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# **Bluegrass Covers of Bob Dylan Songs in the Sixties**

*Les reprises bluegrass des chansons de Bob Dylan dans les années 1960*

**Gary R. Boye**

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# Bluegrass Covers of Bob Dylan Songs in the 1960s

by

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**Abstract:** Few songwriters have had more of their songs covered by other artists than Bob Dylan. Although most commonly associated with the folk and folk/rock traditions today, his early listening included wide exposure to country music, including bluegrass, and it is not entirely surprising that some of his early works were covered in a bluegrass style by such artists as the Dillards, Country Gentlemen, and Flatt and Scruggs in the 1960s. Some of these early covers appear to have circulated in back channels of the recording industry and been pushed towards the performers regardless of the suitability for the style or the group in question. Some are quite successful; others border on musical parody. They changed not only the original work of Dylan but, in many ways, the future directions of the bluegrass style.

**Key Words:** *Bluegrass music – Bob Dylan – Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs – American Folk Revival (1960s) – Covers and the recording industry – Columbia Records.*

**Résumé :** Peu d'auteurs-compositeurs ont été autant repris que Bob Dylan. Bien que de nos jours, on l'associe spontanément aux traditions folk et rock/folk, son succès précoce le fit connaître au monde de la musique country et bluegrass, et il n'est pas si étonnant que certaines de ses premières chansons aient fait l'objet dans les années 60 de reprises dans le style bluegrass, par des musiciens tels que les Dillars, les Country Gentlemen et Flatt and Scruggs. Certaines de ces premières reprises semblent avoir circulé dans les circuits secondaires de l'industrie du disque, et avoir été proposées aux interprètes sans aucun égard pour la cohérence avec le style ou le groupe en question. Certaines eurent du succès; d'autres frisent la parodie musicale. Elles transformèrent l'œuvre originale de Dylan et changèrent, de nombreuses façons, les directions que le style bluegrass allait prendre par la suite.

There are over 100 covers of Bob Dylan songs by bluegrass artists or in a bluegrass style from 1963 to 2007<sup>1</sup>. Table One gives the original Dylan albums by release date, the number of songs taken from each album for bluegrass covers, and the number of versions of these songs by various bluegrass artists. Note that 73 (almost 70 %) of these covers are of Dylan's core repertoire from the 1960s; a further 29 (28 %) are from the 1970s and only 3 (2 %) are from the 1980s. There appear to be no covers of new Dylan songs after *Oh Mercy* in 1989. This indicates that the recognizability of these songs is one of their attractions – they are songs that are mostly part of the Dylan canon and are recognized as such. Artists who covered these songs played on this familiarity and hoped to draw the larger audiences of Dylan's music into the emerging sound of bluegrass. This is a major shift in a style which, until the 1960s, sought primarily to expand from within: to enlarge the tastes of the traditional country/bluegrass audiences, rather than to attract new audiences from the larger commercial worlds in which Dylan's music arose. The search for covers with “crossover” potential – songs that could make it into the popular music charts and not just the more regional country charts – was to have wide-ranging impacts on the music and the artists of bluegrass, as well as their audiences. This paper will look at the earliest of these bluegrass covers, done in the 1960s, by such younger groups as the Dillards and Country Gentlemen and, somewhat later in the decade, by the veteran duo of Flatt and Scruggs.

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1. See David Plentus, *Collector's Guide to Dylan Covers*, <http://dylancoveralbums.com/cguides/0bluegrass.html>. Another excellent Web site for Dylan information is Eyolf Østrem, *My Back Pages: Bob Dylan Chords and Lyrics*, <http://dylanchords.info/> (currently involved in international copyright disputes).
  2. Not including live albums. Covers by American bluegrass artists only, using a loose definition of the style encompassing artists whose overall body of work would be considered bluegrass. The list was collected primarily from David Plentus, *Collector's Guide to Dylan Covers*, <http://dylancoveralbums.com/cguides/0bluegrass.html> with a few additions from my own research.

Table One – Dylan Albums and Bluegrass Covers, 1963-2007<sup>2</sup> (supra).

<i>Bob Dylan</i> (1962)	1 song	1 version
<i>The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan</i> (1962)	6 songs	14 versions
<i>The Times They Are A-Changin'</i> (1963)	5 songs	10 versions
<i>Another Side of Bob Dylan</i> (1964)	4 songs	4 versions
<i>Bringing It All Back Home</i> (1965)	5 songs	10 versions
<i>Highway 61 Revisited</i> (1965)	3 songs	3 versions
<i>The Bootleg Series, Vols. 1-3</i> (1991; rec. 1963-1965)	5 songs	12 versions
<i>Blonde on Blonde</i> (1966)	2 songs	2 versions
<i>Bob Dylan's Greatest Hits</i> (1967)	0 songs	
<i>John Wesley Harding</i> (1967)	2 songs	3 versions
<i>Nashville Skyline</i> (1969)	3 songs	14 versions
<i>Self Portrait</i> (1970)	1 song	1 version
<i>New Morning</i> (1970)	1 song	1 version
<i>Greatest Hits, Vol. II</i> (1971)	6 songs	17 versions
<i>Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid</i> (1973)	1 song	1 version
<i>Dylan</i> (1973)	0 songs	
<i>Planet Waves</i> (1974)	1 song	2 versions
<i>Before the Flood</i> (1974)	0 songs	
<i>Blood on the Tracks</i> (1975)	3 songs	3 versions
<i>The Basement Tapes</i> (1975; rec. 1967)	0 songs	
<i>Desire</i> (1976)	0 songs	
<i>Hard Rain</i> (1976)	0 songs	
<i>Street Legal</i> (1978)	1 song	1 version
<i>Slow Train Coming</i> (1979)	2 songs	3 versions
<i>Saved</i> (1980)	0 songs	
<i>Shot of Love</i> (1981)	0 songs	
<i>Infidels</i> (1983)	1 song	
<i>Empire Burlesque</i> (1985)	0 songs	
<i>Biograph</i> (1985)	1 song	1 version
<i>Knocked Out Loaded</i> (1986)	0 songs	
<i>Down in the Groove</i> (1988)	0 songs	
<i>Oh Mercy</i> (1989)	1 song	1 version
<i>Under the Red Sky</i> (1990) and after...	0 songs	

Bluegrass artists were certainly not the only ones covering the songs of Bob Dylan at this time; folk/rock groups such as the Byrds virtually founded their careers on his songs, and mainstream country artists were surprisingly interested in covering Dylan tunes as well.<sup>3</sup> Dylan's personal association with Johnny Cash was probably his most obvious connection to the Nashville mainstream. The two had first met in July 1964 at the Newport Folk Festival. Cash was, at that time, enthralled with Dylan's second album, *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, to which he had been listening throughout his latest tour (Heylin, 2001: 163-163). Surprisingly, Cash's interest in Dylan songs predates even that of the Byrds. Both Cash and Dylan recorded for Columbia Records, and Cash recorded covers of Dylan's "It Ain't Me Babe," "Don't Think Twice, It's Alright," "One Too Many Mornings," and "Mama, You've Been On My Mind" before the Byrds had even formed as a group in November 1964<sup>4</sup>. These songs appear to have come to Cash as demos, as they were released before Dylan's own studio versions. These covers date to the very beginnings of the arrival of Dylan on the folk scene with his first hit, "Blowin' in the Wind," and the success of his second album (his first album, *Bob Dylan*, appears to have had little influence at the time and sold poorly). This indicates that country, if not yet bluegrass, musicians found something appealing in the earliest Dylan lyrics and were as quick – in fact, quicker – to cover them than mainstream pop/folk artists.

While it may at first seem illogical to connect Dylan and country music, his recent autobiography makes it clear that his tastes in folk music included the same roots influences shared by country artists such as Johnny Cash and, more importantly for our discussion here, bluegrass artists. While the influence of Woody Guthrie on Dylan is well known, *Chronicles* makes it clear that his interest in country music was also important and had pre-dated the Guthrie

3. A few of these covers are contained on the CD, *Dylan Country* (Shout!, 2004). Artists include Waylon Jennings, Johnny Cash, Hank Williams, Jr., Buck Owens, the Byrds, Glen Campbell, Peter Ostroushko and Norman Blake, Willie Nelson, Emmylou Harris, Jennifer Warnes, Jerry Jeff Walker, Nancy Griffith, and Kitty Wells, as well as bluegrass artists Earl Scruggs, the Country Gentlemen, and Tim O'Brien.

4. Cash's first Dylan cover, "Mama, You've Been on My Mind," was recorded July 27-28, 1964 at Columbia Studios in Nashville. In August of the same year, he covered "It Ain't Me Babe." See Colin Escott, notes to *Johnny Cash: The Man in Black, 1963-69 Plus* (Bear Family: BCD 15588, 1995), 38.

phase: “Hank Williams had been my favorite songwriter, though I thought of him as a singer, first. Hank Snow was a close second.” (Dylan, 2004: 49) The book is full of references to country artists such as George Jones, Slim Whitman, Webb Pierce, Jimmie Rodgers, Merle Haggard, Kitty Wells, and others, and even mentions that as a youth he listened to the *Grand Ole Opry*, the major live radio show for country music from WSM Nashville. While these influences did not lead the young Minnesotan to a career as a country singer/songwriter in the South, as they would so many others, they certainly must have given the music he was later to create a wider and more personal world view than many of his folk singing contemporaries. In this light, his later move away from folk music for a more personal songwriting narrative can be seen as a return to his roots in the more direct country tradition; his songs from his fourth album, *Another Side of Bob Dylan* (1964), onwards appear then as an exploration of updated relationship songs by the two Hanks and their contemporaries only a little more than ten years earlier.

As far as influences from the narrower world of bluegrass, which in Dylan’s youth would still have been regarded as a style within country music, *Chronicles* again gives a clear indication of his awareness of the style. For example, he mentions singing the song “Brother in Korea” in his early days in New York (*ibid.*: 18). This song was originally recorded by the Osborne Brothers (a bluegrass group) in 1952, although other artists would later record it as well. Also at this time, he was given a Country Gentlemen recording, and saw Don Stover and the Lilly Brothers at Alan Lomax’s loft (*ibid.*: 21&70). While bluegrass always seemed to remain one of many folk music styles of interest to the young Dylan, one of the primary things that he shared with adherents to the style was his disdain for contemporary country music that ventured too close to popular styles: “Outside of maybe George Jones, I didn’t like country music either. Jim Reeves and Eddy Arnold, it was hard to know what was country about that stuff.” (*Ibid.*: 33) So the recent influx of the Nashville Sound – and the techniques that virtually ended the place of bluegrass in commercial country music in the 1960s – alienated both folk connoisseurs like the young Dylan and the growing number of fans who were defining “bluegrass” as that part of the country music scene that was still noncommercial and valid.

In the coming years Dylan would venture towards country music in his albums *John Wesley Harding* (1967) and *Nashville Skyline* (1969). While these albums contain little suggestion of a bluegrass style, it was evident early on that folk music and bluegrass audiences shared similar tastes; what was successful and appealing in one style could and often did cross over quite easily to the other. Both audiences had a dislike of electric instruments bordering sometimes on the irrational – Dylan’s own foray into music accompanied by a rock band and its condemnation by fans at Newport in 1965 was mirrored in the late 1960s by the Osborne Brothers’ tamer but still controversial use of amplification. Both even contain apocryphal anecdotes of a well-meaning savior out to cut the electric cables and restore the acoustic sound world<sup>5</sup>. An audience that demanded a “pure” folk music aesthetic untarnished by the taint of commercialism could just as easily embrace bluegrass. And where the audience leads, savvy performers are sure to follow and exploit...

In this light, it would be most surprising if there were absolutely no covers of Dylan songs in a bluegrass style. Bluegrass could, after all, be used on just about any form of popular music with moderate aesthetic, if rarely commercial, success<sup>6</sup>. But the use of Dylan covers seems wider and more influential than a few albums of pop music curiosities done in a bluegrass style. And these songs were also covered by some of the top performers in the style, not just young, experimental groups.

### The Dillards, Hillmen, and Country Gentlemen

The earliest Dylan cover in an explicitly bluegrass style that I am aware of comes from the Dillards second album, *Live!... Almost!*<sup>7</sup>. The Dillards are best known to American television audi-

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5. Although technically most folk festival performance at the time were at least in part “electric” since they used microphones and public address systems, a fact often ignored by folk purists.
  6. For example, music of the Beatles in a bluegrass style by the Charles River Valley Boys, *Beatle Country* (Elektra, 1966).
  7. Dillards. *Live!... Almost!* (Elektra, 1964). The exact date of the live performance in this recording has not been determined at this time.

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ences as the fictional “Darling” family on the popular *Andy Griffith Show*, appearing on several episodes from 1963 to 1966. Their appearances on this network TV show took bluegrass music out of its original Southeastern environs and onto the national stage and surely won converts to the style as well as the band. Although originally from Missouri, the Dillards became part of a growing West Coast bluegrass music scene around Los Angeles and were naturals as the socially backwards but musically advanced family occasionally featured on the show<sup>8</sup>.

Indicating just how early in Dylan’s career their first cover originates, bassist Mitch Jayne introduces him to the audience in this manner:

“I don’t know how many of you know who Bobby Dylan is but he’s probably done more for folk music or had more influence on folk music than anybody. He has a voice very much like a dog with its leg caught in barbed wire [laughter]. But that doesn’t matter because what he does is *write* the songs. And he wrote a song that we liked real well and wanted to try to do it, ourselves, in a bluegrass style. This song is called “Walking Down the Line”<sup>9</sup>...”

Dylan had only recently moved away from his given name, Robert (often “Bobby”) Zimmerman to his carefully constructed stage name, Bob Dylan. The joke about Dylan’s voice would be echoed in future criticism from fans and professionals alike. And Jayne cuts right to the heart of a matter that would occupy critics for the next several decades: the quality of his voice is less important than the lyrics and the songs themselves. This in part explains the appeal of Dylan songs as covers: they were well-written with interesting words and music, but delivered with a voice that was an acquired taste for those who had not steeped themselves in the folk music of earlier times. In addition, the use of his own simple but effective guitar/blues harp accompaniment would give a prospective cover a wide range of new musical possibilities.

The song the Dillard’s chose for this album had not been released on a regular commercial Dylan album. “Walkin’ Down the Line” was written in 1962, published in the folk song magazine,

8. The four members of the Dillards, brothers Doug and Rodney Dillard, Dean Webb, and Mitch Jayne, were supplemented in the episodes by character actors Denver Pyle as their father and Maggie Peterson as their sister.

9. Transcribed by the author from Dillards, *Live!... Almost!* (Elektra, 1964).



*Broadside*, and recorded as a demo by Dylan sometime in 1963. The demo would not be officially released until 1991 (Dylan, 1991), but clearly the Dillards had heard the original tape.

“Jim Dickson, who produced this album as well as our first one, played this song for us, and we liked the feeling of it. We have always admired Bob Dylan’s writing, and it was a real pleasure to find a song of his that was particularly suitable for Bluegrass harmony and instruments. This is the only song we do with four parts, incidentally, and the sound is unusual, for us<sup>10</sup>.”

Note that Jim Dickson would become the producer for the Byrds; he would later play some of these same demos for the group and their rise to fame began with the January 1965 recording of “Mr. Tambourine Man.”

The original demo – and it might be stated that there was relatively little difference, at this time, between a Dylan demo and an actual released recording, since much of his studio work has a live, “one take” feel – contains vocals in the nasal Woody Guthrie-influenced style, acoustic guitar in open D tuning, and blues harp played from a metal holder around the performer’s neck. This instrumental combination, which Dylan inherited from much earlier folk performers, would become the iconic formula for much of his earlier, and some of his later, work. The song itself is rather pallid in comparison to works still to come from his pen; it could fairly easily pass for a public domain folk song and details the roamings and troubles in a Guthrie-esque landscape. Songs such as these point out one of the main differences between Dylan and other folk musicians at the time: his ability to steep himself in a style and create works that mimic and advance the style for a modern audience.

The demo contains a simple strummed introduction on the guitar, with blues harp interspersed after the choruses. The static lines of the chorus alternate with verses, four in total, for a simple form found in many folk and popular songs. The four members of the Dillards keep this basic structure and add more variety to it. In the bluegrass style, each musician can play a variety of roles: lead singer, harmony singer, lead instrumentalist, backup instrumentalist, or rhythm instrumentalist. Around the core of a lead singer/guitarist, very much in the style of Dylan although

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10. Liner notes to Dillards, *Live!... Almost!* (Elektra, 1964).

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the song has been moved to F major and normal tuning, are mandolin, banjo, and bass. The mandolin is clearly the featured instrument here and Dean Webb plays the introduction and all of the breaks on the song, with noticeable banjo backup from Doug Dillard. The string bass of Jayne holds the ensemble together, and all four members of the group join in vocal harmony for the choruses. The fourth verse is left off, ending the song on the verse about the narrator's sleepless night. The folk style that Dylan was experimenting with at this time makes for a cover that is virtually seamless in its transferral to the closely related bluegrass world.

The next known bluegrass covers of Dylan songs occur in "late 1963 and early 1964"<sup>11</sup>, although it was not released commercially until 1969<sup>12</sup>. Once again, the band was from the Los Angeles area, but this time we have a group of very young performers who would later gain fame outside of the bluegrass world who called themselves the Hillmen. Nineteen-year-old mandolinist Chris Hillman, shortly to join the Byrds on bass and go on to become a leading figure in country-rock music, was joined on guitar by Vern Gosdin, himself later to become a major mainstream country singer. Rounding out the band were Vern's brother Rex on bass and Don Parmley, one of the best young banjo players on the California scene at that time and later to play in the Bluegrass Cardinals. Jim Dickson, discussed earlier as the producer for the Dillards, helped the group record this album and may have influenced the choice of material.

Why this recording was consigned to the vaults is not known precisely, but surely the appearance of the Beatles on American television in February of 1964 and the general demise of the folk revival thereafter made a selection of bluegrass songs by a young California quartet less than easily marketable. Even Dylan himself was beginning to veer quite consciously away from his earlier folk style at this point. The set list for this album includes folk standards "Fair and Tender Ladies," "Winsborough Cotton Mill Blues," Woody Guthrie's "Ranger's Command," and Bill Monroe's "Wheel Hoss," as well as four originals by the Gosdin brothers and two songs by Dylan. The latter are the lesser known "Faretheewell" or "Farewell" and "When the Ship Comes In" from his third album, *The Times They Are A-Changin'* (1964).

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11. Chris Hillman, liner notes for CD, *The Hillmen* (Sugar Hill, 1981).

12. *The Hillmen* (Together, 1969).

“Farewell” was published in *Broadside* in January of 1963 and Dylan recorded a demo of the song that March. It was apparently recorded again in August but wound up as an outtake for the *Another Side of Bob Dylan* album (1964)<sup>13</sup>. It has been related to the British folk song, “The Leaving of Liverpool,” popularized by the Clancy Brothers, although Dylan apparently learned the song from Nigel Denver, a Scottish folksinger he met in London (Heylin, 2001: 108). Note that the instrumentation for the Hillmen is identical to that of the Dillards: guitar, mandolin, banjo, string bass. Many of these early folk-inspired bluegrass groups omit the fiddle – an instrument that bluegrass founder Bill Monroe repeatedly stated was the most important lead instrument – in favor of a sound that perhaps distanced these groups from the older string band style. That the Hillmen were aware of one of the most important of these groups, the Country Gentlemen, is readily apparent in the typical high harmony ending to their version of “Fare Thee Well,” which could have been taken virtually note-for-note from a Gentlemen recording.

Their second Dylan cover, “When the Ship Comes In,” is the first Dylan song we have looked at that appeared on one of his albums. It may also have been available as a demo and was performed by Dylan in several live concerts of the time, including his Carnegie Hall concert on 26 October 1963. It is loosely based on “Jenny’s Song” from Brecht and Weill’s *Threepenny Opera*. Heylin calls this a “fingerpointing song” with a “joyously vengeful lyric,” supposedly written after Dylan was refused entry into a hotel because of his unkempt appearance (*ibid.*: 125). The Hillmen’s version quickly loses this sense of finger pointing, and in this instance the bluegrass style seems like a poor fit for an excessively wordy and angry lyric. To make matters worse, the song is performed entirely in four-part harmony, stripping it of the personal energy and flexibility of the original, with a melody ill-suited to the setting. This is the first of Dylan’s songs that may perhaps have been too personal, too poetic, and too apocalyptic for the group-oriented performance necessary in bluegrass. In comparison to the original, the bluegrass version by the Hillmen seems a bit turgid and flat, overwhelmed by well-done vocal harmony and interesting but unnecessary instrumental interludes on mandolin and banjo.

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13. None of the original demos appear to be available commercially at present.

If the Hillmen were to find their futures in other groups and other styles of music, our final early Dylan covers were by one of the most important bluegrass groups of the time, the Country Gentlemen. Predating both the Dillards and the Hillmen, they were formed in the late 1950s. Charlie Waller, guitar/lead vocals, and John Duffey, mandolin/tenor vocals, formed the core of the early group; later musicians included Eddie Adcock on banjo and Ed Ferris on bass, the quartet which performed the Dylan covers in question here. The popularity of the Country Gentlemen spread from their Washington, D.C. base throughout the folk music festival circuit on the East Coast and, eventually, the West Coast and beyond. For many folk enthusiasts, they were the first and most lasting exposure to the bluegrass style in the early to mid 1960s. This early version of the group, featuring Duffey's soaring tenor and alpha male stage antics, quickly became an audience favorite.

The songs come from a period beginning in 1965 when no one would have to introduce Dylan as Mitch Jayne had done previously. Original songs by Dylan, as well as cover songs by popular artists, would have made him instantly recognizable by this time within and increasingly outside of the folk music world. The first Dylan cover by the Country Gentlemen, "Girl from the North Country," was recorded between 23-25 February 1965 at Syracuse University (Reid, 1998b: 16). The song had appeared on Dylan's second album, *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* (1963), and was based on the basic melody of "Scarborough Fair" by Martin Carthy (another relic of Dylan's trip to England).

As in many Dylan songs, the autobiographical aspects of the lyrics are shrouded in mystery and the silence of the composer. Few major artists have been able to keep such a private life and few have been so evasive in writing about the inspirations for their music. While this taciturn attitude toward the press may confound many who seek a definitive explanation of Dylan's lyrics, it also creates a sense of artistic license and leaves room for personal interpretations that, while they may or may not follow the author's original intentions, may be nevertheless effective. For example, it seems evident that Dylan had a particular person in mind for his song, "Girl of the North Country" (note the slight difference in the original title: "of" and not "from"), the identity of that person has been confused and misrepresented through time in the growing volume of

Dylan literature both published and on the Web. The most likely candidate is Bonnie Beecher, one of Dylan's early girl friends he met in Minneapolis before coming to New York (Heylin, 2001: 36ff). He would later rework the song into yet another early masterpiece, "Boots of Spanish Leather," for Suze Rotolo, his next love interest. It is important to keep in mind that songs can be inspired by or dedicated to someone without being patently autobiographical; from the standpoint of a cover version, the song can simply mean many things to many different people depending on how they choose to interpret it.

Returning to the Country Gentlemen's version of "Girl from the North Country," Charlie Waller recalled that their version was not actually based on the original, but that "we heard a folk singer up on Martha's Vineyard do that song. We played a club up there called the Mooncusser." (Reid, 1998b: 4-6) Dylan's increasing popularity thus meant a growing number of cover versions of his songs, both in the studio and certainly in live venues throughout the country. The Gentlemen's cover is unapologetically bluegrass from the start, with a banjo introduction by Eddie Adcock followed by Waller's lead and John Duffey's nearly dominant tenor singing. After the opening chorus, Waller continues solo with the verses of the song, again alternating with harmonized choruses. As with the Dillards and Hillmen, the mandolin appears to be the favored feature instrument; Duffey takes the first break, but Adcock adds the second on the banjo. Instrumentally, as well as vocally, the performers' debt to their bluegrass predecessors are evident throughout: Duffey's mandolin fills owe much to Bill Monroe and Adcock's solos and especially backup are only slightly personalized versions of what Earl Scruggs might have played in a similar setting. We are only one generation removed from the original founders of the bluegrass style. While this particular cover loses some of the poignancy of the original, like the Hillmen's "Faretheewell" it appears to invest a newly composed song with the timeless quality of folk material handed down through time. Once again, Dylan's original is so closely wedded to his folk inspiration that one would more likely expect the word "traditional" to appear in the credits than "Bob Dylan."

The Country Gentlemen's next Dylan cover was recorded in November 1965 and for a very specific purpose: a low budget Japanese release apparently financed by Japanese investors (Reid,

1998a). Bluegrass gained a surprisingly large following in Japan in the 1960s, due in part to the emphasis on instrumental prowess that could translate across cultures where lyrics might fail. The investors apparently also controlled the selection of material. To call their selections conservative would be a gross understatement: the album included hoary favorites such as “Home Sweet Home,” “Auld Lang Syne,” and even “Oh Susanna,” as well as Guthrie’s canonic “This Land Is Your Land” and, oddly, Dylan’s “Blowin’ in the Wind”. The latter comes again from *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan* (1963) and, as noted above, had fast become one of the most recognized of the newly composed “folk” songs of the era. The Gentlemen’s renowned high harmony trio singing is used for this song, in keeping with its frequent role as a communal show closer in folk singings. The recording is informal and loose, clearly reflecting its rather rushed origins in a single recording session, but the performance is nonetheless effective, if a bit indifferent. What may at first go unnoticed in such a song would become a trait of most “second generation” bluegrass acts: a willingness to experiment with unfamiliar repertoire and lyrical subject matter. Many, although certainly not all, first generation bluegrass songs contained references that were archaic by the 1960s; references to mother, old cabins in the hills, moonshine and other rural concerns. Lyrics such as those from “Blowin’ the in the Wind” invested bluegrass with a new social relevance.

The final early bluegrass Dylan cover was the one that occupied a more consistent place in their repertoire than either of the others: “It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue” first recorded 15-16 June 1966 by the same group of Waller, Duffey, Adcock, and Ferris. Duffey sang lead vocals here and would later perform this song in his next group, the Seldom Scene. John Duffey characterized “It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue” a song that:

“I wish I’d written. For years I did it, I never understood what it meant and I didn’t care. I got a little insight into it... I didn’t realize until I saw it in the newspaper one time that Bob Dylan and Joan Baez had actually kept house for about a year or so and this was actually written to her”.

In the notes to a 1995 Shanachie Records release detailing the roots of the Grateful Dead, Blair Johnson wrote that “Dylan’s original version appeared on his half-acoustic, half-electric 1965 LP *Bringing It All Back Home*...Bob Dylan related it to Gene Vincent’s ‘Baby Blue,’ a song he sang in high school...” (Reid, 1998b: 7)

While Duffey thought the song was written for Baez, others think it was intended for Paul Clayton, the “seasick sailors” line a reference to Clayton’s sailor album for Tradition. (Heylin, 2001: 177) The song can appear to be written for a woman, however, with the lines “the lover who just walked out your door, has taken all his blankets from the floor”. But if interpreted from the standpoint that all of these characters are just figures from folk songs sung by Clayton, he can still be heard as the inspiration for the song. Adding extra weight to this assertion is the fact that when Clayton committed suicide in April 1966, Dylan suddenly added the song back into his live tour’s repertoire and sang it with a poignancy noticed by even the most jaded critics of the time (*ibid.*: 251-252). What is more important than the actual origins of the song is that Duffey believed it was written about Baez and that this meant something to his interpretation. This speaks toward the silence of the author, who could easily have stated a specific autobiographical intent for the song, if it indeed ever had one. Again, the author of the song should not be too casually confused with the narrator in the lyrics.

The song originates from Dylan’s *Bringing It All Back Home* (1965), importantly on the acoustic side of the disc. In fact, all of the songs we have covered thus far were acoustic guitar (some with blues harp) and voice in the original. The musicianship is top notch, with harmonized vocals joining in only on the title line, giving Duffey soft supporting backup vocals here and there on neutral syllables, but allowing him to tell the lyric in a more personal manner than group singing would allow. Adcock has also hit his stride at this point, moving away from Scruggs style towards his trademark single line, more guitar-influenced solo work. The effect is arresting; suddenly the bluegrass sound world has been infused with mysterious lyrics that hint at, but do not expose, a sense of sorrow and foreboding. Whatever Duffey thought the song meant, or whatever Dylan might have meant when he wrote it, it now has gained a similar troubling aura firmly within a slow tempo bluegrass style. Of all of the early covers we have looked at thus far, it is perhaps the most successful.

## Flatt and Scruggs and Dylan

Second generation bluegrass groups such as the Dillards and the Country Gentlemen were easily exposed to new folk/pop music, working the same folk festival circuits as Dylan and his contemporaries. But only one first generation bluegrass ensemble ventured away from their established canon and towards the new folk music in the 1960s: Lester Flatt, Earl Scruggs and the Foggy Mountain Boys. In fact, for most bluegrass fans, their foray into folk music and especially the music of Bob Dylan became one of the biggest controversies in the increasingly insular bluegrass world of the time:

“There are 13 musicians on the last Flatt & Scruggs. Pretty big bluegrass band. Bluegrass? There are three drummers. Three bassists, one electric (the bass, not the bassist). Three guitars, not counting the dobro. The songs are fine old bluegrass standards by Bob Dylan (mostly), Johnny Cash and Leonard Cohen (the Canadian Rod McKuen). The participants don't sound like they enjoyed it much; neither did I. But if you've still been enjoying their music you'll like this set too.” (Spottswood, 1970: 14)

The sarcastic tone is repeated in other reviews of Flatt and Scruggs from the period.

Like the Dillards, Flatt and Scruggs had first gained popularity nationwide on television, playing the theme song and making guest appearances on the enormously popular *Beverly Hillbillies* (1962-1971). Unlike the Dillards, though, they had been around as a group since 1948 and before that performed in the seminal bluegrass band with Bill Monroe and His Blue Grass Boys – a band that to many defined the style of bluegrass during a brief period from 1945-1948. Through crafty management, especially by Earl's wife Louise, they had joined the folk revival circuit and had quickly been accepted as the leaders in the bluegrass style, much to the dismay of Monroe and other first generation bluegrass artists. Their new found popularity was double edged: on the one hand, they were playing to larger audiences than ever before, touring parts of the country and even the world that bluegrass artists had never appeared in before; on the other hand, they were opening themselves to the taint of commercialism and the danger of distancing themselves from the core audience that had followed them to this point.



The first factor that must be kept in mind with Flatt and Scruggs is that they recorded for Columbia Records, the same label as Dylan (and Johnny Cash). Few bluegrass artists at this time had been able to hang onto major label contracts and Flatt and Scruggs had been with Columbia since 1950. Given the backstage pushing of demo tapes already encountered in larger record labels, it is no surprise that they were given tapes of Dylan and encouraged to perform them. One historian even states that Dylan's publisher Artie Mogull of Witmark and Sons, colluded with Dylan's manager Albert Grossman in paying artists to record Dylan songs:

“Stories are told of Mogull's offering cash to various folk labels if they would have their artists record Dylan's songs; while Grossman piggy-backed his stable of performers, which included Odetta and Peter, Paul and Mary, to cover a lot of Dylan. Judy Collins, Manfred Mann, the Byrds, the Animals, Sonny and Cher, and the Turtles, all Grossman acts, had hits with Dylan's songs.” (Eliot, 1989: 114)

Dylan's Witmark contract expired in 1965 and he then formed his own publishing company, Dwarf Music (Grossman craftily wound up with 50 % of the publishing income). It may never be known if such shady back-room dealings influenced the songs and the artists in question here, but the fact that demos of one of the hottest singer/songwriters in the business were circulating amongst Columbia artists gives some indication as to the connections necessary to get a song covered in the world of popular music.

The first Dylan song recorded by Flatt and Scruggs is “Mama, You've Been On My Mind” from 16 May 1966 and released on a 45 rpm single. The original song, covered first by Johnny Cash (see above), seemed a natural fit for the group, with its overtly country feel, although Dylan's demo is a world away from the bouncy versions by either Cash or Flatt and Scruggs. And here we are clearly venturing onto the fringes of the bluegrass sound, as Spottswood pointed out in his review. Earl Taylor's blues harp leads off the song, surely a nod to the same instrument made increasingly popular by Dylan, but he cups the instrument in his hands in a blues style, not from a rack, and gets a radically different sound, if still hinting of the original. By just about anyone's definition, the harmonica (i.e., blues harp) is not a standard bluegrass instrument. Neither are the drums, evident throughout, nor even the flat picked guitar solo by Grady Martin. In fact,

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the only real bluegrass elements that separate this song from the standard Nashville country fare of the time are Scruggs' simple but effective banjo accompaniment and the mere fact that Lester Flatt's voice had been associated with bluegrass for nearly 20 years at the time. And there appears to be no real change in Flatt's singing style through that period, although his voice was increasingly subjected to heavy echo effects so common in 1960s recordings and he tended to exploit his lower register more than on his early songs.

The fact that this song – or any of the of the others recorded at that session, such as Tom Paxton's "The Last Thing on My Mind" or Bobby Bare's "Passing Through" – might not have fit the label "bluegrass" would not have mattered much to the duo at the time. Like many first generation acts they were becoming increasingly uncomfortable with the term, due in large part to the association with Bill Monroe (and His *Blue Grass Boys*) and the limiting factors that it entailed. After all, if Monroe didn't use harmonica, drums, resophonic guitar (aka Dobro), or play songs by Dylan and other popular artists, how could anyone else and still consider their music "bluegrass"? This cuts to the core of the problem faced by Flatt and Scruggs and other first generation acts: how could they increase their audience and progress musically without alienating the purists? Different groups solved this in different ways. Younger bands like the Osborne Brothers and the Dillards began amplifying their instruments, mainly to be able to play the same shows as loud mainstream country acts, and expanded their repertoire to include modern music in a large variety of styles. Most adamantly insisted that they no longer considered their music bluegrass, in any sense, yet they were still predictably criticized from a standpoint of comparison to Monroe, who was being all but deified by the remnants of the folk revival in the late 1960s.

It comes as a bit of a surprise then, that albums by Flatt and Scruggs featuring songs by Dylan such as *Changin' Times* (1968) and *Nashville Airplane* (1969), sold well and seem to find a popular audience, despite the consistently scathing reviews in the bluegrass press. With the former album, there are five Dylan covers. Dylan's originals of the first two, "Blowin' in the Wind" and "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right" appeared on *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* (1962), "It Ain't Me Babe" on *Another Side of Bob Dylan* (1964), and "Mr. Tambourine Man" on *Bringing It All Back Home* (1965). A fifth song, "Down in the Flood," would appear on *The Basement Tapes*

(1975) and was later re-recorded and released on *Greatest Hits, Vol. II* (1971).

The studio musicians on “Blowin’ in the Wind” immediately set it apart from the Country Gentlemen’s version. In addition to the regular members of the Foggy Mountain Boys at this time – Lester Flatt, lead vocals/guitar, Earl Scruggs, banjo, “Josh” Graves, resophonic guitar, “Jake” Tullock, tenor vocals/string bass, and Paul Warren, bass vocals – musicians added in the studio include Charlie McCoy on harmonica, Earl’s son Randy on baritone vocals, and an unnamed drummer. Warren, a fine fiddle player and one of the best musicians in the group, apparently was asked to leave his fiddle in the case for the entire session, which took place on 21 September 1967 (Talbot, 1995). Three of the four songs recorded that day were Dylan tunes, along with Ian Tyson’s “Four Strong Winds.” There is certainly a bluegrass quartet there, and one of the finest in history, but the recording has buried or omitted certain key elements of the style. The fiddle, deemed essential by Monroe himself, was often left out of recordings in this period as we have seen from the previous groups who did not even include it as a regular member of the band. The mandolin was rarely featured in Flatt and Scruggs’ recordings (some say to differentiate their sound from Monroe’s), so its absence is hardly noteworthy here. Of more import to the overall sound is the fact that Flatt’s fine and underrated thumb-finger rhythm guitar work is all but obliterated by the studio guitarist and drums. And, as on “Mama, You’ve Been on My Mind” the harmonica, even played by one of the best studio musicians in Nashville at the time, hardly lends itself to the bluegrass style. So once again we are left with Scruggs’ banjo accompaniment – including a brief solo break – and Flatt’s familiar drawling baritone. Still, whether or not it is “bluegrass,” the essence of the Flatt and Scruggs’ sound is more than evident: banjo/dobro interplay and four-part harmony. Musically, the song is quite effective; it might even be said that a listener who did not understand English could mistake it for a moderately paced bluegrass standard, at least ignoring the drums and harmonica.

But the crucial element is the lead vocalist and most of the criticism of these covers relates to Lester Flatt’s voice. Although Flatt did not have what was commonly regarded as a typical bluegrass voice, it must be remembered that he was the lead vocalist to Bill Monroe’s tenor on recordings from the 1940s that virtually defined the style. It was also a voice that proved

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enormously popular on recordings as well as radio and television shows throughout the South in the 1950s and 1960s, landing the duo a spot on the coveted *Grand Ole Opry* stage in 1955 and catapulting them to even greater success during the brief folk revival. But Flatt was over 50 years old by the late 1960s, hardly the ideal person to communicate these songs of youth and social change. It is evident that he would have concurred, as he expressed in an interview with Bill Vernon in 1972:

[Bill Vernon:] You had some songs selected for you a number of years back, some Dylan songs and things like that, that it seemed you had to work extra hard to put something into.  
[Lester Flatt:] That's right – it was a forced thing.” (Vernon, 1972: 3)

Flatt was reluctant to openly criticize the repertoire choices, especially while the group was together and still under contract with Columbia, but he was even more plain spoken in another interview from 1971:

“In this case Bob Johnston, the guy who recorded us, picked a lot of the material. He (Johnston) also cuts Bob Dylan and we would record what he would come up with, regardless of whether I liked it or not. I can't sing Bob Dylan stuff. I mean, Columbia has got Bob Dylan, why did they want me?” (Talbot, 1995)

Surely part of the defensiveness in Flatt's statements comes from the bitter reviews in folk and bluegrass journals, but there is also no doubt that he felt uncomfortable with the new folk material and the Dylan covers in particular: he refused to learn them so that the group could perform them live. Scruggs and his wife continued to side with Johnston, pressing for more commercial folk covers.

With this as a background, a fresh listen to these recordings is in order. Again, it is important to remember that the band was not trying to follow a pre-determined bluegrass style, whatever that term might have meant in the late 1960s. It might also be noted that some criticisms about these recordings do not hold up to closer examination, such as the sense that these are slowed down versions of the originals. Careful comparison of the originals leads to the surprising conclusion that, for the song “Blowin' in the Wind” it was the Country Gentlemen who slowed their cover down; Flatt and Scruggs' version is actually noticeably quicker than Dylan's original. The same

can be said of their next cover, “Don’t Think Twice, It’s All Right.” The banjo gives a driving rhythm, as in all classic bluegrass, and the heavy backbeat lends an irresistible foot tapping feel. If Flatt’s voice sounds “tired” to some critics, perhaps it is a matter of opinion, although it must be admitted that it does feel as if he is merely reading the lyrics from a lead sheet (which, of course, he actually was).

“It Ain’t Me Babe” is also noticeably quicker than the original, although this may be one of the best examples of Flatt’s rather lethargic delivery, lacking any sense of the undercurrent of anger and heartache in Dylan’s original, or even the borderline menace in Cash’s 1963 cover. In Flatt’s defense, an instrumentalist’s job on a cover may be much easier than that of the lead vocalist’s; the instrumentalists have only to play the original chords and melody, lay down the rhythm set forth by the band, and make music. The vocalist has to express not just the music but the meaning and power of the lyrics, and the vocalist on a cover tune will invariably be the first person compared to the original performer. Perhaps it was simply a matter of generational and regional differences too great for Flatt to overcome, but the final two songs from *Changin’ Times*, “Down in the Flood” and “Mr. Tambourine Man” are perhaps the nadir of bluegrass Dylan covers. The former features a ridiculous “Ohhhh mama!” opening by Flatt and an energetic, if ultimately comical vocal. “Mr. Tambourine Man” may be one of the few times where the tempo is actually quicker on the original, and it must be said that even the Byrds’ hit version comes off as a pale reading of the complex poetry of the original. In Flatt’s version, the words are nonsensical to the point of kitsch.

An additional four Dylan covers occur on Flatt and Scruggs’ *Nashville Airplane* (1969), one of their last albums together. To show how the duo was breaking apart artistically, Flatt is said to have especially disliked the cover of this album, which shows an airplane and caricatures of Scruggs literally in the pilot’s seat and Flatt, in his own words, “barely hanging on to the damn tail!” (Lambert, Sechler, 1982: 53) The songs include a fairly effective version of one of Dylan’s more country-flavored songs, “I’ll Be Your Baby Tonight” from *John Wesley Harding* (1967). “Like a Rolling Stone” features an effective dobro part by Graves, but otherwise is another cover bordering on parody. It pales, however, in comparison to “Rainy Day Women #12 & 35” (aka

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“Everybody Must Get Stoned”). The latter features an alternate take with audible laughter at the end, as if the boys were at least enjoying themselves and aware of the misfit nature of the song and the group<sup>14</sup>. To make matters worse, one of the more effective Dylan covers recorded earlier in 1967, “Girl of the North Country,” never even made it onto an album<sup>15</sup>. It appears that the group too often had ineffective material forced on them and, when they weren’t able to find a good groove for a song, it was left in the vault.

“Girl from [sic] the North Country” was re-recorded in 1969, as one of an astonishing seven Dylan covers featured on Flatt and Scruggs’ last album, *Final Fling (One Last Time)* (1969). Other covers from this album are “Honey, Just Allow Me One More Chance” (from *The Free-wheelin’ Bob Dylan*, 1962), “Maggie’s Farm” (from *Bringing It All Back Home*, 1965), the instrumental “Nashville Skyline Rag” and “One More Night” (both from *Nashville Skyline*, 1969), “One Too Many Mornings” (from *The Times They Are A-Changin’*, 1963), and “Wanted Man” (another song written for Johnny Cash and not recorded by Dylan). The sheer amount of the Dylan material on these later albums may have worked against their success, over saturating the market, although most of them sold reasonably well, again in an era when most bluegrass acts could not get a major record contract. One almost begins to wonder if there was an intentional – or perceived – comic effect in these songs that contributed to their commercial success. In the 1980s, the folk duo Robin and Linda Williams created a fictional bluegrass band, Marvin and Mavis Smiley and the Manhattan Valley Boys, that performed Broadway show tunes, Beach Boys’ songs, and other offbeat material for a comic skit on Garrison Keillor’s radio show, *A Prairie Home Companion*<sup>16</sup>. Fans that favored the Dylan originals may still have found the covers by Flatt and Scruggs both familiar and humorous at the same time, as well as musically interesting. One wonders if Dylan himself might have had Lester Flatt in mind when he stated: “Most of the cover versions of my songs seemed to take them out into left field somewhere...” (Dylan, 2001: 61)

14. Released version and outtake on *Flatt & Scruggs, 1964-1969, Plus* (Bear Family, 1995).

15. It does appear on *Flatt on Victor, & Scruggs, 1964-1969, Plus* (Bear Family, 1995).

16. See Kathryn Slusher, *A Prairie Home Companion: All About the Music*. <http://prairiehome.publicradio.org/features/aatml/2003/05/>.

But Flatt and Scruggs were far from the last bluegrass group to cover the songs of Bob Dylan. Scruggs continued to feature occasional Dylan songs in groups with his sons that featured a more overtly rock sound and the more youthful and effective vocals of Gary Scruggs. And while Flatt moved more safely back into the conservative fold after forming a more traditional bluegrass group, the Nashville Grass, he still recorded another Dylan tune, “She Belongs to Me,” on his solo album, *Flatt Out* (Columbia, 1971). Whether Flatt and Scruggs and other artists chose Dylan material on their own or whether their choice was guided by the back-room machinations of figures such as Jim Dickson, Artie Mogull, and Albert Grossman, cannot at this point be determined. But beginning in the 1970s, counterculture bluegrass groups such as the Bluegrass Alliance and New Deal String Band also covered Dylan songs, as part of the generation that had literally grown up with them. In later years, younger artists such as Tim O’Brien combine respect for both bluegrass and Dylan in recordings such as *Red On Blonde* (Sugar Hill, 1996), featuring 13 Dylan covers with a mixture of bluegrass and old-time instrumentation. Surely the inspiration here is love of the music itself and not mere commercial profit.

### Summary

The style of music generally referred to as bluegrass emerged from country music by the late 1940s, was given its name in the 1950s, and, with the help of these Dylan covers, was expanded to a larger commercial audience either disenchanted or unfamiliar with country music in the 1960s. The music appealed to those who enjoyed the relative simplicity and acoustic feel of folk and earlier country musics; the lyrics gave bluegrass a currency and relevance impossible to find in the inherited rural songs which defined the style. Dylan covers acted as a familiar bridge for those new to bluegrass to cross into its sound world. The often obscure lyrics, combined with the sparse instrumentation of the originals, meant that artists in many styles could make fresh creations out of these songs, add more complex accompaniment, interpret the lyrics in new ways, and make them, in part, their own. The songs also moved bluegrass musicians outside of familiar melodic and chordal formulas that threatened to stagnate the style. In bluegrass, these covers will always remain a center of controversy for those ensconced in tradition and the

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“purity” of the original style as created by Bill Monroe. But it is important to note that they were not lone examples of bluegrass Dylan covers, but the beginning of a tradition of covering his and other mainstream songs that continues in bluegrass to the present day, investing it with new material, new styles, and new audiences.

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