter in the face of the gallows and violence, the gibbet of public remark, and preaching censure...<sup>81</sup>

It follows that the crude gallows humor of blackface minstrelsy offered a point of attraction for Dylan, whose wry wit and almost comically forlorn perspective distinguish “*Love and Theft*” from his other late period studio albums. Lott, commenting on the relationship between the album’s woeful thematic content and its primary genre, indicates, “I think we do in fact see a connection between loss – lost love, lost relatives, lost time – and the blues format in which Dylan has chosen to represent that loss” to occasionally humorous effect.<sup>82</sup> Given Lahmon’s suggestion of “laughter in the face of the gallows” and Lott’s theory of the blues as a vehicle for the album’s forlorn themes, it follows that Dylan’s adaptation of minstrelsy as a mode of performance serves to make

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<sup>80</sup> Hedin, *Studio A: The Bob Dylan Reader*, 267.

<sup>81</sup> Lahmon’s claim seemingly downplays the malevolence of blackface minstrelsy in his claim that it targeted authority “more than blackness,” but it is the suggestion of a ‘gallows humor’ element that offers a potential explanation for Dylan’s attraction to minstrelsy.

<sup>82</sup> Eric Lott, “When Bob Dylan Came Knocking,” Ensemble video, 01:12:16, September 04, 2009, <https://ensemble.dickinson.edu/Watch/Lc8s6CZt>

light of his own hardships – namely, vengeful women, loneliness, and the ‘high water’ of unnamable malaise. More simply, Dylan employs his unique brand of minstrelsy on “*Love and Theft*” as a language to make light of his numerous and varied misfortunes at the hands of others:

Well my pa he died and left me, my brother got killed in the war

My sister, she ran off and married

Never was heard of anymore<sup>83</sup>

My woman got a face like a teddy bear

She's tossin' a baseball bat in the air

The meat is so tough you can't cut it with a sword

I'm crashin' my car, trunk first into the boards<sup>84</sup>

To this point, scholars have framed Dylan’s career-long participation in modern minstrelsy in terms of his plagiarism of African American artists and appropriation of Southern American genres. “*Love and Theft*,” however, offered new fodder for the discussion by way of Dylan’s newfound sense of humor throughout the album’s lyrics. Benjamin Hedin points to such lyrics as “Man says, "Freddy!" I say, "Freddy who?" He says, "Freddy or not here I come" and “I’m sittin’ on my watch so I can be on time,” among others, as evidence of “*Love and Theft*’s” fascination with minstrelsy.<sup>85</sup> Hedin argues that “all of these high-low jokes...are in the updated minstrel style,” though

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<sup>83</sup> Bob Dylan, ‘Lonesome Day Blues,’ “*Love and Theft*,” (New York: Columbia, 2001).

<sup>84</sup> Bob Dylan, ‘Honest With Me,’ “*Love and Theft*,” (New York: Columbia, 2001).

<sup>85</sup> Bob Dylan, ‘Po’ Boy,’ “*Love and Theft*,” (New York: Columbia, 2001).



Dylan's deadpan delivery is seldom mentioned.<sup>86</sup> In its original early-to-mid-nineteenth century format, minstrel performances consisted of "young working-class white men...jumping and singing in a googly-eyed 'Yass suh, nooooo sah' dialect about sex and love and death and just plain nonsense,"<sup>87</sup> all of which feature prominently in the humor of "*Love and Theft*."<sup>88</sup> While Dylan seemingly forgoes the racist diction outlined by Hedin, however, Wilentz applauds Dylan for mastering "his own performing style, or at least his recorded performing style. Listen to the breakneck opening lines of 'Cry a While' – 'didn't havta' wanna' havta' deal with...'," despite overlooking the possibility that Dylan's delivery nods to the minstrel tradition of mimicking stereotypical African American vernacular.<sup>89</sup>

The question may well be raised then, of why Dylan's singing on "*Love and Theft*" necessarily, though indirectly, connotes minstrelsy, and whether the same would be true of other artists singing the same songs. The argument at hand rests on the supposition that the voice itself, regardless of what it is saying, is political by nature. Because Dylan has accumulated the age and experience necessary to claim the position of living archive, and because of his well-known interest in American musical traditions

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<sup>86</sup> Hedin, *Studio A: The Bob Dylan Reader*, 265.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> The intention and tone of blackface minstrelsy featured a complex interplay between overt and abhorrent racism and a fascination with African American song and vernacular. According to Lahmon, Jr., early historians of 19<sup>th</sup> century blackface minstrelsy seemingly acknowledged the patronizing nature of the practice as "it told of their supposedly simple southern ways," while simultaneously positing minstrelsy as a celebration of "black people's genius for contentment" (2000, 22). This perspective would change, however. According to Eric Lott, "there is no question that nineteenth-century blackface acts cast doubt on the idea that blacks and whites shared a common humanity. Their racist gibes and pastoral gambols asserted that slavery was amusing, right, and natural" (2017, 35), though he also cites Ralph Ellison's observation that white minstrel performers necessarily listened closely to African American vernacular.

<sup>89</sup> Sean Wilentz, *Bob Dylan in America*, (New York: Double Day, 2010), 275

and history, his singing voice necessarily encompasses those traditions – including that of minstrelsy.

“*Love and Theft*” represents two disparate and seemingly contradictory functions of minstrelsy. On one hand, Dylan (perhaps unintentionally) highlights the embeddedness of African American musical traditions within White American culture at large. Eric Lott, whose 1993 exploration of 19<sup>th</sup> century blackface minstrelsy *Love and Theft* served as the inspiration for the album’s title, asserts that “from ‘Oh! Susanna’ to Elvis Presley, from circus clowns to Saturday morning cartoons, blackface acts and words have figured significantly in the white Imaginary of the United States,” highlighting the tradition’s potent and largely overlooked legacy.<sup>90</sup> Presley, the figurehead of early rock and roll – a genre popularized by white imitations of its African American originators – offers an early example of the kind of ingrained nature of minstrelsy to which Lott refers, particularly in terms of vocal technique. Presley’s stardom was founded on the notion of minstrel singing at hand, as indicated by Sam Philips’s<sup>91</sup> declaration, “If I could find a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel, I could make a billion dollars.”<sup>92</sup>

Middleton argues that in Presley’s case, the emulation of African American blues singers is accomplished by way of ‘boogiefication,’ wherein “the basic vocal rhythms are triplets and...the off-beat quaver is often given an unexpected accent, producing syncopation and cross-rhythm” in the style of black boogie-woogie singers.<sup>93</sup> Elvis seemingly exaggerates such techniques by slurring words and adding extra off-beat

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<sup>90</sup> Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 4.

<sup>91</sup> Founder of Sun Records

<sup>92</sup> Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1990), 18.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*, 18-19.

notes, recalling the absurd imitations of African Americans by blackface minstrel performers.<sup>94</sup> While no such exaggeration or emulation is immediately detectable in Dylan's singing on "*Love and Theft*," the argument for minstrelsy's legacy as embedded within contemporary musical performances by white artists is an important one, and a notion highlighted by Dylan's very presence on the songs of "*Love and Theft*."

At the very least, Dylan works within the framework of Lott's notion of "black mirroring," consisting of "the mechanics, dispositions, and effects of the dominant culture's looking at itself always through a fantasized black Other" – a tried and true hallmark of white rock music-making at large.<sup>95</sup> Dylan, therefore, necessarily traffics in "the very medium of white luxury and privilege" and the legacy of minstrelsy at every turn on "*Love and Theft*."<sup>96</sup> Quite broadly, adapting blues and minstrelesque instrumentation, as on 'High Water (For Charlie Patton),' necessarily situates Dylan in relation to the black Others who haunt the album.

Dylan's particular brand of minstrelsy on "*Love and Theft*," however, functions more covertly by way of his vocal delivery of lyrics inspired by - and directly lifted from - African American artists. Granted, Dylan has arguably always participated in the minstrel tradition, from the blues inflection of *Highway 61 Revisited* and *Blonde on Blonde* to his inversion of blackface by painting his face white on the Rolling Thunder Revue to the more obvious appropriation of gospel throughout his born-again period.<sup>97</sup> "*Love and Theft*" carries this engagement into the 21<sup>st</sup> century; Hedin asserts that "now, as then, Dylan is a minstrel, filching other people's diction and mannerisms...and

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>95</sup> Eric Lott, *Black Mirror: The Cultural Contradictions of American Racism*, (London: The Belknap Press, 2017), xvii.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Wilentz, *Bob Dylan in America*, 267.

transforming them and making them his own, a form of larceny that is as American as apple pie” and one that Dylan arguably hones in 2001.<sup>98</sup> This is due, I argue, in large part to the aged voice of Dylan’s late period, wherein the increasingly weathered grain of his voice emulates blues singing more convincingly than at any other time in his career.

Crucially, Dylan’s voice on “*Love and Theft*” had evolved to the point of *sounding* like the sources from which he had always lifted. On ‘High Water (For Charlie Patton),’ for example, Dylan sings with a gusto and growl evocative, if not imitative, of Patton’s performance of ‘High Water Everywhere.’ Haggard blues singing abounds on ‘Honest With Me,’ ‘Lonesome Day Blues,’ and ‘Cry A While,’ all written and delivered in the Delta blues style. The best evidence for the *intention* of Dylan’s aged singing lies in these songs’ place alongside the crooned and more softly delivered ‘Moonlight,’ ‘Po’ Boy,’ and ‘Sugar Baby,’ which underscores the variable degree of age Dylan portrays depending on the songs’ genres.

While it has been noted that the increasingly haggard grain of Dylan’s voice lends authenticity to his performances of blues compositions on “*Love and Theft*,” I posit that it is precisely this supposed authenticity granted by Dylan’s age that is a hallmark of the album’s emulation of blackface minstrelsy. According to Karl Hagstrom Miller, blackface performances were branded as authentic, seemingly educational insights into African American life:

Minstrelsy was a primary medium through which nineteenth-century Americans came to understand musical authenticity. From the start, white minstrels claimed an almost ethnographic authority in their portrayals of black characters.

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<sup>98</sup> Hedin, *Studio A: The Bob Dylan Reader*, 266.

Performers touted themselves as “students of the negro” and assured audiences that they were enjoying authentic renditions of black song.<sup>99</sup>

The supposed minstrel authenticity with which Dylan delivers the various genres of “*Love and Theft*” functions much in the same way. Now equipped with the voice to represent ‘real’ Delta blues – arguably the missing piece of Dylan’s lifelong emulation of African American musical traditions – he is granted the authority to lay claim to the traditions “*Love and Theft*” represents so convincingly. It is therefore Dylan’s late period ‘authenticity’ – his ability to encompass the gamut of American musical traditions by way of the voice – that ultimately authenticates the album’s engagement and interest in minstrelsy.

### 3.4. ‘Beyond the Horizon’: *Modern Times* and The Grain of Experience

If *Time Out of Mind* and “*Love and Theft*” heralded Dylan’s entry into the recorded twilight of his career, *Modern Times* cemented his role as elder statesman of American music. Continuing the sonic themes of its predecessor, “the world has gone wrong, the women are doing him wrong...the arrival of the apocalypse, the breaking of his heart,” Dylan’s aged voice in 2006 was more fully developed, replacing the exaggerated huskiness of *Time Out Of Mind* and “*Love and Theft*” with a controlled growl and a more refined croon.<sup>100</sup> The latter mode is so finely honed on ‘Spirit on the Water,’ ‘When the Deal Goes Down,’ and ‘Nettie Moore’ as to shock the listener with the most sentimental singing of Dylan’s career. Where the crooning of the album’s two predecessors displays the crags in Dylan’s softened singing, that of *Modern Times* is

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<sup>99</sup> Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 5.

<sup>100</sup> Sheffield, “Love and Theft,” *Rolling Stone*.

uniformly polished, more controlled in its delivery and conscious of its volume. Highlighting the intention with which Dylan switches between the two modes, the growl of ‘Thunder on the Mountain’ and ‘Rollin’ and Tumblin’ is more selective and nuanced in its intensity. On the latter, for example, Dylan sings “I rolled and I tumbled / Cried the whole night long,” delivering ‘cried’ with a gargled wheeze too venomous to be accidental.<sup>101</sup> With the release of *Modern Times*, Dylan had now mastered his ability to toggle between the definitive singing modes of his late period, complementing the album’s widespread plagiarism with a voice that more convincingly evoked the blues and jazz singers from whom he borrowed.

It is this awareness, control, and mastery of Dylan’s two vastly different modes of singing – the very grain of his aged voice - on *Modern Times*, that cements Dylan’s role not only of living archive or elder statesman, but the authoritative voice of experience in American popular music. Perhaps more than at any other time in his career, the grain of Dylan’s voice – rather than the delivery or the lyrics – is the primary source of pleasure (and for some, derision). Commenting on *World Gone Wrong* (1993), Bill Flanagan suggests that “the weight of nobility and loss are as appropriate to this older Dylan’s singing as anger and hunger are to the snarl of his youth,” highlighting the meaning beyond Dylan’s lyrics as he continues to evolve.<sup>102</sup> Barthes’ assertion that “it is in the throat, place where the phonic metal hardens and is segmented, in the mask that *significance* explodes, bringing not the soul but *jouissance*” serves as a particularly fitting metaphor for the vocal performances of *Time Out of Mind*, “*Love and Theft*,” and

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<sup>101</sup> Bob Dylan, ‘Rollin’ and Tumblin,’ *Modern Times* (New York: Columbia, 2006).

<sup>102</sup> Bill Flanagan, cited in Wilentz, *Bob Dylan in America*, 235.

*Modern Times*.<sup>103</sup> Indeed, the distinctive character of Dylan's late voice resides in the throat, where the voice gargles, cracks, and whispers its way through the most fascinating albums of Dylan's career. It is in the grain of this ever-evolving and highly intentional ageing voice where age finds signification, "manifest and stubborn...beyond (or before) the meaning of the words," by way of Dylan's raspy croon and grating croak.<sup>104</sup> While *Time Out of Mind* and "*Love and Theft*" hinted at what critics would term the 'voice of experience,' I posit that the disparity between Dylan's two modes of singing on *Modern Times* marks the fully realized incarnation of the voice of experience.

Marking the beginning of his late period discography, *Time Out of Mind* offered the first widely-heard instance of Dylan as the voice of experience. The album did so more explicitly than that of its successors, ruminating on mortality and weariness through its lyrics and Dylan's exaggeratedly aged voice. The objectively forelorn tone of *Time Out of Mind* caused *New York Times* critic Jon Pareles to proclaim that "the voice of a generation has become a voice of experience, telling us that experience hasn't taught him anything he needs" in his review.<sup>105</sup> Whereas the 'voice of a generation,' however, was achieved through the politically charged authorial voice of Dylan's early albums, the voice of experience is expressed most immediately by way of the grain of Dylan's late-period voice.

Richard Elliott's insights into the voice of experience on *Time Out of Mind* are particularly apt. Elliott suggests that "the Erfahrung, or accumulated data of his experiences and that of his audience couldn't fail to flavor the songs with certain

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<sup>103</sup> Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," ed. Frith and Goodwin, 296.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, 295.

<sup>105</sup> Jon Pareles, "A Wiser Voice Blowin' in the Autumn Wind," *New York Times*, September 28, 1997, <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/09/28/arts/pop-jazz-a-wiser-voice-blowin-in-the-autumn-wind.html>.

meanings,” implicating the album’s lyrics, Dylan’s singing voice, and the audience in the focus on Dylan’s age.<sup>106</sup> Certainly, the lyrical content of *Time Out of Mind* and Dylan’s haggard singing are part and parcel, as lyrics like “the ghost of our old love has not gone away” and “trying to get to heaven before they close the door” necessitate the physical accumulation of experience and time in Dylan’s voice.<sup>107</sup> I argue, however, that the singing of Dylan’s late period takes precedence over lyrics in his performance of age from 1997 to the present day. Elliott supports this claim:

More than ever, Dylan’s voice in later years offers both caresses and opportunities to explore the deep folds of lived experience. Michael Gray speaks of Dylan’s ‘evoking...desolation by vocal caress’ in his late work...The lived experience is both Dylan’s – it is the folds of his voice, after all, into which we direct our ears – and, as lettered or sounded knowledge...<sup>108</sup>

While the grain of Dylan’s aged voice and its significance in relation to *Time Out of Mind* is widely understood, however, it must be noted that Dylan’s control and manipulation of that grain is a defining characteristic of his late period singing. This is an ability that Dylan hones with *Modern Times*, weaving in and out of character and affect by way of the grain of his voice.

Much like the voice of *Time Out of Mind*, that of *Modern Times* was widely received as withered and decaying, though complementary to the album’s lyrical and thematic content. In a review for *PopMatters*, Michael Franco states that Dylan’s “voice is now little more than a whispery croak that disappears at the slightest strain...and yet,

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<sup>106</sup> Richard Elliott, *The Late Voice: Time, Age and Experience in Popular Music* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 172.

<sup>107</sup> Bob Dylan, ‘Standing in the Doorway’ and ‘Tryin’ to Get to Heaven,’ *Time Out Of Mind* (New York: Columbia, 1997).

<sup>108</sup> Elliott, *The Late Voice: Time, Age and Experience in Popular Music*, 179.



the creaks and breaks sound appropriate, given that the man is the real deal talking about real life,” thereby lending credence to the album’s lyrics.<sup>109</sup>

The critical interpretation of Dylan’s voice here worked much the same way as that of *Time Out of Mind*: because he was writing about mortality and heartbreak in the style of early-to-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century recordings, it was happenstance that Dylan’s singing voice was deteriorating. It is more likely, however, that Dylan’s explicit late-period interest in Americana prompted the adaptation and development of his late-period voice.<sup>110</sup> Though his interest in American folk and blues pervades his early discography, Dylan’s late period marks a renewed and romanticized vision of 20<sup>th</sup>-century America. *Theme Time Radio Hour*, Dylan’s Sirius XM radio show from 2006 to 2009, reveals not only a profound interest in early-to-mid-20<sup>th</sup> century American music and radio, but Dylan’s desire to emulate that era as well, recalling the hushed and mysterious radio host of yore. Dylan’s notorious and acclaimed memoir, *Chronicles, Volume 1* (2004) exhibits a similar reverence for America’s golden age, featuring vivid and romanticized descriptions of New York, New Orleans, American authors, folk, blues, country, and jazz artists - indeed, the memoir arguably functions as an idealized period piece rather than credible nonfiction.

It is this renewed reverence, I argue, that prompts both the instrumentation and singing of Dylan’s late period discography, and the mastery of that aged vocal technique on *Modern Times*. Dylan’s singing here conveys a more developed understanding of the

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<sup>109</sup> Michael Franco, “Bob Dylan: Modern Times,” *PopMatters*, September 4, 2006, <https://www.popmatters.com/bob-dylan-modern-times-2495696977.html>

<sup>110</sup> ‘Americana’ is used here to refer primarily to American history and culture quite generally, rather than specifically the genre of music defined by traditionally American styles, i.e. folk, bluegrass, blues, etc. While Dylan has always worked within these traditions, however, the arrangements of *Modern Times*, like those of its late period predecessors, do subscribe to the conventions of Americana as a genre.

grain of his own aged voice, allowing him to toggle more seamlessly between the croak and the croon. If “the (material) voice can be a mediator between body and language; it gives language meaning, in its inflections, its speed, its accent, its bodiliness...[speaking] more of the body than of syntax,” then 2006 marks a time at which Dylan comes to understand and master his own ageing body on record and its ability to represent the styles he reveres.<sup>111</sup> It is the very grain of Dylan’s ageing voice, then, that signifies experience – it is in the grit of his croak on ‘Rollin’ and Tumblin’ and ‘Thunder on the Mountain,’ and in the gentle rasp of his croon on ‘Spirit on the Water’ and ‘Nettie Moore’ where Dylan intentionally performs his age and role as living archive. Amanda Petrusich refers, perhaps unintentionally, to this possibility, calling *Modern Times* “music of accumulated knowledge, it knows every move, anticipates every step before you take it,” indicating that Dylan’s awareness of the age in his voice precedes that of the listener.<sup>112</sup>

### 3.5. ‘I Feel a Change Comin’ On’: *Together Through Life* and Blues Authority

Despite *Together Through Life*’s (2009) largely insubstantial contribution to Dylan’s discography, the album serves as a fascinating case study of Dylan’s evolving late period voice and the intentionality of his portrayal of age. *Together Through Life* marks his most full-fledged attempt at electric blues since the mid-1960s, though by 2009 he had developed the voice – by way of both the natural ageing process and the ability to embellish and adapt that voice to different styles – to to successfully recall Muddy Waters, Willie McTell, and Howlin’ Wolf. In a promotional interview for the album’s

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<sup>111</sup> Freya Jarman-Ivens cited in Elliott, *The Late Voice: Time, Age and Experience in Popular Music*, 46.

<sup>112</sup> Amanda Petrusich, “Bob Dylan: *Modern Times*,” *Pitchfork*, August 29, 2006, <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/9361-modern-times/>.

release with Bill Flanagan, Dylan commented, “the old Chess records, the Sun records...I think that’s my favourite sound for a record” in response to Flanagan’s suggestion that the album emulated 1950s blues records.<sup>113</sup> ‘Beyond Here Lies Nothin’,’ ‘My Wife’s Home Town,’ ‘Shake Shake Mama,’ and ‘It’s All Good,’ feature particularly Chicago blues-inspired arrangements and structures complemented by the most ragged singing of Dylan’s career.

Far out-croaking its predecessors, the voice of *Together Through Life* “[had] never sounded as ravaged, pissed off and lusty, all at once,” marking the latest installation of Dylan’s late-period performance of age.<sup>114</sup> Here, however, Dylan’s growl is more obviously embellished. ‘My Wife’s Home Town,’ a rearrangement of Willie Dixon’s ‘I Just Want To Make Love To You,’ mimics Dixon’s rasp in an obvious effort to emulate blues authenticity. Dylan’s pleasure at barking “one of these days I’ll end up on the run / I’m pretty sure she’ll make me kill someone” is palpable as his inflection rises with ‘days,’ ‘run,’ and ‘sure,’ the resultant growl emphasizing the speaker’s bitterness. Sounding ‘old’ has long been a desire of Dylan’s, who commented in 1963, “I don’t carry myself yet the way that Big Joe Williams, Woody Guthrie, Leadbelly and Lightnin’ Hopkins have carried themselves. I hope to be able to someday, but they’re older people,” thereby equating notions of authenticity and skill with advanced age.<sup>115</sup> Fricke affirms this relationship in his review, declaring that “[Dylan is] finally there, with

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<sup>113</sup> Bob Dylan, “Bob Dylan Talks About the New Album With Bill Flanagan,” *The Official Bob Dylan Site*, April 25, 2009,

<https://web.archive.org/web/20101224173253/http://www.bobdylan.com/conversation?page=6>

<sup>114</sup> David Fricke, “Together Through Life,” *Rolling Stone*, April 13, 2009,

<https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-album-reviews/together-through-life-252842/>.

<sup>115</sup> Bob Dylan cited in Elliot, *The Late Voice: Time, Age and Experience in Popular Music*, 159.

an authentically pitted instrument ideally suited to the devastated settings of these songs,” seemingly in response to the younger Dylan’s desire.<sup>116</sup>

### 3.6. ‘The More I Die, the More I Live’: *Tempest* and the Voice as Artifact

The release of *Tempest* in 2012 – Dylan’s most recent studio album of original songs – marked the longest succession of critically acclaimed albums of Dylan’s career. 15 years after the release of *Time Out of Mind*, Dylan’s late period role as a living archive of American musical traditions was now firmly established – a feat that arguably granted him the authority to continue exploring the deep chasms of his voice regardless of the outcome. *Tempest*, then – like its late-period predecessors – is of interest for the evolving character of Dylan’s singing voice and the ways in which it serves as the primary vehicle for the album’s subject matter and Dylan’s archival orientation.

*Tempest* precedes in the same vein as “*Love and Theft*” and *Modern Times*: Dylan digs into the well of American music – blues, folk, country, and jazz – and guides the listener through the American musical and historical landscape. *Tempest*’s subject matter, however, seems to predate that of *Time Out of Mind*, “*Love and Theft*,” *Modern Times*, and *Together Through Life*. While those albums dealt primarily with mortality, lust, and heartbreak against a backdrop of early-to-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century instrumentation, *Tempest* evokes a forgotten past through both its instrumentation and subject matter combined with a voice seemingly as old as the subjects it recalls. Old West violence permeates ‘Pay in Blood,’ ‘Scarlet Town,’ ‘Early Roman Kings,’ and ‘Tin Angel,’ while the album’s title track offers a nearly 14-minute long narrative of the sinking of the

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<sup>116</sup> Fricke, “Together Through Life,” *Rolling Stone*.

Titanic, complete with fiddle and accordion.<sup>117</sup> While its predecessors offered a recreation and renewal of traditional American genres, then, *Tempest* features perhaps the most explicit late-period instance of Dylan's fascination with a fantastic and romanticized American past.

The voice of *Tempest*, like its subject matter, is older than time – or existing in a space outside of locatable time. Though his voice softens to a familiar croon on two tracks, 'Narrow Way' and 'Soon After Midnight,' the remainder of *Tempest* features a "cultivated tangle of disdain and nicotine and bad love" and the most mangled singing in Dylan's discography.<sup>118</sup> Like the voice of *Together Through Life*, that of *Tempest* may well be attributed to a purposive and deliberate artistic choice. As Dylan ages, he increasingly embellishes that advancing age by way of showcasing the increasingly splintered grain of his voice. On *Tempest*, Dylan acts as a messenger from the past, or one who has lived long enough to recount the bloodshed of centuries ago. While the ageing voice from 1997 onward is often (mis)read as the natural and quick deterioration of Dylan's voice, the role of persona is often overlooked - with the exception of a select few instances, as in the following review *The New Yorker's* Jody Rosen:

But even by Dylan's standards, the vocal cragginess of "Tempest" is startling....You could ascribe Dylan's croak to the ravages of time (he is seventy-one). You might more accurately call it a stylistic flourish – a ravages-of-time schtick.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Both the song's melody and instrumentation borrow heavily from the Carter Family's 'The Titanic,' released in 1956.

<sup>118</sup> Amanda Pretrusich, "Bob Dylan: *Tempest*," *Pitchfork*, September 13, 2012. <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/17139-the-tempest/>

<sup>119</sup> Jody Rosen, "Older Than That Now: Dylan's "Tempest," *The New Yorker*, September 11, 2012, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/older-than-that-now-dylans-tempest>

While the ageing process has undeniably coarsened the grain of Dylan's voice, *Tempest's* croak - more so than that of *Together Through Life* - reveals and exaggerates the ageing process for the purpose of serving the album's historical themes. While previously Dylan had asserted himself as popular music's living archive of American music, the voice itself in 2012 *becomes* a living artifact of American recording history, having travelled from the American frontier of 'Scarlet Town' to the sinking of the Titanic in 1912 to the present day. Rosen, in a rare instance of praise for Dylan's late period voice, foretellingly ranks Dylan among the finest vocalists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century:

"Tempest" reminds us what a thrilling and eccentric vocalist he is. He sings with a jazzman's feel for rhythmic play, laying back on the beat, rushing ahead of it, bending, distending, and cutting short his raggedy notes. He has a dramatic flair that places him in the company of Sinatra, Billie Holiday, and George Jones: an actor's way with line readings, a knack for making the musical conversational and vice versa.<sup>120</sup>

It is a counterintuitive sentiment given the oftentimes trying character of Dylan's voice throughout *Tempest*, and one that would prove prescient upon Dylan's next release.

### **3.7. 'Stay With Me': *Shadows In The Night, Fallen Angels, and Triplicate***

The release of *Shadows in the Night* in 2015 marked the most dramatic and unpredictable turning point of Dylan's career since 1997, and possibly his conversion to Christianity in 1979. The irony of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's most prolific songwriter covering songs from the American songbook and made famous by Frank Sinatra was instantly recognized by both the music press and Dylan's fan community. Perhaps a greater source of skepticism, however, lay in the knowledge that Dylan had seldom, if ever, been a

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

skillful singer in the traditional sense – a notion further evidenced by his increasingly mangled croak on *Tempest*. *Shadows in the Night*, however, marks the disappearance of the notorious croak while Dylan’s softer croon - seemingly improved and with wider range - features more prominently. Dylan’s singing here was so improved, in fact, as to elicit universal acclaim for his ability to effectively deliver such prized compositions with the gusto of Sinatra. Fricke, in his review, offers a summation of the reaction to Dylan’s ‘new’ aged voice:

The great shock here, then, is Dylan’s singing. Dylan’s focus and his diction, after years of drowning in sandpaper, evoke his late-Sixties poise and clarity on *John Wesley Harding* and *Nashville Skyline*...it is not crooning. It is suspense: Dylan, at 73, keeping fate at arm’s length as he looks for new lessons, nuance and solice in well-told tales.<sup>121</sup>

Importantly, Fricke’s assessment indicates that at 73 years of age, Dylan recalls a younger mode of singing on *Shadows in the Night*. While the grain and character of the voice have undeniably aged and evolved, Dylan’s refined croon serves as perhaps the strongest evidence of the *intention* of his late period modes of singing as they serve his ultimate project. *Shadows in the Night*, in addition to its equally elegant and impressive successors *Fallen Angels* (2016) and *Triplicate* (2017), prompts the listener to question *how* and *why* Dylan had seemingly overcome the gargling croak that had come to define his late period discography.

Despite the dramatic improvement of Dylan’s voice, the singing of the so-called ‘Sinatra period’ from 2015 to 2018 marks a logical progression of Dylan’s performance

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<sup>121</sup> David Fricke, “Shadows in the Night,” *Rolling Stone*, February 3, 2015, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-album-reviews/shadows-in-the-night-98853/>.

of age – despite the initially widespread skepticism. This is because while the croak evokes the physical deterioration of the body with age, the croon of *Shadows in the Night*, *Fallen Angels*, and *Triplicate* conveys the psychological and emotional handling of advancing age. Alexis Petridis posits that *Shadows In The Night* “fits perfectly with...Dylan’s latterday persona, the grizzled old geezer unveiled on 1997’s *Time Out of Mind*, either sentimental or growling at the world to get off his lawn,” highlighting the duality of Dylan’s late period singing and its capacity to evoke the various dimensions of the ageing process.<sup>122</sup> It is the interiority of ageing – the sentimentality, nostalgia, reminiscence, and melancholy – that is central to Dylan’s singing on these albums, demanding the clarity and fragility of his crooning. These meditative dimensions of ageing, I argue, are incongruous with the growl of *Tempest*. Neil McCormick supports this assertion with the concession that “there is age in the notes, for sure...yet somehow this ancient croon focuses the songs, compelling listeners to address their interior” in a more effective manner than the croak *or* the flawless technique of Sinatra.<sup>123</sup>

In addition to the gentle character of Dylan’s ‘standards’ voice, it is the intimate nature of crooning itself that best conveys the self-reflective element of the ageing process. Philip Tagg posits the notion of the ‘vocal stance’ as an integral contributor to the simulation of intimacy in recorded music. The term refers to “the actual/imagined distance between two persons (transmitter and receiver) in an intimate/confidential dialogue” by way of placing the singer’s mouth “nearer the listener’s ear by means of

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<sup>122</sup> Alexis Petridis, “Bob Dylan: *Shadows in the Night* Review – an unalloyed pleasure,” *The Guardian*, January 29, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/jan/29/bob-dylan-shadows-in-the-night-review>.

<sup>123</sup> Neil McCormick, “Bob Dylan, *Shadows in the Night*, review: ‘extraordinary’,” *The Telegraph*, January 23, 2015, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/bob-dylan/11366536/Bob-Dylan-Shadows-in-The-Night-review-extraordinary.html>



mike positioning and volume level,” evoking a personal relationship between singer and audience.<sup>124</sup> Similarly, Steven Connor puts forth the notion that crooning evokes intimacy by way of its imagined proximity to the listener’s ear:

The crooning voice is seductive because it appears to be at our ear, standing forward and apart from the orchestral background with which it is nevertheless integrated... Such a voice promises the odors, textures, and warmth of another body... Most of all, perhaps, the imaginary closeness of such voices suggests to us that they could be our own.<sup>125</sup>

Dylan’s crooning on *Shadows in the Night*, *Fallen Angels*, and *Triplicate*, then, simulates both intimate conversation between generations and meditation so personal as to impose itself on the listener’s experience of age. It is therefore the vocal stance of these recordings, in tandem with the thick grain of Dylan’s late period croon, replete with experience and paired with a sentimentality and clarity of diction, that most effectively represents the interior ageing process. Indeed it is the interiority of ageing, rather than physical decay, that interests Dylan throughout his standards period, and the improved singing voice reflects that central concern.

Inevitably, the release of *Shadows In the Night* elicited widespread comparisons to Frank Sinatra, who was most strongly associated with each of the album’s songs. Sinatra and Dylan’s mutual respect is well documented, the former having requested Dylan to perform ‘Restless Farewell’ at his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration and the latter expressing his admiration in Dylan’s 2004 memoir *Chronicles, Volume One* (“When Frank sang [Ebb Tide], I could hear everything in his voice – death, God and the

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<sup>124</sup> Philip Tagg in Dave Laing, *One Chord Wonders: Power and Meaning in Punk Rock*, 56.

<sup>125</sup> Steven Connor in Elliott, *The Late Voice: Time, Age and Experience in Popular Music*, 100.

universe, everything”)<sup>126</sup>. Interestingly, the majority of songs Dylan chose to record between 2015 and 2018 were famously performed by Sinatra at the mid-point of his career from 1957 to 1965 – a time at which Sinatra had become concerned with his own advancing age.<sup>127</sup> The theme of ageing is most central to *September of My Years* (1965), wherein Sinatra, then 50 years of age, meditates on the roles of regret, triumph, wisdom, and memory in his life. This period also marked a change in the singer’s voice. Now entering his fifth decade, “years of Jack Daniel’s and unfiltered Camels had taken their toll on his pipes...but experience in the form of more polished style and technique carried him through” songs reflecting on the passing of time.<sup>128</sup>

In the context of Dylan’s singing on *Shadows in the Night*, *Fallen Angels*, and *Triplicate* and Sinatra’s ‘mature style’ from the mid-1950s onward, the ageing voice may well be repositioned as the *improved* voice. Friedwald, describing the phenomenon among jazz vocalists, terms the ageing voice ‘old sound’:

Old sound works in degrees from light...to heavy (as with Billie Holiday...who managed to sound incredibly old before she was forty), and encompasses such technicalities as rasp, the sound of air breathing through old throats and lungs, and the gradual loss of the ability to control vibrato and pitch – though if anything

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<sup>126</sup> Bob Dylan, *Chronicles, Volume One* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 81.

<sup>127</sup> Strangely, Dylan attempted to distance himself from Sinatra in a promotional interview for *Triplicate* with Bill Flanagan. When asked if he knew Sinatra had recorded many of the album’s songs, Dylan responded, “Yeah, I knew he did, but a lot of other people recorded them as well, it just so happened that he had the best versions of them.”

<sup>128</sup> Allen Barra, “Sinatra and Reflections as Days Dwindle Down,” *The Wall Street Journal*, December 30, 2015, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/sinatra-and-reflections-as-days-dwindle-down-1451516266>.

the gift for keeping *time* becomes acuter...“old” sound is somehow regarded as authentic.<sup>129</sup>

Friedwald’s supposition applies acutely to Dylan’s 2015-2017 project of deliberately conveying the interiority of ageing via crooning, hinting at Holiday’s ‘old sound’ as seemingly intentional given her young age and opening the possibility of jazz singing as a particularly fertile medium for the exploration of age by way of the voice. Friedwald’s additional description of what entails ‘sounding old’ is immediately apparent throughout Dylan’s standards trilogy – sustained and high notes, as on ‘Stay With Me’ and ‘All the Way,’ and ‘Once Upon a Time,’ reveal a gentle rasp while ‘That Old Feeling,’ and ‘Full Moon and Empty Arms,’ among others, feature Dylan’s subtle breathing and swallowing into the microphone (a product of the albums’ vocal stance and live recording sessions). The improvement found within the ‘old style,’ derives from the notion that despite having “more negative points than positive, since it implies the loss of the ability to sing...can also add dramatic credulity to a performance” as it conveys an ‘authentic’ representation of advancing age.<sup>130</sup>

Much like the voice of “*Love and Theft*” and *Tempest*, that of *Shadows in the Night*, *Fallen Angels*, and *Triplicate* both authenticates Dylan’s performance of American songbook standards and his expression of advancing age. Per Friedwald’s assessment that ‘old sound’ lends authenticity to vocal jazz, Dylan’s standards trilogy was met with critical acclaim in part because as on *Modern Times*, age had granted him the authority to inhabit songs across eras. Where previously that authority had allowed Dylan to emulate traditional American genres, however, *Shadows in the Night* suggests a

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<sup>129</sup> Will Friedwald, *Jazz Singing: America’s Great Voices from Bessie Smith to Bebop and Beyond* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1990), 417.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid*, 417.

transition from emulation to ownership. Simply put, Dylan had now accumulated the lived experience not simply to ‘cover’ songs from the American songbook, but to inhabit them both lyrically and vocally. Where *Time Out of Mind*, “*Love and Theft*,” *Modern Times*, *Together Through Life*, and *Tempest* function as pastiche and references to traditional American genres (albeit convincing ones), Dylan’s standards albums serve primarily as ‘genuine’ and ‘authentic’ meditations on ageing. Dylan admits as much in a promotional interview with Bill Flanagan for the release of *Triplicate*, stating “Now that I have lived [the songs] and lived through them I understand them better” and indicating that the songs hold more significance in old age.<sup>131</sup>

In the same interview, Dylan discusses the intentionality of his singing voice in explicit terms – a rare, albeit brief instance of Dylan referencing his two late period vocal modes. Flanagan, praising Dylan for his improved singing, questions why the voice of his standards albums does not feature more prominently elsewhere:

Depends what kind of song it is. “When the World Was Young,” “These Foolish Things,” are conversational songs. You don’t want to be spitting the words out in a crude way. That would be unthinkable... “An airline ticket to romantic places” is a contrasting type of phraseology, than, say, “bury my body by the highway side [Robert Johnson].” The intonation is different, more circumspectual, more internal.<sup>132</sup>

The response marks perhaps the most revealing, compact, and powerful evidence for the intentionality of Dylan’s late period singing and the case presented here. Dylan alludes to the choice of mode – crooning or croaking – depending on both the song’s lyrical content

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<sup>131</sup> “Q&A with Bill Flanagan,” *Bob Dylan Official Site*, March 22, 2017, <https://www.bobdylan.com/news/qa-with-bill-flanagan/>.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

and genre. Dylan's reference to Robert Johnson's 'Me and the Devil Blues' and its necessitation of a cruder delivery implicates the infamous croak not as the natural toll of age on his voice, but as a deliberate artistic decision. Finally, Dylan's use of the terms 'conversational,' 'circumspectual,' and 'internal' supports the claim that the albums' thematic meditation on the psychology of ageing necessitates the clarity of diction offered by crooning and a proximal vocal stance.

With the latest installment of Bob Dylan's ever evolving and consistently surprising late period renaissance, Dylan solidifies his position as elder statesman of American popular music and living archive of traditional American genres via a voice both seemingly younger *and* stylistically appropriate to themes of advancing age. Mirroring Sinatra's vocal progression with a mature and imperfect aged voice, though masterful in its delivery and rhythm, Dylan simultaneously recalls and inhabits the American songbook and convincingly explores advancing age both thematically and vocally. *Shadows in the Night*, *Fallen Angels*, and *Triplicate*, therefore, seemingly mark the completion of Dylan's recorded performance of age, barring possibly forthcoming original material. Given the evolution of Dylan's singing from 1997 onward as a reflection of each album's central theme proposed here – mortality, minstrelsy, the eclecticism of American genre, blues authenticity, the voice as living artifact, and the interiority of advancing age – the next logical progression of Dylan's late period voice remains unclear. Indeed, it is the unpredictable, versatile, and endlessly frustrating and gratifying nature of Dylan's portrayal of age that is the hallmark of his post-1997 rebirth and leaves his audience both cautious and spellbound.

## Chapter 4

## ‘Too Much Paperwork’: Defending Bob Dylan’s Late-Period Plagiarism

“And I rolled and I tumbled and I cried the whole night long,  
 And I rolled and I tumbled and I cried the whole night long,  
 And I rose this mornin’ mama and I didn’t know right from wrong”  
 -Hambone Willie Newbern, “Roll and Tumble Blues” (1929)

“Well, I rolled and I tumbled, cried the whole night long  
 Well, I rolled and I tumbled, cried the whole night long  
 Well, I woke up this mornin', didn't know right from wrong”  
 -Muddy Waters, “Rollin’ and Tumblin’” (1950)

“I rolled and I tumbled, I cried the whole night long  
 I rolled and I tumbled, I cried the whole night long  
 Woke up this mornin', I must have bet my money wrong”  
 -Bob Dylan, “Rollin’ and Tumblin’” (2006)

Wussies and pussies complain about that stuff. It’s an old thing – it’s part of the tradition. It goes way back. These are the same people that tried to pin the name Judas on me.

-Bob Dylan, Rolling Stone interview, 2012

#### 4.1 ‘Research Gone Berserk’: An Overview

“All songs written by Bob Dylan.” This was the phrase that accompanied the track listing to Bob Dylan’s critically acclaimed 2006 album, *Modern Times*. The album, the third of Dylan’s late period renaissance following 1997’s *Time Out of Mind* and 2001’s “*Love and Theft*,” was stunning in its revitalization of traditional forms of American music; Dylan’s band melded cold-blooded blues, tender Tin Pan Alley orchestration, and electric folk balladry in a way that sounded both grounded in a

forgotten and romanticized American past and yet distinctly Dylanesque.<sup>133</sup> Dylan's ragged snarl, now older than time itself, instilled songs like "Thunder on the Mountain," "Rollin' and Tumblin'," "Someday Baby," and "The Levee's Gonna Break" with all the wisdom and world-weariness of the 65-year-old's years, while ballads "Spirit On The Water," "When The Deal Goes Down," and the breathtaking "Nettie Moore" were delivered with the tender hindsight of a forlorn elder. Dylan's lyrics were refined and cutting, in equal measure blood red in their bitterness and heartbreaking in their resignation. When Dylan sang "I loved you then, and ever shall / But there's no one left here to tell / The world has gone black before my eyes" on 'Nettie Moore,' he did so as if the words were written in his soul from him to you – a testament to Dylan's longevity as an interpreter and performer of words, if not a 'singer' in the traditional sense.<sup>134</sup>

Where the album presented a challenge to casual listeners and critics outside of Dylan's fan community, however, was that many of Dylan's lyrics and melodies were not his own. On 1997's *Time Out of Mind*, Dylan decorated songs with lines by folk revivalists, blues artists, and former Black Flag front man Henry Rollins. On 2001's "*Love and Theft*," (which takes its title from Eric Lott's 1993 study of American blackface minstrelsy) Dylan draws heavily on Japanese writer Junichi Saga's 1991 novel *Confessions of a Yakuza*. With *Modern Times*, however, Dylan's casual and occasional nods to other artists and writers becomes an unprecedented streak of outright stealing; entire lines, verses, and melodies are mercilessly and unreservedly appropriated and taken credit for – a practice in which, as this paper will argue, Dylan has always partaken (though to a lesser degree) throughout his nearly 60-year-long career.

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<sup>133</sup> The term 'Dylanesque' is commonly used to describe that which evokes the distinctive musical, lyrical, or visual style of Bob Dylan, sometimes to the point of exaggeration.

<sup>134</sup> Bob Dylan, "Nettie Moore," *Modern Times* (New York: Columbia, 2006).

In the late 1990s, Bob Dylan sought to reimagine himself as an intersection through which traditional forms of American music (blues, folk, big-band, and crooning) would pass following *Good as I Been to You* (1992) and *World Gone Wrong* (1993) – two albums of traditional folk covers. Entering his sixties with a slew of mediocre studio albums over the previous decade and a half (1989’s *Oh Mercy* being the sole exception), “Dylan seems to have sensed...that the much-needed fresh start might lay in his past; not as a return to past victories, but rather as a return to those musical worlds he had not felt himself entirely qualified to inhabit as a younger man” and claimed his place as a living archive of American vernacular music and elder statesman of the genres that raised him.<sup>135</sup> While Dylan had always explicitly appropriated and adapted such forms, however, he begins to do so more shamelessly with the lyrics of his following album (and the first of his universally-acclaimed late period trilogy) *Time Out of Mind*.

This chapter will serve as an unabashed exculpation of Dylan’s late period plagiarism. While this defense is undeniably rooted in fandom, the argument for Dylan’s license to steal is threefold. This inquiry will establish that such ‘borrowing’ (i.e. the appropriation of traditional folk lyrics and melodies) has always been integral to Dylan’s songwriting, from his earliest recordings and performances in Greenwich Village coffee houses to the present day – a lineage that will be briefly traced from 1962 to 2006. Furthermore, I seek to further the popular assertion that such plagiarism is a well-established method of folk songwriting commonly referred to as the ‘folk process.’ Because of the widespread acceptance of the folk process by the folk community (of which Dylan initially belonged and within which he honed his songwriting), Dylan has

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<sup>135</sup> Richard Elliott, *The Late Voice: Time, Age and Experience in Popular Music* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015): 172.



often exhibited a proprietary attitude toward hymnal, folk, and blues songs from the American past. His widespread borrowing, however, does not discount Dylan's artistry; indeed, "Bob Dylan is one of the most original American artists of the past half-century, but like Shakespeare and Bach he has manifested his originality more by transforming available materials than by inventing new ones,"<sup>136</sup> acting as a curator of American poetry, prose, history, and music.<sup>137</sup> Thus, Dylan's late period cultural curation is a hallmark of modernist practice and a standard technique of his modernist forebear, T.S. Eliot. It is the modernist tradition of cultural curation – taking from various sources and combining lines from popular song and literature – that best serves Dylan's late-20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century role as living archive of American vernacular music. This chapter seeks to place Dylan's plagiarism within a modernist context, expanding upon the notion of cultural curation in conjunction with establishing Eliot as the modernist ancestor to Dylan's practice.

#### **4.2 'Paths of Victory': Slapping a Title on It, 1961-1964**

Dylan's songwriting process has always been one of borrowing, allusion, and more brazen instances of direct quotation. This quotation, from the time of Dylan's arrival in New York City, took the form of original lyrics paired with old, traditional melodies, recycled lyrics paired with original melodies, and a combination of recycled and original lyrics paired with old or original melodies. It was these combinations and this early songwriting formula that gave rise to many of Dylan's earliest songs, and a practice in which he engages even in the twilight of his career. Critics of Dylan's late

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<sup>136</sup> Charles Hartman, "Dylan's Bridges," *New Literary History* 46, no.4 (2015): 737.

<sup>137</sup> While 'transforming' seemingly implies the agentic transmogrification of such materials, Dylan's particular brand of transformation relies heavily on direct quotations of other artists' words.

period filching need only remember that “Dylan’s art has always been one of collage. His particular gift has been to appropriate, assimilate, and meld a wide-ranging mass of personal and national lore” to astoundingly ‘original’-sounding results.<sup>138</sup>

While the brunt of the criticism of Bob Dylan’s plagiarism has been aimed at his late-period albums (particularly “*Love and Theft*” and *Modern Times*), Dylan freely admits to the integrality of this practice from his earliest days in New York City cafés in his 2004 memoir *Chronicles, Volume One* (itself an impressive example of Dylan’s subtle and not-so-subtle borrowing). Referring to his earliest forays into songwriting, Dylan says, “I didn’t have many songs, but I was making up some compositions on the spot, rearranging verses to old blues ballads, adding an original line here or there, anything that came into my mind – slapping a title on it,” and importantly, claiming it all as his own.<sup>139</sup> This short passage is replete with insight into both the folk songwriting process and the pervasiveness of other artists’ works in early Dylan. Dylan’s comment about “adding an original line here or there” implies that while some lyrics were of Dylan’s making, many were taken from those “old blues ballads” to which he refers. In this sense, Dylan’s earliest songs and performances, even those he claimed to be original (enough so to slap his own title on), may be considered not simply original songs based on traditional ones, but collages of older songs sprinkled with the occasional original line. A more detailed example of Dylan’s unreserved claiming of other artists’ words and melodies is offered when he describes meeting famed publisher Lou Levy upon arriving in New York:

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<sup>138</sup> Hartman, “Dylan’s Bridges,” 737.

<sup>139</sup> Bob Dylan, *Chronicles: Volume One* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2004), 227

Sitting in Lou’s office I rattled off lines and verses based on the stuff I knew – “Cumberland Gap,” “Fire on The Mountain,” “Shady Grove,” “Hard, Ain’t It Hard.” I changed words around and added something of my own here and there...you could write twenty or more songs off that one melody by slightly altering it. I could slip in verses from old spirituals or blues. That was okay; others did it all the time.<sup>140</sup>

Here, Dylan evokes an almost factory-like songwriting technique wherein existing and used parts are removed, added, melded together and inscribed with his name. As the final line of the above quotation indicates, while Dylan feels it necessary to justify this practice for the reader, he sees no personal wrongdoing; he was simply working within a well-established tradition of appropriation and rebranding. Why, then, does Dylan include this brief and half-hearted self-defense in his description of the songwriting process? The inclusion is likely pre-emptive; the memoir is three short years removed from Dylan’s most brazenly plagiarized document until that point, 2001’s *Love and Theft*,<sup>141</sup> and he deliberately, though covertly, draws a parallel between his earliest songwriting process and that of his late-period rebirth. To any listener well versed in Dylan’s discography and biography, his early ‘plagiarism’ of other artists was a stale non-issue; to more casual fans suddenly attuned to the criticisms of *Love and Theft*,<sup>142</sup> however, Dylan’s self-defense in *Chronicles: Volume One* highlights that this was simply how he had always written songs.

Indeed, it is widely accepted that much of Dylan’s early work was the product of imitation (of both the guitar playing and singing of Woody Guthrie) and lyrical patchwork. His 1961 ode to Guthrie – one of his first ‘original’ songs – takes its melody

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid, 228.

directly from Guthrie's 1941 song '1913 Massacre.' Similarly, perhaps Dylan's most famous and enduring tune, 'Blowin' In The Wind,' replaces the lyrics of the Civil War era spiritual song, 'No More Auction Block' while retaining the song's original melody.<sup>141</sup> Similar cases abound in Dylan's early compositions; 'A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall' begins each verse with the same questions posed in 17<sup>th</sup>-century medieval ballad 'Lord Randall.' 'Girl from the North Country' takes its lyric "remember me to one who lives there / for she once was a true love of mine" from the traditional English ballad, 'Scarborough Fair.' 'Restless Farewell,' the closing track of 1964's *The Times They Are A-Changin'*, takes its melody directly from the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Scottish song 'The Parting Glass,' while mirroring its lyrics with Dylan's revisions. 'With God on Our Side,' from the same album, filches its melody from both Dominic Behan's 'The Patriot Game' and traditional Irish folk song 'The Merry Month of May,' while the melody of 'The Ballad of Hollis Brown' is taken from the 18<sup>th</sup>-century English folk song 'Pretty Polly.' Dylan's 1963 song 'Bob Dylan's Dream' from his second album, *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* (his first album of supposedly 'original' songs), uses the tune and lyrics of 'Lady Franklin's Lament,' a 19<sup>th</sup>-century folk ballad.<sup>142</sup>

### **4.3 'The Game is the Same, it's Just up on Another Level': The Folk Process Then and Now**

Clearly, Dylan's habit of borrowing from various sources from *Time Out of Mind* onward marked a return to his earliest songwriting process of setting new lyrics to old folk and traditional melodies and vice-versa. As already outlined, many of Dylan's earliest compositions, and indeed some of his most enduring, can be traced to American,

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<sup>141</sup> Mark Polizzotti, "Love and Theft: Dylan's appropriations," *Parnassus: Poetry In Review* 34, no. 1/2 (2015): 50-73.

<sup>142</sup> Eugen Banauch, *Refractions of Bob Dylan: Cultural Appropriations of an American Icon*, 190.

Irish, English and Scottish hymns, ballads, and folk songs from the 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. This was because that particular songwriting practice, now referred to as the ‘folk process’ among critics and scholars (and just about anyone looking to defend Dylan), was commonplace during the folk revival of the late-1950s and early-1960s. The ‘folk process’ argument is perhaps the most commonly invoked defense of Dylan’s lifelong inclination toward plagiarism, described by Harvard musicologist Charles Seeger, as “by reality, entirely a product of plagiarism.”<sup>143</sup> Dylan and his Greenwich Village folk cohort learned and shared traditional songs with each other, often swapping lyrics and creating new songs out of old ones.<sup>144</sup> Dylan himself acknowledged the widespread nature of the folk process in *Chronicles: Volume One* (2004), recounting that “there were a few who wrote their own songs, like Tom Paxton and Len Chandler and because they used old melodies with new words they were pretty much accepted” as the creators of new compositions.<sup>145</sup> Eugen Banauch argues for the enduring and standard practice of exchanging songs without claim to authorship that exculpates Dylan, both in the dawn and twilight of his career, from wrongdoing:

Traditional folk songs were ‘traditional’ precisely because they had no single author. Songs were passed from mouth to mouth, from ear to ear, by a cumulative body of singers, making up a collective authorship for which the categories of ‘plagiarism’ and copyright’ are simply irrelevant.<sup>146</sup>

The widespread acceptance and perpetuation of the folk process by the folk community renders Dylan’s early instances of borrowing both standard practice and inoffensive. It is

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<sup>143</sup> Yaffe, *Bob Dylan: Like a Complete Unknown*, 100.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid*, 100.

<sup>145</sup> Dylan, *Chronicles: Volume One*, 82.

<sup>146</sup> Banauch, *Refractions of Bob Dylan: Cultural appropriations of an American icon*, 189.

the conventions of each genre that determine an artist or song's legitimacy and quality, and "given that all artistic creation takes place within a tradition...each tradition must also work out for itself what is allowable borrowing and what constitutes plagiarism," a criterion determined largely irrelevant within the folk community.<sup>147</sup>

While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide an exhaustive list of Dylan's early episodes of plagiarism, it is evident that his 'borrowing,' often recognized as plagiarism in his late period, is by no means a new phenomenon. Dylan's appropriation of melodies and lyrics from traditional Irish, English, and Scottish folk songs and ballads served as the foundation of his early songwriting process, and a practice in which he continued to engage (though perhaps in different ways) from 1997's *Time Out of Mind* onward. Why, then, did the subject of Dylan's plagiarism gain such forceful traction four decades after his 'folk period' of the early 1960s? The reasons may be threefold. For one, Dylan's first two albums of original compositions, *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* (1963) and *The Times They Are A-Changin'* (1964) fit comfortably within the folk genre; Dylan sings songs with a conscious social message accompanied only by acoustic guitar and harmonica. The 'folk process' of songwriting was an integral part of Dylan's early style in that the practice of appropriating and borrowing from traditional folk melodies and lyrics was a standard, widely practiced, and widely accepted method of writing folk songs during the folk revival out of which he emerged. From *Time Out of Mind* onward, however, Dylan's musical style had evolved into a more complex and eclectic melting pot of genres less easily identified as folk or blues. For this reason, the 'folk process' might have seemed incongruous with Dylan's

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<sup>147</sup> Theodore Gracyk, "Record Consciousness," *Rhythm and Noise: An aesthetics of rock* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 91.

21<sup>st</sup>-century songwriting and musical style; perhaps those critical of Dylan's late-period plagiarism felt his early practice of borrowing melodies and lyrics irrelevant to this rebranding of American vernacular music.<sup>148</sup>

A second contributing factor may have been the obviousness of Dylan's references in his work from 1997 onward as compared to that of his early folk period. Whereas in the early 1960s Dylan's songs were informed by traditional ballads of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries – likely unknown to the general public and casual listener – his later albums take more overtly from popular sources – 20<sup>th</sup>-century blues and Tin Pan Alley songs, along with popular fiction and poetry all make appearances on *Time Out of Mind*, *“Love and Theft,”* and *Modern Times*, and even listeners unfamiliar with Dylan's history of plagiarism could identify the occasional Robert Johnson lyric or Muddy Waters arrangement on later albums.

A third reason for the discussion of plagiarism surrounding Dylan's late period may be that whereas his earlier compositions largely took their melodies from traditional songs, the majority of the lyrical content of the aforementioned songs were of Dylan's writing. His late-career output, however, features both borrowed melodies *and* the more widespread inclusion of pre-existing lyrics than on his folk albums – a notion more commonly associated with plagiarism. Perhaps to the casual consumer of popular music, filching lyrics represents a greater transgression than appropriating melodies; indeed, one might prefer to imagine that the lyrics delivered to them are the artist's thoughts, emotions, and autobiographical details manifested, rather than stolen and claimed as their own. Melodies, in comparison, are expected to be less personal and original, their

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<sup>148</sup> Namely folk, blues, country, and rock

lineages and influences more easily traced than those of lyrics. Beginning with 1997's *Time Out of Mind*, however, Dylan begins to claim pre-existing lyrics more conspicuously – a habit that intensifies on “*Love and Theft*” in 2001 and reaches its problematic peak on the 2006 album *Modern Times*.

#### 4.4 The Trajectory of Borrowing from *Time Out of Mind* to *Modern Times*

With each album in his so-called ‘late period,’ Dylan tests the boundaries of what he can and cannot get away with, and in doing so he finds himself “on the slippery slope that starts with cadging a line or two from an admired predecessor and ends up in the murky swamp of copyright infringement” as his borrowing becomes increasingly aggressive.<sup>149</sup> In 1997 Dylan released *Time Out of Mind*, marking a stunning and unexpected return to the quality of his mid-1960s output. The album, an hour-and-thirteen-minute-long meditation on ageing and Dylan’s impending death (at the age of 56), establishes Dylan’s new role as the elder statesmen of rock and a living archive of American vernacular music. Dylan’s voice croaks and gasps over atmospheric blues guitar, melancholic piano, and funereal organs, all awash in Daniel Lanois’ murky and reverb-laden production. Like many of the songs from his folk period, however, other artists’ words are subtly infused with Dylan’s, marking a mild return to his early songwriting practice. While still marking the beginning of Dylan’s late-career habit of borrowing from various sources, David Yaffe asserts that the stolen lines on *Time Out Of Mind* “were allusive, not plagiaristic, and they were yoked together to paint a portrait of a man out of time – hence the album’s title,” itself a reference to one of Mercutio’s lines in *Romeo and Juliet*.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Polizzotti, “Love and Theft: Dylan’s appropriations,” 56.

<sup>150</sup> Yaffe, *Bob Dylan: Like a Complete Unknown*, 113.



Indeed, Dylan's references serve the purpose of both placing himself within the tradition of Great artists and poets, and distorting the listener's understanding of time; the album exists within the present moment but harkens back to bygone eras – the Dust Bowl, the American Civil War, and the birth of rock and roll. On 'Standing in the Doorway,' Dylan sings, "I eat when I'm hungry, drink when I'm dry," referencing Woody Guthrie's recording of 'Rye Whiskey' with only a slight alteration.<sup>151</sup> 'Highlands,' in its seventeen minutes, features the lyric "my heart's in the highlands, gentle and fair" – a nod to a Robert Burns lyric from 1789.<sup>152</sup> Perhaps most strangely and indicatively of the obscurity of Dylan's sources, however, *Time Out of Mind* is littered with traces of poems by American writer and former Black Flag front man Henry Rollins. According to Scott Warmuth, eight of the album's eleven songs feature allusions to (rather than direct plagiarism of) Rollins' collections of poetry, *Art to Choke Hearts & Pissing In The Gene Pool: Collected Writing 1985-1987* (1992), *See a Grown Man Cry: Collected Work, 1988-1991* (1997), and *Now Watch Him Die* (1993).<sup>153</sup>

Where *Time Out of Mind* often alluded to fellow artists with a subtle nod, "*Love and Theft*," released four years later, features more blatant and problematic instances of plagiarism on Dylan's part. The album shares its title with Eric Lott's 1993 study of American blackface minstrelsy – a tradition with which Dylan flirts throughout the album as he filches lyrics from American blues greats Robert Johnson and Charlie Patton, inhabits the role of haggard elder statesman of the blues in his delivery and drawl, and emulates the musical traditions of the Mississippi delta. While it may legitimately be

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<sup>151</sup> Bob Dylan, "Standing in the Doorway," *Time Out of Mind*, (New York: Columbia, 1997).

<sup>152</sup> Yaffe, *Bob Dylan: Like a Complete Unknown*, 113.

<sup>153</sup> Scott Warmuth, "Bob Dylan Takes Henry Rollins Through 'Mississippi,'" *Goon Talk*, last modified March 2, 2011, <http://swarmuth.blogspot.ca/2011/03/bob-dylan-takes-henry-rollins-through.html>

argued that only the former constitutes actual plagiarism, the album's title serves as a deliberate and self-aware indication that theft in all its forms is the album's primary *modus operandi*. Yaffe also notes that "with his use of the title, Dylan was commenting on the counterfeit origins of rock and roll, himself included: that he was cloaking his often playful, often mournful antiquarian musings in an elaborate disguise," and had been partaking in his own brand of minstrelsy for over forty years.<sup>154</sup> In addition to his appropriation and imitation of the blues and plagiarism of blues lyrics, "*Love and Theft*" "is shot through with unacknowledged quotations from *Confessions of a Yakuza*, a contemporary Japanese book by Junichi Saga" published in 1991 and which Dylan was surely reading at the time of the album's recording.<sup>155</sup>

Dylan pays homage to the Mississippi delta throughout – Mardi Gras and early-20th century blues are evoked in both musical and lyrical content – in an American sonic melting pot more obviously complex than that of the album's predecessor. But while the appropriation of African American musical traditions is fair game, and indeed the legacy of rock and roll, Dylan's lyrical borrowing on "*Love and Theft*" is more widespread and less allusive than on *Time Out of Mind*. Most notably, 'High Water (For Charlie Patton)' features the lyrics "the cuckoo is a pretty bird / she warbles as she flies" and "I'm getting' up in the morning / I believe I'll dust my broom," both almost direct quotations of traditional ballad 'The Cuckoo' and Johnson's 'Dust My Broom' (1936), respectively.<sup>156</sup> While the song is an explicit tribute to Patton, Dylan feels such quotation

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<sup>154</sup> Yaffe, *Bob Dylan: Like a complete unknown*, 116.

<sup>155</sup> Banauch, *Refractions of Bob Dylan: Cultural appropriations of an American icon*, 191.

<sup>156</sup> Bob Dylan, "High Water (For Charlie Patton)," "*Love and Theft*," (New York: Columbia, 2001).

is appropriate to the task. Perhaps less easily justified, however, is Dylan's adaptation of Junichi Saga's words in *Confessions of a Yakuza*.

The track 'Floater (Too Much to Ask)' includes the lyric "I'm not quite as cool or forgiving as I sound,"<sup>157</sup> a slight alteration of "I'm not as cool or forgiving as I might have sounded" from the novel.<sup>158</sup> Dylan also sings, "my old man, he's like some feudal lord,"<sup>159</sup> taken from Saga's line, "my old man would sit there like a feudal lord,"<sup>160</sup> barely altering the original source.<sup>161</sup> In response to Dylan's taking credit of his words, Saga expressed a sense of flattery rather than injustice. Despite Saga's attitude toward Dylan's plagiarism, however, the moral and legal implications of this practice remained in question and continue to be debated in the present day. When *Rolling Stone* contributing editor Mikal Gilmore confronted Dylan about allegations of plagiarism against him in 2012, Dylan shot back, "Oh, yeah, in folk and jazz, quotation is a rich and enriching tradition. That certainly is true. It's true for everybody, but me. I mean, everyone else can do it but not me. There are different rules for me," raising an equally valid, if overly simplified point.<sup>162</sup>

Such discussions reached their peak in 2006 with the release of *Modern Times*, the final installment of Dylan's so-called late-period trilogy. If *Time Out of Mind* and "Love and Theft" featured instances of mildly uncomfortable borrowing and filching, *Modern Times* serves as a prime case study of Dylan's inclination toward looting and

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<sup>157</sup> Bob Dylan, "Floater (Too Much to Ask)," *Love and Theft*, (New York: Columbia, 2001).

<sup>158</sup> Junichi Saga, *Confessions of a Yakuza*, (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 2013).

<sup>159</sup> Dylan, "Floater (Too Much to Ask)."

<sup>160</sup> Saga, *Confessions of a Yakuza*, 2013.

<sup>161</sup> Jonathan Eig and Sebastian Moffett, "Did Bob Dylan Lift Lines from Dr. Saga?" *Wall Street Journal*, July 8, 2003, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10576176194220600>.

<sup>162</sup> Mikal Gilmore, "Bob Dylan Unleashed," *Rolling Stone*, September 27, 2012, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/bob-dylan-unleashed-189723/>

plundering the words and works of other artists. Allusions, references, and the odd quotation became the unreserved and extensive taking of others' lyrics and words on Dylan's 32<sup>nd</sup> studio album; entire verses, melodies, and arrangements were now fair game to Dylan, who took credit for all the album's lyrics and melodies without so much as a wink or nod. With a title once again referencing a bygone era (this time the Great Depression as depicted in the Charlie Chaplin film of the same name), the album, like its two predecessors, is a foray into and sonic study of American song, including folk, the blues, and crooning. Nearly each of the album's ten tracks has its roots in previous works of those genres, with some references more subtle or overt than others. 'When the Deal Goes Down,' for instance, mirrors both the melody and arrangement of Bing Crosby's 'Where the Blue of the Night (Meets the Gold of the Day)' almost exactly.<sup>163</sup> Similarly, 'Beyond the Horizon' takes its melody from 'Red Sails in the Sunset' by Jimmy Kennedy and Hugh Williams. 'Someday Baby,' Dylan's take on no-holds-barred rollicking blues, is based on Muddy Waters' 'Trouble No More' in both melody and lyrics (which itself is based on Sleepy John Estes' 'Worried Life Blues'). 'When the Levee Breaks' is Dylan's electric version of Kansas Joe McCoy and Memphis Minnie's 1929 song of the same name, while 'Thunder on the Mountain,' 'Workingman's Blues #2,' 'Nettie Moore,' and 'Ain't Talkin'' take lyrics from Memphis Minnie, June Christy, Marshall Pike and James Lord Pierpont, Blind Lemon Jefferson, and the Stanley Brothers, respectively. Perhaps the most blatant example of Dylan's claiming existing

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<sup>163</sup> Yaffe, *Bob Dylan: Like a complete unknown*, 102.

songs as his own, however, is ‘Rollin’ and Tumblin’,’ originally recorded in 1929 by Hambone Willie Newbern and later covered by Muddy Waters in 1950.<sup>164</sup>

While Dylan’s version includes several of his own original verses, the song’s first verse, melody, and arrangement are taken directly from Waters. While such an overt case of plagiarism may well upset the casual listener upon learning this detail, the song’s lineage stretches beyond Waters, and the line between what is public domain and what is rightfully Waters’ is blurred. If Waters’ version derives from Newbern’s 1929 song ‘Roll and Tumble Blues,’ does he have any more claim to the song than Dylan? Indeed, it is entirely possible that even Newbern’s version was passed down from generations before him. Yaffe suggests that the original “could have been a work song, even a slave song. It is now public domain, and while anyone can claim credit for it, its real origins will remain obscure” in the tradition of many blues songs.<sup>165</sup> Importantly, the copyright on ‘Rollin’ and Tumblin’ was a dead one, having been originally recorded 77 years prior to *Modern Times*. As a result, Dylan was entitled to claim authorship of the song on legal grounds, if not moral ones. While numerous blues and rock artists including Eric Clapton, Fleetwood Mac, the Grateful Dead, and the Yardbirds adapted and recorded their own versions of the song in later decades, none took the original lyrics and Waters’ arrangement as directly and brazenly as Dylan, who claimed full authorship of the song. This habit was a hallmark of Dylan’s late period output, culminating in the full-throttle piracy of *Modern Times*. While Dylan claimed to have written all the album’s songs, Yaffe posits that “‘written’ was becoming a relative term” and asks, “were these

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<sup>164</sup> Granted, this practice of claiming credit for the work of blues artists is hardly unique to Dylan; blues-based rock bands, namely the Rolling Stones and Led Zeppelin, have become notorious for similar instances of lifting entire melodies and lyrics.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid*, 103.

appropriations the sign of a waning muse, or was Dylan merely doing a version of what he has always done?” – a question central to any exculpation of Dylan’s late period plagiarism.<sup>166</sup>

#### 4.5 The Role of Age in Dylan’s Modern Songwriting Practice

The question might be expanded, then, to examine why the folk process exculpates Dylan of wrongdoing on his late-period albums, particularly when they seemingly bear little resemblance to the folk stylings of his earliest albums. Despite Dylan’s turn toward a more complex brand of American vernacular music (including blues, country, bluegrass, rock and roll, and folk), he seemed to have retained his ties to both the folk process and the traditional songs on which he based his early compositions, often exhibiting a proprietary attitude toward the songs and genres he evokes in his late period. Dylan recognizes that even on his albums from *Time Out of Mind* onward, he is working within the well-established folk and blues traditions. In an interview following the release of the 1997 album, Dylan states, “these songs didn’t come out of thin air. I didn’t just make them up out of whole cloth...there was a precedent. It all came out of traditional music: traditional folk music, traditional rock and roll and traditional big-band swing orchestra music,” indicating that in evoking those traditional genres, he is working within their established conventions – including the borrowing in which he engaged 35 years prior.<sup>167</sup> In his later years, Dylan seems to perceive the standards of those genres as fair game – material to be used, however, explicitly, in his own songwriting.

This is a conscious decision on Dylan’s part, and to defend his late-period plagiarism as accidental or unconscious would be naive. In a 2003 interview, Dylan

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid, 103.

<sup>167</sup> Elliott, *The Late Voice: Time, age and experience in popular music*, 148.

stated, “what happens is, I’ll take a song I know and simply start playing it in my head...at a certain point, some words will change and I’ll start writing a song” for which he will undoubtedly take authorial credit.<sup>168</sup> For Dylan, the songs that served as the ‘inspiration’ for many of the tracks on *Time Out of Mind*, “*Love and Theft*,” and *Modern Times* – “old Protestant hymns or Carter Family songs or variations of the blues form”) – exist in a mythical realm free of authors, copyright, or the rigid legalities of ownership, and serve as the archives through which he may dig to construct his own songs.<sup>169</sup> Given Dylan’s late-period role as an intersection for American vernacular music and living archive of traditional American genres, such acts of appropriation and borrowing are indeed appropriate to the task. According to Ian Bell, “Dylan’s hyper-awareness of history as an active presence has been one of the distinguishing features of his ‘late period.’ It explains many, if not all, of his acts of alleged plagiarism” because Dylan is intentionally invoking the periods, genres, artists, and songs from which he so tastefully steals.<sup>170</sup>

While Dylan had simply been partaking in the same songwriting process as he had at the beginning of his career, Richard Elliott suggests that his late period habit of borrowing was not simply old news, but *more* convincing and appropriate to his advancing age. Elliott posits that from 1997 onward, “it suddenly became possible to see this promised elder Dylan more clearly as he took on the mantle of the blues and folk singers [he had always admired], those he had seen as carrying themselves in a way he

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<sup>168</sup> Polizzotti, “Love and Theft: Dylan’s appropriations,” 53.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Ian Bell, *Time Out of Mind: The Lives of Bob Dylan* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 2014), 526, quoted in Elliott, *The Late Voice: Time, age and experience in popular music*, 179.

couldn't at that time muster" as a young man.<sup>171</sup> While Dylan had always stolen from blues and folk artists in plain sight, his age now allowed him to inhabit the role of elder statesman more convincingly, lending his alleged plagiarism more legitimacy as he became a kind of archive and museum fixture of American music.

Indeed, the role allowed Dylan access to the American songbook as he became the embodiment of that tradition. More straightforwardly, and in Dylan's own words, "my sentiment was that the law is fine but this time, I'm the law – the dead can't speak for themselves. I'm speaking for 'em. Okay?"<sup>172</sup> Granted, Dylan's proprietary view of deceased artists' work, however well-intentioned, fails to indicate any similar defense of his filching from living artists like Henry Rollins and Junichi Saga. An apparent cure-all argument, however, likens Dylan's songwriting to the modernist practice of assembling new and original work with various cultural media (songs, literature, poetry, theatre, etc.) serving as raw material.

#### **4.6 'Modernist Times': Dylan and Eliot in the Captain's Tower**

Lifting lines from a variety of popular sources was only not the territory of the folk revival, but of modernist artists and poets like Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot.<sup>173</sup> Dylan's late period albums are replete not only with traces of traditional folk lyrics and melodies, but with lines from poems, novels, and personal letters.<sup>174</sup> This practice, in tandem with his borrowing of popular traditional *and* modern songs, establishes Dylan as a distinctly modernist 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century artist. As he had done with the folk process, Dylan has

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<sup>171</sup> Elliott, *The Late Voice: Time, age and experience in popular music*, 172.

<sup>172</sup> Dylan, *Chronicles: Volume One*, 51.

<sup>173</sup> Indeed, the two are not mutually exclusive. The argument could well be made that folk artists *were* engaging in modernist practice

<sup>174</sup> This method of songwriting is a prime example of Dylan "having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition" not only throughout the 1960s, but his late period as well, utilizing both great and obscure works of literature as his sources.



always worked within the modernist tradition – though perhaps to a higher or more obvious degree in his later years. “*Love and Theft*” and *Modern Times*, in particular, feature songs that act as a kind of cultural patchwork wherein civil war poetry, blues songs, and Tin Pan Alley instrumentation stand side by side to inform Dylan’s distinctive late-period style. It is the juxtaposition of sources – that marks Dylan’s borrowing of the last twenty years, as his late albums “can probably best be apprehended as reverberations...where we are meant to remark on the discrepant tones and idioms of the original texts bumping up against one another” to culminate in something distinctly new.<sup>175</sup>

Despite the originality of Dylan’s particular brand of modernism,<sup>176</sup> he is working within a well-established lineage of cultural curators, “whether it was Picasso’s inclusion of popular song titles (e.g., ‘Ma Jolie’), Joyce’s complex reworkings of music hall in *Ulysses*, or Weill’s adaptations of contemporary jazz in *Die Dreigroschenoper*.” Dylan, then, may be justifiably posited as the latest iconic installment of modernist Greats.<sup>177</sup> Perhaps Dylan’s most direct modernist ancestor is T.S. Eliot, whose *The Waste Land* takes directly from African American spirituals and popular songs of the 19th and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Eliot makes reference to and borrows directly from a variety of popular sources, including ‘By the Watermelon Vine,’ a 1904 “coon song” by T.S. Allen, ‘My Evaline,’ a 1901 minstrel song by Mae Sloane, and ‘Maid of the Mill,’ featured in an 1887 operetta.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Banauch, *Refractions of Bob Dylan: Cultural appropriations of an American icon*, 192.

<sup>176</sup> ‘Brand’ here refers to the impressive variety and obscurity of Dylan’s sources

<sup>177</sup> Barry J. Faulk, “Modernism and the Popular: Eliot’s music halls,” *Modernism/Modernity* 8, no.4 (November 2001): 603, <https://doi.org/10.1353/mod.2001.0082>

<sup>178</sup> David Chinitz, “In the Shadows: Popular song and Eliot’s construction of emotion,”

But where Eliot and Dylan share an interest in early 20<sup>th</sup> century minstrelsy and appropriate that tradition in their own work, it is the intent rather than the content of their borrowing that shares commonality. For both artists, the cultural patchwork in which they engaged served to evoke both personal nostalgia (in which the audience would presumably share) and previous generations. When Eliot invoked popular song, for example, it was because that was a medium on which he was raised and a vocabulary that was most immediately available to him. David Chinitz suggests that Eliot the poet, and indeed all artists, could not exist without the cultural ingredients of their upbringing:

My point is...that a usable reservoir of phrases, symbols, and situations – components of the objective correlatives that constitute, according to Eliot, “[t]he only way of expressing emotion in the form of art” – existed all around him in the popular culture and provisioned his imagination. For as Eliot himself insisted in 1933, “of course only a part of an author’s imagery comes from his reading. It comes from the whole of his sensitive life since early childhood.”<sup>179</sup>

Given Eliot’s assessment – with the indication that all elements of one’s childhood inform the artist’s work – Dylan’s filching sheds the sinister intention with which it has been associated in his late period. Simply put, both his early and more recent episodes of plagiarism may not be a case of an artist struggling for new material and lazily copping lines, but rather of one simply informed by the various cultural landmarks of his formative years in both Minnesota and New York. Polizzotti suggests that “identity is not an attribute you are born with or develop seamlessly over time, but something compiled

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*Modernism/Modernity* 11, no.3 (September 2004): 451-2, 459,  
<https://doi.org/10.1353/mod.2004.0053>

<sup>179</sup> Ibid, 462.

from the flotsam and jetsam of accumulated experience,” suggesting the inseparability of one’s identity from that accumulated experience.<sup>180</sup> Therefore, while Dylan may consciously invoke a Robert Johnson or June Christy lyric or melody, it is not for lack of original ideas; it is because those are the landmarks that informed Dylan’s sense of lyricism and melody, and he pays homage to the work of his predecessors.

In the same way that Eliot’s work is peppered with “sentimental Victorian parlor songs and the workaday productions of Tin Pan Alley hacks,” Dylan’s work – during both his folk and late periods – features a collage of traditional folk songs, spirituals, blues lyrics, and crooner-style orchestration.<sup>181</sup> In this sense, both Eliot and Dylan employed popular sources not only for personally nostalgic reasons, but to invoke historical nostalgia as well. Both saw the practice of cultural curation as a means of reviving bygone generations. When Dylan says, “these old songs are my lexicon and prayer book,” for example, he takes that sentimental attachment as license to use those old songs to create a sense of timelessness in his own late-period albums.<sup>182</sup>

As the embodiment of that tradition of American genres, Dylan, and indeed all modernists engaged in cultural curation, acts as a kind of cultural tutor to his audience, guiding his listener through the landmarks of bygone eras. While Faulk argues that “Eliot...marks the final stand for one version of the myth of the intellectual, one in which he or she served as professional tutor for a public,” Dylan’s 21<sup>st</sup> century output functions similarly.<sup>183</sup> With minimal research on Dylan’s late-period output and so-called plagiarism (or perhaps unknowingly), one is granted access to the songs, poetry, and

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<sup>180</sup> Polizzotti, “Love and Theft: Dylan’s appropriations,” 51.

<sup>181</sup> Chinitz, “In the Shadows: Popular song and Eliot’s construction of emotion,” 451.

<sup>182</sup> Dylan, 1997, quoted in Yaffe, *Bob Dylan: Like a complete unknown*, 114.

<sup>183</sup> Faulk, “Modernism and the Popular: Eliot’s music halls,” 618.

literature discussed here, as Dylan not only evokes the art of generations past, but gestures toward it. The sheer variety of Dylan's sources means that his "work is saturated in the cultural products and references available to a curious, connected North American in the mid-to-late twentieth century," and any listener seeking access to Dylan's psychology would be better served by exploring the words of *others* in his songs rather than his own.<sup>184</sup> Surely, Dylan's modern borrowing is both sophisticated and deliberate in its selection, each source serving a specific purpose *and* as a roadmap to Dylan's historical and current interests. Banauch suggests that despite the popular perception that with each album Dylan is 'caught' stealing the words of other artists, "Dylan knows that all his work is subject to intense scrutiny; he must surely have expected that his 'sources' would...be revealed. There is no intent to deceive: rather, this is an invitation to join the game" by both uncovering Dylan's sources and sharing his musical and literary tastes.<sup>185</sup>

While this defense of Bob Dylan's 'plagiarism' between 1997's *Time Out of Mind* and 2006's *Modern Times* covers some of Dylan's most prolific and noteworthy late-period instances of borrowing, much work remains to be done on Dylan's non-musical plagiarism of the past two decades. Dylan continued working in the traditions of the folk process and modernist cultural curation on his subsequent studio albums, *Together Through Life* (2009) and *Tempest* (2012), but it is his filching outside of the studio that poses further questions about the legality and intent of his practice. His critically acclaimed 2004 memoir *Chronicles: Volume One*, for example, features entire sentences and descriptions taken directly from Marcel Proust and Mark Twain. Dylan's

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<sup>184</sup> Elliott, *The Late Voice: Time, age and experience in popular music*, 178.

<sup>185</sup> Banauch, *Refractions of Bob Dylan: Cultural appropriations of an American icon*, 192.

acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize for literature ruthlessly lifts lines from *Moby-Dick* – an ironic choice given the context, and one explored briefly in the following chapter.

If Dylan has indeed contributed significantly to the American literary body, it has been, at least in part, with the help of the songwriters, poets, and novelists from whom he has so daringly borrowed. It is the sheer inventiveness of the patchwork in which Dylan has engaged for over 55 years – the craftsmanship and ingenuity of his particular brand of songwriting, cultural curation, and Americana – that gives Dylan license to borrow from bygone generations as he sees fit. Dylan's plagiarism, however, like the question of Shakespeare's identity or the myth of Robert Johnson at the crossroads, remains shrouded in mystery - augmenting for some, and calling into question for others, the legitimacy of an artist who has refused to be understood for the better part of a century.

## Chapter 5

‘Time is Piling Up’: *The Nobel Lecture*, Conclusions, and Future Research

Here’s a face. I’ll put it in front of you. Read it if you can.

-Bob Dylan, *The Nobel Lecture*, 2017

### 5.1 ‘When the Deal Goes Down’: Stockholm, 2016

The announcement by the Nobel Committee for Literature that it was awarding its 2016 honor to Bob Dylan “for having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition,” was met with a frigid and weighty silence on the part of the recipient. Upon the decision’s release in October, Dylan gave no response for over two months, leading some to criticize and question the mercurial artist’s gratitude and lack thereof. To others, however, the apparent rejection of the Nobel Committee’s unprecedented offer was in keeping with a persona so finely honed over two decades as to amalgamate, perhaps deterministically, in this perfectly unscripted moment of silence. To those abreast with his 21<sup>st</sup> century image and modus operandi, the notion that “Dylan, true to form, [had] played the whole Nobel thing mysteriously, maybe maddeningly, cool” revealed itself as an exercise in the self-mythologizing and mystiquing that were the hallmarks of the past two decades.<sup>186</sup>

When Dylan did announce, via a typed message delivered by ambassador Azita Raji, that he was “honored to be receiving such a prestigious prize” for which he “never could have imagined or seen coming,” his modesty and surprise seemed almost

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<sup>186</sup> Alexandra Schwartz, “The Rambling Glory of Bob Dylan’s Nobel Speech,” *The New Yorker*, June 6, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-rambling-glory-of-bob-dylans-nobel-speech>

uncharacteristically transparent, as if Dylan had shed his impenetrable veneer in a moment of illuminating candor.<sup>187</sup>

Dylan's *Nobel Lecture*, however, delivered via audio recording on June 5, 2017, offered more substantial revelations and fodder for widespread discussion. The speech featured Dylan recounting the music that inspired his earliest songwriting and the literature from which he drew his methods, "an eloquent artistic statement... [by] one of the world's most fascinating cultural figures," in equal measure creation myth, pulp fiction, and surreal pedagogical manifesto.<sup>188</sup> Of interest to the present study, however, are the ways in which Dylan's *Nobel Lecture* encapsulates the arguments presented here. From Dylan's self-mythologizing to his American musical and literary interests, his speaking voice to his plagiarism, *The Nobel Lecture* serves as perhaps the single strongest document illustrating Dylan's late period project of living archive by way of age performativity.

The bulk of Dylan's lecture, entailing simultaneously intricate and grossly simplified summaries of *Moby-Dick*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and *The Odyssey*, serves (consciously or not) as an effort at the self icon-making outlined in chapter two that is at the core of Dylan's late period persona. With each description Dylan seemingly, though implicitly, likens himself to the novels' protagonists. *Moby-Dick*'s Ishmael proves a potent initial example:

*Moby-Dick* is a seafaring tale. One of the men, the narrator, says, "Call me Ishmael." Somebody asks him where he's from, and he says, "It's not down on any map. True places never are"...Ishmael's been on a sailing ship his entire life.

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<sup>187</sup> Bob Dylan, "Banquet Speech," *The Nobel Prize*, December 10, 2016, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2016/dylan/25424-bob-dylan-banquet-speech-2016/>

<sup>188</sup> Cover copy, Bob Dylan, *The Nobel Lecture*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017).

Calls the sailing ships his Harvard and Yale. He keeps his distance from people.<sup>189</sup>

One need not understand the intricacies of Dylan's late period persona or career-long outsider image to recognize his implicit likening of himself to Ishmael. Indeed, the aloof and withdrawn Ishmael situates his origin as being outside of locatable place and time, a "true place" from that world beyond the horizon. I contend in Chapter Two that Dylan's late period persona works in much the same way. As a visual collage of classically American signifiers – cowboy hat, spats, bolo ties, and pencil moustache – the Bob Dylan of 1997 onward is similarly vague in his origins and guarded in his statements. For Dylan, however, this image is projected by way of his numerous television commercials, live performances on the Never Ending Tour, and speaking voice, which defies geographical accent and era in favor of a vaguely southern, vaguely archaic radio voice.

Despite its long absence from the public ear, Dylan's speaking voice as heard on his recording of *The Nobel Lecture* continues along this path. In this medium, the lecture works as a performance as much as it does a speech, with Dylan's timeless drawl and cadence on full display. When in the recording he says, "It's not down on any map. True places never are," Dylan emphasizes the first syllable of each word as if rattling off a philosophy he has always known to be true. As with the voice of *Theme Time Radio Hour* on Sirius XM, *The Nobel Lecture's* interpretive frame of both the recorded Nobel speech (set against piano lounge music) and 19<sup>th</sup> century literature dictates Dylan's vocal inflection and accent, constituting a performance of his near-mythological place in American culture. Like Odysseus, Dylan "is a travelin' man, [and]

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<sup>189</sup> Bob Dylan, *The Nobel Lecture*, 8.



he's making a lot of stops," promoting his late period persona to new audiences night after night under dim stage lights and hats that mask his eyes.<sup>190</sup> Like Odysseus, Dylan's unlikely return to glory in 1997 builds upon his already-established stature:

He's been gone twenty years. He was carried off somewhere and left there. Drugs have been dropped into his wine. It's been a hard road to travel. In a lot of ways, some of these same things have happened to you. You too have had drugs dropped into your wine. You too have shared a bed with the wrong woman...You too have come so far and have been so far blown back.<sup>191</sup>

Dylan's creation story, however, begins much earlier in *The Nobel Lecture*. He recounts that upon seeing Buddy Holly in concert, "the most uncanny thing happened. He looked me right straight dead in the eye, and he transmitted something," thereby imbuing Dylan with the ability to pioneer a new genre of music and a new brand of songwriting.<sup>192</sup>

Like Holly, who "sang in more than a few voices," Dylan's late period studio albums and performances have been marked by the emergence of two distinctive modes of singing. Each of which, the croak and the croon, serves the purposes, themes, and genres of each album from *Time Out of Mind* (1997) to *Triplicate* (2017). Chapter three seeks to outline those themes and genres and the ways in which Dylan's ragged bark and wistful croon serve those purposes. At the core of this contention is the suggestion that Dylan intentionally sings in the croaking mode to sound older or portray advancing age. This is in contrast to the common perception of his voice as being in a state of physical decay; I argue that Dylan exhibits a control of these two modes too masterful to be

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid, 2.

coincidental or accidental. Instead, Dylan's mode of singing depends on those traditionally American genres he seeks to represent on any given song or album, be they blues, country, rock and roll, vocal jazz, or the "ragtime blues, work songs, Georgia sea shanties, Appalachian ballads, and cowboy songs," that Dylan consumed so heavily as a young man.<sup>193</sup> Now, however, Dylan emulates those genres and artists with conviction and authority, having accumulated the experience and vocal character to do so convincingly.

Dylan's mastery of performing and writing within the traditions of American song and genres in his late period, however, are the result of a life imbued with a rich and archival understanding of both traditional songs and the American songbook. Recounting his earliest encounters with folk music, Dylan contends that "by listening to all the early folk artists and singing the songs yourself, you pick up the vernacular. You internalize it" and it becomes the vocabulary on which 'your' writing is founded. Chapter Four offers a similar defense of Dylan's alleged late period plagiarism, invoking the 'folk process' and tradition of adapting folk lyrics and melodies, gleaning from each to write new material. Dylan's borrowing of other artists', authors' and poets' words is justified here by both its place within the folk and modernist traditions, placing Dylan within the lineage of Great 20<sup>th</sup> century modernist writers and artists.

Dylan's *Nobel Lecture*, however, garnered widespread attention for its borrowing not of Melville's words, but of SparkNotes's online summary of *Moby-Dick* to confounding degrees. When *Slate Magazine* revealed that "Across the 78 sentences in the lecture that Dylan spends describing *Moby-Dick*, even a cursory inspection reveals that more than a dozen of them appear to closely resemble lines from the SparkNotes

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid, 4.

site,” prominent media outlets and critics called the validity Dylan’s speech into question.<sup>194</sup> While Dylan’s late period songwriting had long been a subject of scrutiny for its often-rampant borrowing of other artists’ words, his *Nobel Lecture*, much like the 2004 memoir *Chronicles: Volume One*, proved less easily defensible for some. Not only had Dylan lifted lines directly from his source without credit, but he had borrowed from an online summary, thereby cheapening his standard practice and oftentimes revered skill at cultural pastiche. Grant Shreve suggests that Dylan’s speech “seems less interested in defending songs as literature than [it] does in using their ephemerality and promiscuity to redraw the borders of literary ownership” in a kind of tongue-in-cheek act of mischief on the world’s most prestigious stage.<sup>195</sup>

Perhaps so, though Shreve continues to posit the direct borrowing of Melville rather than the anonymous online summary to be more appropriate to the task and context. Even more telling is Shreve’s suggestion that Dylan’s attraction to Melville and *Moby-Dick* lies in the author’s “ability to synthesize a vast array of cultural sources” in the modernist tradition outlined in chapter four. The question of Dylan’s use of SparkNotes, then, becomes ever more shrouded in mystery and humor. Such is the enigma that is Dylan’s late period songwriting; words lifted from sources high and low, obscure and popular, consciously or not, all in a cat-and-mouse game with those committed to the riddle.

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<sup>194</sup> Andrea Pitzer, “The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan,” *Slate Magazine*, June 13, 2017, <https://slate.com/culture/2017/06/did-bob-dylan-take-from-sparknotes-for-his-nobel-lecture.html>

<sup>195</sup> Grant Shreve, “What Herman Melville Can Teach Bob Dylan About Plagiarism,” *JSTOR Daily*, August 1, 2017, <https://daily.jstor.org/herman-melville-can-teach-bob-dylan-plagiarism/>

## 5.2 Future Research and Implications

The present study has sought to contextualize and demystify Bob Dylan's late period persona, singing voice, discography, and songwriting from 1997 onward. Given the work's scope and self-imposed limitation on materials used, however, much remains to excavate from the past twenty years of Dylan's career and return to form. While this work has deliberately worked to isolate this period from Dylan's 1965-1997 output, future research would likely benefit from the 32 years of context, autobiographical information, discography, live performances, and interviews missing from this study. Indeed, published interviews with Dylan served a particularly integral purpose here, offering insight into his own proprietary attitude toward traditional and modern songs and literature; future work would do well to trace the evolution, consistency, and patterns of those attitudes over time.

Because of the novelty of research on ageing in popular music, further exploration of other artists' handling of advancing age, in addition to representations of ageing across genres, would lay the groundwork for further research and case studies. The representations and performances of ageing among crooners versus rock artists, 1990s rap and hip hop versus pop stars, and male versus female pop stars, for example, should be more thoroughly explored and outlined by scholars of popular music.

Due to the limited scope and length of this case study, the legality of Dylan's songwriting, and indeed the folk process at large, requires further attention. While the vast majority of his borrowing uses traditional folk lyrics and melodies, as well as pre-20<sup>th</sup> century literature and poetry, Dylan's late period has more brazenly taken from more modern artists like Junichi Saga, Henry Rollins, Muddy Waters, and June Christy, among

many others. Despite the seeming lack of legal retaliation toward Dylan, future work on the topic of Dylan's ageing should explore his late period songwriting methods within a framework of copyright law. The question of other artists treating Dylan's work similarly in the near or distant future remains; would Dylan allow his words to be adapted and lifted without permission? Will his work become fair game or public domain upon Dylan's death? Such questions, though perhaps too hypothetical to be answered definitively, require the attention of modern Dylanology and scholarship.

Despite the exclusion of these vital research questions from the work at hand, I hope to have offered a heartfelt and optimistic case for the value, beauty, and complexity of Bob Dylan's post-1997 recorded output, persona, and artistry quite generally. While the attempt to unravel and intellectualize Dylan's motivations and intentions is fraught with obvious perils and implications to those who dare participate, it is the mystery inherent to his art that captures and recaptures the obsessive attention of Dylan's disciples. Indeed, among the cosmos that is a half-decade's work both popular and academic on Bob Dylan, one studies and writes with the sincere and grossly ambitious intention to offer some small point of value to those of generations past, present, and future who continue to work within this ever-expanding tradition.

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