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*Bob Dylan*. By Keith Negus. Icons of Pop Music. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008.

*The Cambridge Companion to Bob Dylan*. Edited by Kevin J. H. Dettmar. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

In Martin Scorsese's 2005 documentary *No Direction Home*, Bob Dylan admits to drawing inspiration from the carnival workers he observed as a boy growing up in Duluth, Minnesota.<sup>1</sup> Dylan was identifying something distinctly American in the showmanship, anachronism, and incongruous juxtaposition of the carnival. Like a carny who performs in a show, changes costume, and then sells tickets, Dylan assumes a variety of personae in his songs, ranging from prophet to jilted lover to commercial entertainer. Two recent books explore his different personae and add to the body of scholarship on his life, music, and career, which have been intimately connected to the development of popular music criticism since the 1960s.

Keith Negus offers a concise and accessible biography of Dylan as part of Indiana University Press's Icons of Pop Music series. His book is divided into five thematic sections: surroundings, chronologies, traditions, lyrics, and music, and includes a general bibliography and selective discography. In the first chapter, Negus laments that much of the literature on Dylan focuses on his biography and lyrics at the expense of his musicianship (7). As evidence, Negus points to Dylan's ability to learn songs by ear, transpose, and employ alternate guitar tunings. Although these skills are not evidence of exceptional musicianship, Dylan's musicality is shown in his ability to assimilate a broad range of U.S. folk music idioms and to incorporate the soundscape of his youth in rural Minnesota.

Dylan's Jewish background figures prominently in the opening chapter, in which the author characterizes Robert Allen Zimmerman's adoption of alternate names—first Elston Gunn and later Bob Dylan—not as a denial of his Jewish heritage, but as a calculated move to construct a star persona. Although he draws attention to the influence of Hebrew cantillation in songs such as "One More Cup of Coffee," Negus acknowledges that it is not widespread in Dylan's work as a whole (12).

The second chapter, "Chronologies," presents a selective narrative of Dylan's landmark albums and performances from *Bob Dylan* (1962) to *Modern Times* (2006). When Dylan was a folk singer in New York in the early sixties, the ambiguous allegories of songs like "A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall" attracted the attention of college students and beat poets, including Allen Ginsberg. Whereas most biographies highlight Dylan's break with the folk music scene in favor of an electric sound in the mid 1960s, Negus insists that Dylan was never a pure folk artist (31). In "My Back Pages" from *Another Side of Bob Dylan* (1964), Negus observes a repudiation of self-righteous preaching in the earnest folk poet persona that characterized Dylan's ascent to stardom. After he offended folk purists with the amplified

<sup>1</sup> Martin Scorsese, dir., *No Direction Home*, PBS American Masters AMMS421, 2005, 2 DVDs.

timbres of *Highway 61 Revisited* (1965), Dylan in turn alienated rock critics with the country-inspired *Nashville Skyline* (1969). He shocked his earliest fans again with his conversion to evangelical Christianity in the late 1970s, producing a wave of gospel songs on *Slow Train Coming* (1979) and *Saved* (1980). More recently, Dylan celebrated his influences in *Love and Theft* (2001) and *Modern Times* (2006) and plays early recordings that inspired him on his radio show, *Theme Time Radio Hour*.

In the chapter entitled “Traditions,” Negus tackles the concept of originality. Central to Dylan’s music-making process was the borrowing and transformation of poetic and melodic tropes from other songs, which, as Pete Seeger emphasizes, is one of the fundamental elements of folk music.<sup>2</sup> Negus broadens this observation: “Explicitly copying, appropriating, and transforming existing songs and music,” he states, “is fundamental to the creativity of popular music” (96). As an example, he quotes an interview with Dylan in which the singer-songwriter admits that “Blowing in the Wind” is an adaptation of Odetta’s version of the spiritual “No More Auction Block.”

One of the most convincing arguments in this book is that Dylan’s originality is linked to his transformation of familiar material. Less convincing is Negus’s discussion of the technical aspects of the music. He claims that Dylan’s harmonies, or a blues progression in general, simply can’t be notated. To a non-musician, this statement might seem plausible, but in reality a twelve-bar blues progression can be easily transcribed. Negus also overlooks the fact that Dylan’s singing is sometimes off-key, and does not address the nasal and rough timbre of Dylan’s voice, which has been a point of discussion and contention since his appearance on the music scene in the early 1960s. It would also have been instructive to compare Dylan’s singing styles to those of other seminal music figures from the 1960s who have continued to perform, and to say more about Dylan’s emulation of Woody Guthrie. In singing the way he did, was Dylan paying homage to Guthrie’s conversational singing style, or was he constrained by his own vocal limitations?

That Dylan was able to capture the attention of cultural critics as well as casual listeners was due in part to a tangled web of references in his lyrics that included the Bible, modern poetry, and cinema, as well as traditional folk song. In a chapter devoted to Dylan’s lyrics, Negus takes literary critics to task for analyzing Dylan’s songs within a framework designed for novels or drama rather than oral tradition or songs. He also cautions against a strict autobiographical readings of Dylan’s lyrics, while leaving some room for reflections of his life experiences.

Although Negus intends the final chapter in the book, the one on Dylan’s music, to be his main contribution, the musical discussion in this chapter is the least well supported in the study. By design, the book is targeted to a general audience, and much of the space is dedicated to explaining basic music theory. Some observations are noteworthy, however, including Dylan’s signature rising and falling patterns, the use of riffs and “loops,” and pentatonic scales. The relative lack of musical examples to back up claims of Dylan’s use of “a style of playing based on an odd instead of

<sup>2</sup> Paul Zollo, *Songwriters on Songwriting*, 4th ed. (New York: Da Capo Press, 2003), 5.

an even number system,” or the significance of the descending minor third in his songs (145), however, is frustrating. There is also more to be said about Dylan’s guitar playing and use of alternate tunings.

*The Cambridge Companion to Bob Dylan* takes a broad look at a variety of topics related to Dylan, his music, and his times. David Yaffe’s opening essay in the edited collection is refreshingly funny. He captures the tone of an informed critic and passionate fan without slipping into the sycophantic or turgid prose of too much of the biographical writing on the subject. Yaffe frankly acknowledges Dylan’s practice of plagiarism: “Early Dylan always stole tunes, but later Dylan stole words” (21). Although other authors hesitate to use the term, Yaffe does not employ “plagiarism” in a pejorative way. Rather, he characterizes Dylan’s borrowing as an act of “love and theft,” comparing it to Ovid’s plagiarism of Homer.

Michael Denning argues in the volume’s second chapter that live concerts rather than recorded albums were “Dylan’s fundamental long form” and focuses on the circus-like Rolling Thunder Revue tour of 1975. He claims that “Dylan’s work is made up of strategies of stopping time, techniques of evading history,” pointing out that that Dylan was anachronistic even in the early 1960s, when he presented himself as a “masquerade of a Depression singer” (28–29).

In his essay “Bob Dylan as a Songwriter,” Anthony DeCurtis denies the notion of Dylan’s protest songs as declarations of a consistent ideology. Like several other Dylan scholars, DeCurtis complicates the notion of authenticity in Dylan’s musical borrowings. Dylan may have admitted that “With God on Our Side” was derived from Dominic Behan’s “The Patriot Game,” but DeCurtis points out that the melody was based on an even older Irish folk song (46). Although the lyrics of “Masters of War” are an obvious indictment of the military industrial complex, DeCurtis suggests that Dylan was only giving his audience what they wanted to hear, and eventually grew tired of writing from a self-righteous point of view.

Alan Light’s chapter on Dylan as a performer draws attention to Dylan’s notoriously erratic live performances since the 1970s. Writing from the perspective of a fan, Light refers to attending a bad concert as a “badge of honor.” He adds, “In fact, if you put a bunch of die-hard Dylan fans together, the conversation quickly turns to comparing notes on the worst show they ever attended” (56). Nonetheless, Light rightly identifies Dylan’s unpredictability as one of the main reasons fans are attracted to his music.

Light singles out Dylan’s conversion to Christianity in the late 1970s as a turning point in his career, claiming that Dylan’s preaching and “homophobic rants” delivered on an American tour in 1979 alienated his former fans and ultimately reduced his audience. Although another chapter is devoted to Dylan and religion, Light offers strong opinions on Dylan’s “born-again” period in the late 70s and 80s suggesting that the albums *Slow Train Coming* (1979), *Saved* (1980), and *Infidels* (1983) and the accompanying live tours were not the product of sincere religious conviction as much as musical experiments in the realm of gospel music.

One of the outstanding essays in the volume is Barbara O’Dair’s “Bob Dylan and Gender Politics.” In a lucid and personal account, the author refutes Richard Goldstein’s claim that “hostility to women is a recurring motif in Dylan’s

songs.”<sup>3</sup> Complicating Dylan’s treatment of gender, O’Dair contends, for example, that Dylan’s notorious licensing of his song “Love Sick” for a Victoria’s Secret commercial in 2004 was in fact a subtle parody of Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice*. She admits that although Dylan may have appreciated the growing influence of women of the feminist generation, he was also probably confused and perhaps threatened by it.

At the beginning of their essay on Dylan and religion, R. Clifton Spargo and Ann K. Ream claim to “presume a certain degree of religious consciousness in all of Dylan’s music” (88). They point to Dylan’s use of prophetic language in well-known songs such as “Blowin’ in the Wind” and “Masters of War.” As in Alan Light’s essay, their treatment of Dylan’s Christian gospel music during his “born again” period is characterized as a less-than-sincere musical exercise, as if Dylan were intending to complete a survey of American folk styles. Admittedly, Dylan’s constant contradictions make it difficult to read a consistent theological message in his lyrics. Whether or not he subscribes to any specific creed, Dylan’s persistent engagement with the language of faith was notable at a time when American society was becoming increasingly secular. Dylan’s gospel songs should not be viewed as an anomaly but as the product of a songwriter who continuously struggled with his faith.

Dylan has seemed to be constantly and intentionally confounding the expectations of his fans in both popular and critical circles. In his essay on Dylan and the academy, Lee Marshall suggests that Dylan accepted an honorary doctorate at Princeton “in order to undermine his countercultural credibility,” yet he also wrote the song “Day of Locusts” to indicate his contempt for those who granted the degree (100). David R. Schumway’s essay on Dylan as a cultural icon places him within the context of changing views of art in the 1960s that blurred the boundaries between elite and mass culture. He claims that Dylan was the first rock musician to be considered an artist, who made it possible for others including the Beatles to also be taken seriously (121). This is an overstatement. Although David Brackett has credited Dylan and the Beatles with attracting an increasing number of adult listeners, no single artist was responsible for the critical acceptance of rock as art music.<sup>4</sup> Dylan’s lyrics, however, stood out because they were sprinkled with references of interest to scholars.

The remaining chapters are devoted to selected landmark albums and would provide a useful framework for a seminar on Dylan’s music. Alex Abramovich’s essay on *The Basement Tapes* (1967, 1975) and Eric Lott’s article on *Love and Theft* offer particularly insightful analyses. Abramovich disagrees with Greil Marcus’s view of the basement tape recordings as a return to old-time aesthetics after Dylan’s motorcycle crash kept him from touring in 1966. Instead, he characterizes them as rehearsal tapes, works in progress that were part of a carefully crafted strategy to conquer the pop charts by having his songs performed by other singers (151). That one of these songs—“I Shall Be Released”—was recorded by Nina Simone

<sup>3</sup> Richard Goldstein, “Satellite Dylan,” *The Nation*, 15 May 2006, 11–15.

<sup>4</sup> David Brackett, *The Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader: Histories and Debates* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 221.

as a spiritual seems to foreshadow the devotional music of Dylan's "born-again" period. In a rare instance of scholarly recognition by a popular musician, the title of Dylan's 2001 album *Love and Theft* may have been borrowed from Lott's own book on minstrelsy.<sup>5</sup> In a case of classic Dylanesque contradiction, his publicist stated that he could "neither confirm nor deny" the claim (167). Lott doesn't go as far as to suggest that Dylan's appropriation of the blues is minstrelsy, but he is convinced that Dylan is conscious of its history.

Both of the surveyed books recognize paradox and contradiction as integral aspects of Dylan's songs and public personae and are useful guides to the music and life of a musician and songwriter who has had a seminal influence on American popular and folk music. However we try to address or resolve those paradoxes and contradictions, we can agree that Dylan is a well-read master of fiction in the form of popular song.

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<sup>5</sup> Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).