

Re:Search

Folk Conversations with Bob Dylan: Modern Traditions in *“Love and Theft”*

Casey Mulvany, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

ABSTRACT

Looking through the career of Bob Dylan, we can observe the patterns of musical change throughout the twentieth century, relying on the frequent evolution of the folk tradition in a modern context. By examining Dylan’s body of work, we see how an artist of his caliber approaches his craft, weaving new sounds and new songs out of the old musical fabric that has come before. Bob Dylan’s role as a figurehead of popular music for his generation has placed him on a pedestal; what he does in music helps define what it means to be a recording artist, and ultimately what helps define the craft. Dylan’s lyrical techniques of borrowings, as showcased on *“Love and Theft”* or the re-recordings of traditional folk numbers on *Good As I Been to You*, have surpassed the expectations of how a song develops overtime, becoming commentary on a new, modern world as well as an expressive of artistic intent. In Dylan’s own words, “I don’t see myself as covering these songs.” It’s an uncovering he’s been looking for. In this essay, I discuss what this uncovering of America’s musical landscape does for the future of how we explore the music of old. I intend to examine how Dylan’s approach to conceptualizing these older songs of varying ages dictates his troubadour character and how as a symbol of America’s culture, Dylan’s career has given us a panorama of American sound.

KEYWORDS

Bob Dylan, folk music, popular music, cover, *“Love and Theft”*

In the school of Dylanology we typically look at Bob Dylan first and foremost as a songwriter. But not just any songwriter, as Bob Dylan has transcended pulp status to become part of the cultural fabric of music and America, interweaving his work into the cultural dynamics of poetry, art, film, and music. Dylan is part of what we call the folk tradition, the notion that all art stems from the core principles of storytelling that created the folk songs and tales of old. Through the lens of Bob Dylan, we as readers can observe the folk tradition in popular music as a recourse of dialogue in a grander scheme of an evolving art.

In popular music, the folk tradition has evolved into several avenues of recreating or recycling older works. Sampling, the use of previously made recordings—sometimes licensed—has become an essential part of modern hip hop. Another avenue musicians often take is to cover a song. When a song is covered, it is recorded as its own individual work (sometimes inside a medley with other songs), whereby an artist can rearrange the song, include or exclude lyrical passages, etc. Covering a song is the most common way artists show off this modern folk tradition, as it resembles the way original folk ballads were spoken or sung to audiences. Words were changed here or there; no performance was ever the same. Different singers had different interpretations of the work. I will speak more about covering in Bob Dylan’s career towards the end of the essay.

The third major way singers in the modern age reflect the folk tradition is by adapting or readapting earlier works. This plays out differently than merely sampling minor moments of an earlier work. Rather, adaptation plays older songs or stories in new ways. Adaptation can be a robust tool for bringing out a simple idea that a writer has come across in, say, a poem they read. A young writer might think, “I want to do that too” and express this thought by trying to recreate the poem or song they read or heard. This retelling of tales resembles our recreation of a song when we cover it. In the context of Bob Dylan, adaptation has become a recurring experience over many years. Sometimes this is well-hidden; other times, less so.

Take the case of the love triangle story of “Black Jack Davey,” an old folk number Dylan recorded on his *Good As I Been to You* record in 1993. The song considers a lonely wife who leaves her current husband in search of the handsome rogue, Black Jack Davey, to whom she

makes love by the riverside. Her husband follows her in the night to discover the affair. The song “Black Jack Davey” had its own history long before Dylan. The song is one of the most famous Child Ballads, named after the late-nineteenth-century Harvard professor James Francis Child, who organized a lengthy collection of several hundred folk ballads. These songs typically contain a more general concept of plot but are also more moral than other, more basic examples of the period (Lornell 66). The original version of “Black Jack Davey” is generally regarded to be “That Raggle Taggle Gypsy,” a story about a woman who is taken from her home by gypsies.

“That Raggle Taggle Gypsy” obviously has racial connotations now; so, with time, the song has come to represent a tighter narrative in which one roguish figure woos the woman in the night. This, too, becomes a quintessential plotline: the love triangle. Using the love triangle as a device, we get a better understanding of the characters in the story of the song. Their vices and stakes become all the more prevalent as the song switches from a simple moral tale into a steamy romance of seduction and, in some interpretations, murder. Dylan’s version of the song as it appears on *Good As I Been to You* is far from murderous in telling, but listening to the singer’s inflection and troubadour sneer in his voice, it is hard to hear any vicious intent. “How old are you, my pretty little miss,/How old are you my honey?/She answered to him with a lovin’ smile/’I’ll be sixteen come Sunday,” one exchange goes (Traditional, 6-9). Black Jack appears to be more than a simple travelling man as he walks onto the page.

What Dylan’s version adds to the folk conversation regarding “Black Jack Davey” goes beyond the simple cover. “That’s the key to the whole album,” says George Varga of the San Diego Times Union. “None of these songs are by him, yet he makes them indelibly his own in every case. He found or re-found his own voice on this, not through his own words but through the words of others and in some cases, centuries-old words” (Bream 174). The forceful way he plays, harder than anything else on *Good As I Been to You*, adds to the malicious nature and the trepidation of the plot. Dylan sways his guitar as he plays off the dialogue. When we get to the implied contemplation of the woman’s choice to ride out with Black Jack, he plays. Again, he plays when there is a lapse of time between when the woman leaves and when the boss comes home to find she’s gone. This lyrically empty space becomes a musical bridge the boss literally

uses to “overtake my baby” (34). Such musical cues are what Dylan has done even in his own songs, which are marked by a characteristic lack of lyrical bridges; thus, Dylan’s performance of a folk number like this, which itself uses a technique that Dylan has made his trademark, shows us how much he has learned as not only a performer with a guitar but also an interpreter of folk music. At the time of the release of *Good As I Been to You* in 1992, Dylan had not performed a traditional folk song on a studio album in twenty years (that album being *Self Portrait*).

On his record *Self Portrait*, Dylan was trying to establish a new canon for himself. Many believe this record to be an intentional disaster, mixing the folk rock of Dylan’s contemporaries Gordon Lightfoot and Paul Simon with Dylan’s Isle of Wight performance, as well as sprinkling in traditional folk numbers. It was made a double album for good measure, per Dylan’s own remark that “if you’re gonna put a lot of crap on it, you might as well *load it up*” (Cott 301). This raises the questions of whether Dylan perceived *Self Portrait* as a serious work, and whether its songs require critical interpretation. It would be remiss to overlook the beauty of one of the new songs, titled “All the Tired Horses,” which features only one repeating couplet. However, some folk numbers, such as the two versions of “Little Sadie,” come off as goofs, not unlike the *Basement Tapes* recordings. Ultimately, this is the context by which the mere appearance of folk ballads on a Bob Dylan record were looked at upon the release of *Good As I Been to You*. The reactions were much more impressed and praise for the effort was abundant.

When *Good As I Been to You* was released, the competent covering of songs also allowed Dylan to reach a broader audience, something he had hoped to attempt further with his original concept he was to perform on *MTV Unplugged*, which was to feature only folk tunes not unlike those on *Good As I Been to You* and *World Gone Wrong*. This would have also provided closure to this period of Dylan’s work, culminating in a trilogy, as with most major periods of Dylan’s works. In retrospect, *Good As I Been to You* and *World Gone Wrong* began Dylan’s attempt to recapture his roots, which produced a mountain of material surpassed only by his ‘60s peak. As Ian Bell writes in his biography of the singer, “[*World Gone Wrong*] and its predecessor, 1992’s *Good As I Been to You*, would represent a reimmersion in the original sources of his music. In some sense, Dylan would repeat the course of study he had undertaken back in Greenwich

Village, in his early days” (336). This is the position most critics have adopted toward Dylan’s career from the mid-1990s onward: restless, looking for the answers that will help him discover a sense of who the real Bob Dylan is.

Is the character of Bob Dylan the original Minnesotan folk singer who found his way to New York at the start of the 1960s? How he came by the name is something of a legend. In *Chronicles*, his memoir, he teases that he stole the name from a dead president of the San Bernardino Angels (Dylan 79). And although the legends range from absurd comedy to western folklore, it is the mystery of the persona that is actually important, and its importance carries with it the American values that it embodies. The persona of Bob Dylan is its own folk song character—in fact, a biographer once literally named their tome, *The Ballad of Bob Dylan*. He’s a hero. He’s a legend. Is he a Black Jack Davey, too? A mystical troubadour who comes in the night to take a lady away from riches and life? All this and more. Bob Dylan simply touching a folk song—any song at all, as we will later learn—eternalizes it. This eternal quality to a work, even if it isn’t a grand version worthy of hyperbole, makes the song stand out and shows it to an audience. This is what Dylan brought to the conversation when he recorded *Good As I Been to You*.

This conversation continues onward today, with Dylan’s recent release of five discs of traditional pop songs, the tin pan alley popular music of big bands, and vocal jazz pre-dating the rock ‘n’ roll of the mid-1950s. But before we discuss these latest three records in Dylan’s catalogue, attention must be given to what we call the roots trilogy of Dylan’s work, and where these records stand in the overarching conversation of folk music in the modern age.

The idea for “*Love and Theft*” began to take shape at the beginning of Dylan’s career, but regard for it wasn’t established until forty years into his career, when the titular album was released on September 11, 2001. “*Love and Theft*” is a record in which Dylan feels around for who he is as a singer in a way that he never had before on such a scale. There are potential jousts of character in songs like “Blind Willie McTell” (1983) and “Not Dark Yet” (1998), in which Dylan expresses his more human side. In the former of these two examples, Dylan had most recently come off of his hiatus of writing secular music and had finished a trilogy of Christian

rock songs. On the latter, he had a near-death experience and began work on the *Time Out of Mind* record, which many had thought would be his last. Dylan's actual personality rarely appears in song. *Time Out of Mind* presents the persona of Bob Dylan--an obvious character ballad. But on "*Love and Theft*" the music becomes all the man. The title of the album is twofold: first, it describes the album itself, as Bob Dylan's persona-driven narratives constellate into an American soap opera; second, it describes the notion of "*Love and Theft*" as the lyrical and musical borrowings detailing the essence of the folk tradition—love and theft are both warped types of appreciation.

While listening to "*Love and Theft*," we can easily hear the roots flavoring and the taste of the Mississippi on Dylan's tongue. The delta blues are shot full force in "Lonesome Day Blues," which captures the rugged aesthetics of Dylan's '90s output. "High Water (for Charley Patton)," dedicated to the great bluesman, demonstrates its own folk roots by featuring a couplet from "The Cuckoo," a traditional song Dylan himself hadn't performed since the early 1960s. His reach varies from track to track, but the setting is consistent. The Mississippi and delta blues become the general musical stylings to which Dylan scores his words. The setting becomes the music, and thus, Dylan captures a lost world, forgotten by contemporary America.

The setting recalls the story of Dylan's Americana *Basement Tapes*, a record Greil Marcus writes about extensively in his book *The Old Weird America*. This America Marcus writes of is not unlike the America Dylan describes throughout "*Love and Theft*." It is a place where, Marcus tells us,

[t]ime is longer than rope, and more supple. It unwinds lazily, snaps back in an instant, shocking you awake in a bed you cannot remember entering. [...] A national chronology marked by the dates memorized in the public schools of the 1940s and 1950s opens into neither the same past nor the same future as does a chronology remade according to the '40s and '50s as they happened. (64)

This is another world, a parallel America that Dylan has devised from his roots, building toward a new kind of American sound. His quest to find such music, despite the stalls it encountered

along the way, finally reached its destination at “*Love and Theft*”, where his words meet up with holy spirituals, as on “Sugar Baby,” or Japanese memoir, as on “Floater” (Bream 190). The connections Dylan makes tie together his traditionalism and folk ideas, binding them into a sound collage that puts the *Basement Tapes* record to shame. Dylan would continue on this path of breathing such new life into songs for ten more years, continuing next with *Modern Times* in 2006.

When the roots trilogy concluded with *Tempest* in 2012, critics wondered what direction Dylan would take next, if there would be another direction for the aging troubadour. 2015 saw the release of the most unexpected Dylan set since *Good As I Been to You* and *World Gone Wrong* in the mid-90s: *Shadows in the Night*, a record made up of traditional pop songs from briefly before little Bobby Zimmerman was born. Coincidentally, each of the ten songs recorded for the record were previously recorded by Frank Sinatra. When listening to *Shadows*, it becomes easy to see Dylan’s approach to this record. “You know, when you start doing these songs,” Dylan said in the AARP interview coinciding with *Shadows*’ release, “Frank’s got to be on your mind. Because he is the mountain. That’s the mountain you have to climb even if you only get part of the way there. And it’s hard to find a song he did not do” (Love). Dylan was listening to these songs aged, but not quite like the wine on *Good As I Been to You*, tasting what he could to feel his way around the music until he found the finest sounds to bless his thirsty ears.

If *Good As I Been to You* were covers of folk songs, was that to be the case with *Shadows in the Night*? Covering songs simply means taking them and making them fit with how you can play them. But what happens when you change that song’s history when you recreate it with your own instruments, your own language of sound? The conversation begins to turn. This is how a song becomes reinterpreted over time by further artists down the road. A song never needs to remain the same, as we saw in the growth of “Raggle Taggle Gypsy” into the mysterious “Black Jack Davey.” When Dylan set out to record *Shadows*, he played only with his five-piece band, bending the forest of violins and heavy strings of Gordon Jenkins’ arrangements down to an intimate sound. The charts were the same rhythm and the words were the same musically, not just lyrically, but the movement itself was so different. It was executed with a body of soul, not a

bleeding heart, as in Sinatra's case.

For instance, listening to Dylan's reinterpretation of Sinatra's "I'm a Fool to Want You," we can't help but notice how much Dylan's voice cracks as it moves through the song, bleeding the words into the ear. It's more heartbreaking than Sinatra's melodramatic performance from *Where Are You?*, which Dylan adapts here. The arrangement is the same, stripped down to Dylan's five-piece band, allowing more intimacy as Dylan croons its lyrics. Listening to both tracks simultaneously, Dylan slips through the guitars, crooning in an open desert of sound, whereas Sinatra can only sing around Jenkins's tight original arrangement, rising and falling like a horn player. The empty space not only allows Dylan more access into entering and leaving the song, consistently beating Sinatra to the end of the song by a few seconds, but this phenomenon also allows guitarist Charlie Sexton to perform surgery on Jenkins's accompaniment.

No other track is as good an example of this on *Shadows* than "Stay with Me," which became the record's second single. The song is obscure in the Sinatra canon, with its only LP appearance being on a quiet compilation in 1965. In Dylan's version, the arrangement turns Nelson Riddle's score into a country-Western encounter, something only alluded to in Riddle's arrangement by a saloon piano riff in the first few bars. Such allusions are Riddle's trademark. Dylan instead punches the song with this image, not only setting a scene, but filming an entire action sequence. A simultaneous listen of these two versions of the song reveal more about Dylan's approach to these standards.

There's no emulation, no execution of the same emotions of the original. There is only a wrinkled Dylan, breathing dust over a clothes-wire guitar. Dylan's idea of the saloon is very different from Sinatra's "quarter to three world" of "One For My Baby." As mentioned earlier, it's a Western, with tumbleweeds in the bass rolling from side to side. Dylan loses the urbanization, the noir element of Sinatra, instead tugging a dead whisper across the musical landscape. It becomes a cowboy song in Dylan's hands. While this cowboy approach shines brightly on this central track on *Shadows*, it takes prevalence on *Fallen Angels*, where '40s big band arrangements are turned into barroom dances with corn brooms swaying, as best exemplified in Tommy Dorsey's hit, "Polka Dots and Moonbeams."

Re:Search

It perhaps is better described as a front porch number. The song sways only under Charlie Sexton's guitar, gliding over Dorsey's original trombone solo. By the final instrumental chorus, Sexton then duets with Donnie Herron, who had carried much of the weight on *Shadows*. In true 1940s fashion, Dylan only sings through the song once, deliberating each breath carefully as he joins the dance. His voice sounds like whiskey, pouring between the dancing guitars as it fades into its own gentle, rippling sway.

The band plays as a cohesive unit particularly well on "That Old Black Magic," adapted from a Louis Prima and Keely Smith duet from 1958. George Receli gets to shine on drums, filling in horn riffs with thumps and bumps, not unlike an awkwardly anxious heart, tossing and turning under a witchy woman's spell. Dylan's swagger somehow works its way into the lyrics. He cannot sing high, but he can sing frailly. And with his weariness comes a context where the record shines. The witchy woman has broken down Dylan, and so his performance needs to be delivered with weary passion. All of this plays out better as a collective album when the song moves into "Come Rain or Come Shine" for the finale of *Fallen Angels*, where Dylan's purest devotions are realized, however faintly dismayed by abusive love. He wants it and promises he will stand by his woman, in true Sinatra fashion.

Where *Shadows* creeps itself along through pedal steel guitar passages that linger in the dark, the more laidback instrumentation of *Fallen Angels* pulls together a more rootsy quality that binds this second record to Dylan's roots trilogy. A song like "Skylark" is not distant from "Moonlight" or "When the Deal Goes Down," pulling together a journey of love instead of mere appreciation. Johnny Mercer's lyrics and Bing Crosby's arrangement reunite after seventy years for a lovely serenade. Crosby and Mercer are the call, Dylan the response. The picked guitar line that finishes the song is the questionable serenade that may well conclude the affair. Album-wise, there is more to the affair, but in the moment, Dylan leaves off with ambiguity to prevail, using the flight response of the Skylark to set up this ambiguity. Dylan's vocal ability, having sung so many skeptical songs, again adds that skepticism that Bing Crosby, whose persona was not unlike a fun grandpa, could never add.

Does Dylan care? Is that what he adds to the conversation when he sings something like

“Skylark”? The answer is not that simple, as these are not easy emulations. These are not covers in the general sense. “I don’t think of these songs as covers,” Dylan elaborated to Robert Love. “I think of them as songs that have all been done before in many ways. The word ‘covers’ has crept into the musical vernacular. Nobody would have understood it in the ’50s or ’60s. It’s kind of a belittling term” (Love). Love’s conclusion was that Dylan was *uncovering* these songs. Dylan’s interpretation of “Skylark” may not receive the same attention as a more investigative track like “Blowin’ in the Wind” or “Like a Rolling Stone,” but all the same, Dylan adds his touch. There’s a gentleness with reproach; Dylan understands the age and the delicacy of such a song. If any smart performer were to cover *his* songs, they would treat them the same way. Like any good music historian, Dylan fully knows how to approach a song. “Skylark” or the aforementioned “That Old Black Magic” calls to mind how good a performer Dylan truly is. His voice may have aged, but he understands the words. Like Sinatra, he *feels* them, reaches out to touch them with the faith that few other singers have.

Dylan’s ability to interpret his art as more than just song and his transcendence of generation or era have given us an informed listening experience not only of Dylan’s work but also of music itself. For decades, Dylan has taken bits and pieces of words, music, and performances from others. Is Dylan the line between these two extremes of interpretation? Is that why he transcends time so well? Of course. Dylan’s fluent use of the folk tradition—in multiple styles—has allowed him to stay afloat as a creative artist for these past several decades. *Self-Portrait* was the beginning of this kind of application. The ‘80s began with Dylan interpreting The Bible in his Christian trilogy, the ‘90s with *Good As I Been to You* and *World Gone Wrong*, and the 2000s with the concept of “*Love and Theft*” in full bloom, and now, in the ‘10s, with these traditional pop records. Through the years, there has never been a creative fault that failed to move Dylan somewhere closer to rediscovering himself and what his art has meant to him.

What this amounts to is a body of work that, if explored, can show us the progression of American music in a pastoral beauty so stark, it captures the complete focus of time itself. Returning to Greil Marcus, Dylan’s best work can be described as the “music [that] carried an aura of familiarity, of unwritten traditions, and as deep a sense of recognition [...] that was both

Re:Search

historical and sui generis” (3). Dylan’s work is indeed such a tradition. And as such, it slips away into the culture itself, fading into the frame of who we are as people. Through Dylan’s words, even those not necessarily his own, we can learn to better understand ourselves as a culture and look forward to the expansion of a new old, weird America.

WORKS CITED

Bell, Ian. *Time Out of Mind: The Lives of Bob Dylan*. Pegasus, 2013.

Bream, Jon. *Dylan: Disc by Disc*. Voyageur Press, 2015.

Cott, Jonathan. *Dylan on Dylan: The Essential Interviews*. Hodder, 2006.

Dylan, Bob. *Chronicles, Volume One*. Simon and Schuster, 2004.

Lornel, Kip. *The NPR Curious Listener's Guide to American Folk Music*. Perigee Trade, 2004.

Love, Robert. "Bob Dylan: The Uncut Interview." *AARP Magazine*, February/March 2015.

Marcus, Greil. *The Old, Weird America: The World of Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes*. Macmillan, 2011.

Traditional. "Black Jack Davey." Song lyrics.