

# Pasts Present

## History and Memory in the Songs of Bob Dylan

### *Introduction*

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and Professor Robert Reginio, Alfred University*

The three essays we present here explore critical conditions of temporality as manipulated by one artist, Bob Dylan. No individual, and no community, has ever existed outside of a critical—i.e., crisis-based—relation with time. The chief temporal crises of the current moment are so much with us that articulating them feels both futile and naïve: First, historical narratives that justify the ideologies of the narrators are certainly not new. The battle for the historical narrative (between reinforcing old arcs of power and writing new arcs of critique and empowerment) does seem a matter of holding hostage or freeing the *future of history*, especially in the U.S. Second, the climate crisis has opened arresting new channels that reconceive geological time with anew Anthropocene consciousness and create a space for a secular eschatology. This secular eschatology sometimes ignites awareness, coalition, and action, and sometimes looks like theological eschatology, with protracted rhetoric and speculation. For those of us who enjoy the material and social privileges that permit reflecting, conferring, and disseminating ideas about art and time, right now is a period fraught with special tensions: we seek forms and voices that may grasp these decisive and precarious moments; we may renew our interest in how art plays with temporalities and see if we can get some new light out of that work.

Bob Dylan exemplifies the artist-in-time. For five decades, his creative production has included songwriting, recording, visual art (drawing, painting, and sculpture), and relentless performing that entails ongoing development in his approaches to persona and musicianship. He has proven most meaningful, provocative, and enduring when disrupting every boundary between tradition and innovation, between the radical and the continual. His audience and professional critics have scrutinized his work across these 50 years for its contact points with contextual social, political, and cultural realities to a

degree applied to no other living artist. Formally, he's created strong work manipulating the temporalities of folklore; allegory; the experience of collective time; self-deceptive memory; expansive interiority; historiography; radical chronologies; dramatically framed scenes; and more.

First presented as a panel at the 2023 World of Bob Dylan conference in Tulsa, Oklahoma, these papers look at temporality and the work of Bob Dylan through three lenses: one, patterns of experienced temporality across visual and linguistic compositions; two, the temporality of longevity, mortality, and artistic development; and three, how temporality may be framed as communal in a shared social realm.

In "Time Slots in Dylan's Oeuvre," Anne-Marie Mai considers Dylan's manipulation of "time intervals" in his musical compositions and performances, visual art, and *The Philosophy of Modern Song* (2022). Mai applies particular attention to one of Dylan's masterworks of complex temporality, "Red River Shore" (1997/2008), a deceptively straightforward series of watercolors, and Dylan's discussion of the song "Feel So Good" in *The Philosophy of Modern Song*. She demonstrates that Dylan's uses of language at the grammatic level, and of image, can delineate past, present, and future in order to present "decisive" moments that may be climactic, ambiguous, and emotionally inflected at once.

In "Today and Tomorrow and Yesterday, Too," Nina Goss argues for the prominence of Dylan's post-2000 work in the burgeoning field of late style studies, which posits that strong artists who remain significantly productive in middle age and beyond may radically reinvent their signature styles in service to a vivid consciousness of mortality. With attention to the compositions "Mother of Muses" (2020), and "Murder Most Foul" (2020), Goss posits that Dylan has recast and complicated his historical vision away from consoling progressive, coherent narratives.

In "Oh, Help Me in My Weakness," Robert Reginio takes on the world of the displaced in *John Wesley Harding* (1967) to examine vexations of collective time and power structure: How can a shared sense of time exist when communal culture is imperiled? Although we hope that readers will come away from this project with a refreshed appreciation for the fruitfulness of, specifically, Bob Dylan's decades-long agonistic relationship to time as that which he commands and that to which he must submit, we do wish to position this project as an invitation for discussion and exploration: temporality as historiography, as shared cultural and global narratives, as defined by exile and peril, have become day-to-day existential exigencies. Are we bringing new or different

needs to encounters with art that plays deeply with temporality? Which artists, current or past, have been reframing, refreshing, troubling your vision of our temporal crises? We hope our project may lead you into a possible new urgency surrounding these questions.

*Special thanks to Universal for the permission to quote Bob Dylan's lyrics.*

*Special thanks to manager Jeff Rosen for the permission to show Bob Dylan's painting, "Corner Flat."*