

POSTSCRIPT

For What

I bought my copy of *Love and Theft* on Monday, 10th September, the day of its UK release, and, having given it two or three listens, began to write in the small hours that I couldn't have made a happier ending for this book. Twenty years ago, when I took up the subject, it was partly because Dylan seemed most likely, of his generation of popular musicians, to carry his art on into old age and continue to be creative. It's a distinction of a number of the greatest painters and sculptors – Michelangelo, Titian, Rembrandt, Monet, Cézanne, Matisse and Picasso, to name a few – but far rarer among poets, particularly the moderns. (The shining example for me at that time was Yeats.) It's not a common trait among the Romantics, nor in American literature, and especially not in American popular music. In that field, the only figure to be lauded, as Dylan has been for his new record, for still producing work at sixty worthy of his first maturity, is Duke Ellington.

The chorus of praise, whatever the record was like, would be a story in itself. Across the Atlantic, the critics ranged from Vit Wagner of the *Toronto Star*, calling it a “crackerjack”, more accessible than *Time Out of Mind*, though not so great; through Larry Katz in the *Boston Herald* rating it as “probably” better than its predecessor; to Robert Hilburn giving it four out of four stars in the *LA Times*, breezily comparing it to *Highway 61 Revisited*, and Rob Sheffield in *Rolling Stone* awarding it the first five-star score in nearly a decade (since REM's *Automatic for the People*) and describing the singer as: “Relaxed, magisterial, utterly confident in every musical idiom he touches...”

In the *New York Daily Post*, Jim Farber suggested that another summit had been reached: “Vocally, Dylan has never sounded more wonderfully wrecked. He's full of dust and gravel, like he just got run over by a truck and lived to sing about it. ... It's not just the way Dylan addressed complicated emotions in these songs that impresses, it's also the flow and density of

his words. He hasn't penned a lyric sheet this thick since his psychedelic days.”

In fact, all the American reviews to be found online were glowing, and the European ones, as far as I could guess, seemed to be too: “Mesterværk fra Dylan”, “Highlight der Woche”, “Mesterligt skrammel”, “renacimiento creativo”. In the Parisian paper *Libération*, Nick Kent (I assume in translation) spoke of plenty of songs on the record that could easily rival the best of Dylan's entire career; of his having been miraculously reconnected with the blues “avec une intensité à couper le souffle”; and summed up by saying of the album: “Seuls les imbéciles se risqueront à l'ignorer.”

If there was a risk of appearing imbecilic, gentlemen of Her Majesty's Press would of course be ready to sink to the challenge. David Sinclair of *The Times* depicted “a formerly distinguished performer cheerfully sliding into an advanced state of decrepitude”, and Alexis Petridis of *The Guardian*, in his first week on the job, spent the first half of his review deriding anyone who takes Bob Dylan at all seriously as a bad case of arrested development, before allowing “some moments of genuine inspiration” among the “leaden and overlong... filler”.

By Tuesday, 11th September, the day of its US release, what anyone thought of the new Bob Dylan album didn't seem that important. The music itself, though, still made sense. Only now, where its exuberance and vaudevillean humour had sprung out at first, there were grimness and violence. After watching the plane on the screen slice into the South Tower again and again, until you couldn't watch it any more, the opening lines were a shock:

Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee,
They're throwing knives into the tree.
Two big bags of dead men's bones...

The fantasia of Lewis Carroll from which this first song is drawn seemed to have as many rogue resonances as were sparked from the flinty lyrics of the record itself, in the aftershock of the destruction of the twin towers. We come across that tree again straightaway, as Alice takes the two brothers' hands and dances with them in a ring: “This seemed quite natural (she remembered

afterwards), and she was not even surprised to hear music playing: it seemed to come from the tree under which they were dancing, and it was done (as well as she could make it out) by the branches rubbing one across the other, like fiddles and fiddlesticks." When the twins have agreed to do battle – "Let's fight till six, and then have dinner" – the death of those trees which are also art seems assured: "Tweedledum looked round him with a satisfied smile. 'I don't suppose,' he said, 'there'll be a tree left standing, for ever so far around, by the time we've finished!'" And the sense of something coming that recurs in the record – "You always got to be prepared, but you never know for what" – has its echo here too:

It was getting dark so suddenly that Alice thought there must be a thunderstorm coming on. "What a thick black cloud that is!" she said. "And how fast it comes! Why, I do believe it's got wings!"

"It's the crow!" Tweedledum cried out...

In the shadow of these deaths, and the horror, grief and fear, the rage and hatred that accompany them, a record of popular music may seem to belong in another dimension which it would be an impertinence or irreverence to introduce. (On Thursday 13th, I switched on to find that ITN's reporter in New York was called Harry Smith.) But among the few antidotes to the destruction of the 11th must be counted the creative and collective spirit in which good music lives. Conversely, it is a test of art that it is not rendered irrelevant by reality even at its least tolerable. Dylan's art has never shied from the worst, and the new and much uglier world into which we stepped does not seem strange to the songs of *Love and Theft*. This world had long been his preoccupation, as THE TIMES THEY ARE A-CHANGIN' reminds us. A bonus disc with the first edition of *Love and Theft* includes an alternative take of that song from the 1963 album sessions:

There's a battle outside and it's ragin'.
It'll soon shake your windows and vibrate your walls
For the times they are a-changin'.

(The second of these bonus tracks is uncanny. In 1961, at twenty, Dylan sounds infinitely older and wearier singing I WAS YOUNG WHEN I LEFT HOME than he does now at sixty.)

It's too early for *Love and Theft* to have revealed much of itself. You don't really get the shape of a whole record until you start to anticipate the opening notes of the next song, till your breathing and heartrate attune to it: then you begin to understand how it flows from one to the next. (I do miss the frame provided by the sides of a record, too.) But already the new CD seems more fully formed than *Time Out of Mind*, with its foggy atmosphere and sustained melancholic mood.

Certain recurrences are obvious, the family especially: mother, father, brother, sister, uncle, aunt, grandmother, grandfather, second cousin, and even the closest relatives of all, siamese twins. Beyond these, a web of other roles and relations appears – of workers and bosses, soldiers and officers, buyers and sellers, fugitives and lawmen, duck trappers and undertakers. For the first time for what seems a long time, the world of this new record is a society. There are collective disasters and celebrations, a constant stream of contacts and encounters.

The contrast is particularly stark with *Time Out of Mind*, which was largely inhabited only by You and Me – minus You. The one notable social exchange – with the waitress in HIGHLANDS – is a model of crossed lines and disconnection. Back in the days of *Infidels*, when Dylan painted a world picture, 'I' wandered through it in splendid isolation, and doom-laden scenarios like LICENCE TO KILL and MAN OF PEACE were seen as from above. On *Love and Theft*, 'I' is down on a level with everyone else. "She's lookin' into my eyes, she's holdin' my hand": simple as it is, there hasn't been this much mutual presence in Dylan's songs for years.

When we speak of 'I' on this record, however, I think we'll have to see it as it was described on *Highway 61*: "there is no eye, there is only a series of mouths". Dylan has resurrected the persona of Everyman: where once he was a kind of cypher though, a wandering *anyone*, here he's become a streetful, a whole townful of people at once – the corner ranter, the local dandy, the life of the party and the cantankerous barfly, the village idiot and the preacher, the romancer and the diehard union man. Again the closest

comparison I can find for this cross-sectional impression of a populous world, kaleidoscopic and panoramic, familiar and strange, is with *Highway 61*. Such breadth of vision is part of the appeal of others among Dylan's best works, though, like *Blood on the Tracks*, the Basement Tapes and, in a miniature way, *John Wesley Harding*.

The musical diversity of the songs on *Love and Theft* gives the scenes they describe more scope than those of *Time Out of Mind*: there the music seemed to embody physiological states rather than characters, landscapes and townscapes. Indeed, the network of allusions that we looked at in the lyrics of earlier records is here largely supplanted by skeins of musical reference. There are quite a few quotes from Dylan's own records – the Mardi Gras lurch of RAINY DAY WOMEN behind LONESOME DAY BLUES, the snatches of guitar lines from *Highway 61*, the building of HIGH WATER on the foundation of JOHN BROWN from *Unplugged*. There are also echoes from many of the names we've touched on in earlier chapters – of Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf in LONESOME DAY; of Charley Patton, Son House and Robert Johnson in CRY AWHILE; of Jimmie Rodgers in MOONLIGHT and Woody Guthrie in PO' BOY, and every roots music fan will hear dozens of others I'm sure. A number of reviewers saw in *Love and Theft* a window into history. At the moment, though, my favourite word in the lyrics is "beyond" –

Po' boy in a red-hot town, out beyond the twinklin' stars

– which sends our archaic world into outer space, as a number of science-fiction films have done with the frontier town of the Western.

For the *News & Observer* of Raleigh, North Carolina, David Menconi writes, in the light of current events, of how *Love and Theft* has taken on a compelling and uniquely consoling timeliness. The 11th didn't impinge on its author only through the ghastly timing of the release. One of Dylan's oldest friends and first musical companions, Larry Kegan, died of a heart attack on the same day that so many thousands of others were bereaved. Furthermore, as a rich and conspicuous American Jewish Christian, the artist would surely have considered that he is exactly the kind of person the attackers would have been happiest to kill.

On Sunday, 9th September, the day before I got *Love and Theft*, I saw two things that became entwined with my first listening. One was Werner Herzog's film *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* (or "Every Man for Himself and God Against All" as Herzog's German title has it). Bruno S. as Kaspar, in a performance of uncanny timing and poignancy and presence, seemed to speak the same language as I soon heard on this record, with its mélange of jokes, twisted pastoral and catastrophe.

Before we went to the National Film Theatre, we'd called in at the Tate Modern. There was a late Picasso there, a nude with a necklace, painted when he was eighty-seven, whose vitality was magnetic from across the crowded room. Some of the same spirit it seemed to be in Dylan's voice as in this painting: the elements that coalesce and never quite crystallise, oscillating at the boundary between fragmentation and form, as each song of *Love and Theft* tells its story yet has no narrative; the quick, smeary, decisive brushwork; the freedom of shape and colour, like the singer's lines that appear as impossible clumps and tangles of language at first and unfold as unpredictable and perfectly balanced constructions in sound. People are talking of Dylan as old now – our first old rock star – but Picasso had more than quarter of a century on him when he made that picture. We can hope to hear plenty more from those golden cords yet.

The notice next to the Picasso nude offered the visitor an official explanation of it as a kind of sexual assault in paint. After last week, the metaphor seems pernicious: it's suddenly very clear how different is the nature of art from an assault. On Wednesday, 12th September, the Queen altered the Changing of the Guard ceremony for the first time in its history, and had her band play 'The Star-Spangled Banner'. In a moment when we couldn't do anything, and couldn't do nothing, a piece of popular music provided as true a condolence as one nation could send to another.

There are felicities of every kind – vocal, lyrical, instrumental, compositional – appearing in *Love and Theft* every day, that I have no more space or time to discuss here. They only require that the listener listen. Meanwhile, for their curacy of the past, their bequest to the future and most of all for their aliveness and alertness in the moment, I think we should thank Mr Dylan and his band.

Monday, 17th September 2001