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"STUCK BY THE SOUNDS BEFORE THE SUN": Dylan as composer

"It's that wild mercury sound. It's metallic and bright gold... That's my particular sound. I haven't been able to succeed in getting it all the time."¹

No artist has been placed under the microscope more times than Bob Dylan. Yet, scarcely anyone has begun to analyze this "sound". Dylan as *composer*?

"In sheerly musical inventiveness, Dylan cannot compete with Gershwin or Ellington; in the conventional sense, he cannot sing and is an indifferent guitarist and pianist... Yet, he uses his gifts with intuitive genius and in so doing reveals... that what appears to be technical incompetence is no such thing".²

A more direct analogy might be made with The Beatles, though even in discussing their music we face a perennial problem of rock music criticism: we have no equivalent of classical music's "full score". Rock artists commit their work to tape, not paper. That job is done by a hack who neatly squares off rhythm and melody and over-simplifies harmony, reducing the song to sterile basics. Clearly, empirically created, yet definitive studio effects - *Sgt Pepper's* tuning-up for example - can't be represented in print. The paradox is that Dylan is *more* problematic because he's more musically straightforward. The "intuitive genius" in him precludes any definitive versions. And, above all, any criticism has to take account of the lyrics - the *aim* of a song.

We are dealing with something new and we must find new ways of expressing our views, new criteria by which to judge this music. So, how do we discuss the technicalities without making that discussion too musically specialist? Few things could be more frustrating than reading a piece which you would find fascinating if only you could cut through the academic phraseology. The problems are great and certainly can't be dismissed. This critique attempts something approaching "guitarists' language" in an effort to stay within the genre.

Reducing a song to its elements doesn't prove its worth as a song. Much of the time, one can't say *why* a song is good, *why* it moves us. The criteria are too elusive; it just touches a "certain something" within us. We could take into ac-

count the influences on Dylan's writing, how they are combined and integrated into this style. How are songs structured? How do they work? Where do they get their power? Inevitably, the view is subjective: you may not agree that the songs I've chosen are the most effective and powerful of Dylan's works.

The albums from *Freewheelin'* to *Another Side Of* reveal Dylan's early allegiance to traditional folk and blues. These specific stylistic elements, their simplicity and directness, pervade all Dylan's writing of the period. Indeed, many of the melodies aren't simply folk-like, they *are* folk. "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall", for example, is based on the traditional "Lord Randall", "Bob Dylan's Dream" on "Lord Franklin". Woody Guthrie had taught the young Dylan not to "worry where the tune comes from". Apart from consciously using traditional material as a model, many songs unconsciously use such elements. That's obvious: we all absorb all kinds of things that later come out as "original formulations", so we should be careful how we throw the stone of "plagiarism" around: we could all get stoned. Folk sources continue to pervade Dylan's work even today, though they are more integrated with the other elements of his style. Up to and including *Highway 61 Revisited*, the influence is clear-cut.

The folk vein of these early songs amounts to a formula that is musically very simple. The verse of "Blowin' In The Wind", itself based on a traditional melody, consists of one musical phrase stated three times, with only a small change at phrase-end. A variant follows to provide the chorus. The chords, too, are simple diatonic harmonies: D, G and A7 - the old "three-chord trick"!

It's that very simple folk-like directness that makes the song effective. It's easily recalled; it makes musical sense at first hearing, even if the words remain elusive. These factors undoubtedly contributed to its early success and popularity.

Such comments hold for many other songs of the period. "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" uses three different musical phrases - for the question, the answer and the judgement. Again, the harmonies are simple. "The Ballad Of Hollis Brown" is even more straightforward, using variants on a single pentatonic phrase above an E minor drone accompaniment.

"The Times They Are A-Changin'" is a little more adventurous, with an expanded chord sequence and musical phrases that have a distinct "question and answer" structure. The opening (rising) phrase is answered by its variant, which starts a fifth higher before falling to a restatement of the opening phrase. This time, the answer is extended, lingering on the upper D for the bitter warning before dropping back to the tonic (G) to point the crucial message. Dylan is always more likely to fall to a cadence - it's almost a trademark, and sometimes, as in "Forever Young", he tumbles *way* down.

In "Mr Tambourine Man", surely the most famous folk-rock song of all time, folk simplicity is still the rule. To this is added a rock-oriented electric guitar that takes us beyond the folk tradition. The repeated phrases have that subtly mesmerizing effect that somehow enhances the "druggy" nature of the lyrics.

By the time Dylan recorded *Highway 61 Revisited* in 1965, the music was closer to rock-folk, though original influences are still very much in evidence. "Desolation Row" is derived from the ballad tradition in terms of over-all style and sheer length. Here, the earlier "question and answer" structure is developed, as are the musical phrases themselves which appear at different pitches and slightly altered, though still instantly identifiable as being related to what has gone before. The song itself is a paradox since the complex surrealism of the lyrics take us way beyond folk music, toward the outer reaches of complete psychedelia - on to *Sgt Pepper*, *Beggars Banquet* and San Francisco with flowers in our hair!

Another prominent stylistic trait is the hymnic vein, not "religious" as such but universal - embodied in prayers of the variety Dylan was so good at before he got religion. Formally, these songs may originate from the "traditional" Christian hymn or its Jewish counterpart. They share a hymn-like firmness and direction - lyrically, melodically and harmonically. Here again, elements of repetition are important and each song is very stable in every sense. The music may, at certain points, tend toward another key, but remains tonic-based. Many *bona fide* hymns (and carols) show this almost symmetrical pattern - think of "Oh, Little Town Of Bethlehem".

"I Shall Be Released", the earliest song in this style, has a musical structure of ABAB + chorus. The vocal line is supported by a repeated chord sequence: A - B minor - C-sharp minor - A - E7 - A - B minor and so on, which somehow gives a feeling of yearning to be released. The 1978 live version, (in E major), with the pause before the final chorus line, effectively highlights this idea.

"Knockin' On Heaven's Door" shares a similar structure. Here, it's not only alternate lines that match: so do verse and chorus, giving us the ABAB + ABAB shape. A simple chord sequence of G - D - A minor 7th - G - D - C provides the harmony. All these elements give the song an on-going feeling, the singer continually knocking and hoping for an answer - Dylan's long search for salvation. For the song never cadences formally. The G - D - C sequence has a certain feeling of inner strength, another paradox, since, in academic terms, the move from the dominant to the subdominant (in this case, D - C) is "weak".

"Forever Young" uses altered, developed and extended lines, rather than simple repetition. Despite the decoration of the chord sequence by a descending bass, the song never moves from the home key. The vocal line of the chorus is wide, almost sprawling, with desperate rising pleas and tumbling strains, so contrasting with the reticent prayer-like mood of the verse. The emotion of the song threatens to take it beyond the hymn: it embraces *all* of us where the particularist Christian ethic cannot.

"Is Your Love In Vain?" has a similar form, both melodically and harmonically, its embellished chord sequence resembling that of "Forever Young". Although, once again, there is no attempt at a real modulation, the song is given added strength and direction by a middle-eight which gives the *impression* of a

modulation while, in fact, remaining firmly tonic-based. "Is Your Love In Vain?", while related to the Christian hymn, is given a little of the Jewish flavour which characterized *Desire*, by virtue of the melismata on some of the more sustained notes.

It is a unique facet of Dylan's genius that certain songs possess an inherent cumulative power (especially noticeable in live performance) that does not seem to be related to the arrangements or dynamics, as it must be in Springsteen's "Born To Run" or Spector's "River Deep, Mountain High". "Like A Rolling Stone" and "Where Are You Tonight? (Journey Through Dark Heat)" exemplify this point, and interestingly, the two are linked by certain common musical elements.

Both songs are in the same key, C major, and both use same rather high, narrow vocal range (or *tessitura*) - factors that produce a particular musical flavour or *timbre*. In both, the chords of C, F and G predominate and the opening of "Like A Rolling Stone" is given momentum by the use of a strong rising sequence:

"Once upon a time you dressed so fine,

C Dm

You threw the bums a dime in your prime, Didn't you?"

Em F G7

This is later reversed at "Now, you don't talk so loud...", reflecting an inverted mirror-image. Then, as Dylan's questions pound out, the vocal is punctured by another short rising sequence:

"How does it feel? How does it feel?"

(G7) C F G F C F G

This continues to pervade the music until the close of the song and is also used, albeit less powerfully, in "Where Are You Tonight?" The later song also uses the falling sequence of "Like A Rolling Stone", here augmented:

"And she winds back the clock and she turns back the page. . ."

(F) Em Dm C

This time, the vocal line drops with it, rather than diverging as is often the case with Dylan, and the whole depicts brilliantly a sense of desperation and isolation.

Thus, in both songs, relatively static vocal lines that oscillate around the key-note are off-set by comparatively fluid harmony. Both songs make use of the dramatic pause at the climax and both descend forcefully to the final cadence. Of course, none of these features are, in themselves, rare strokes of genius: the C - F - G - chord sequence is about the first thing any self-respecting guitarist learns. (In fact, such a formulation is the foundation of Western harmony!) But Dylan, in these two songs, has fused the elements in such a way as to gain maximum effect from seemingly minimal resources. Despite their apparent technical simplicity, they succeed as well-structured musical entities.

"Idiot Wind" is also in this mould. Here, the power is explosive as well as

cumulative and derives from the "progressive" tonality of the song, an aspect that will be treated later. However, it again shows some of the characteristics previously discussed, though the descending sequences are shorter and less vital to the whole. The vocal line is more varied and colourful, fragments of monodic declaration broken by wilder outbursts.

"Precious Angel", while not unrelated to these songs, fails. Its melody is too fractured in nature and too triadic in structure to have the "coiled" power of the earlier songs. Its vocal is stilted and lacks conviction. (Perhaps the sentiment of the words was not conducive to the right kind of delivery). Its instrumentation lacks strength. (The brass should heighten the musical interest, adding dynamic tension and release effects, but their use is too predictable. They detract). There is no working toward the "inevitable" climax, no crescendo, and the song lacks a fundamental direction and purpose.

Of course, Dylan throws other factors into his creative mix. "Gates Of Eden", for example, is one of the earliest songs to benefit from a more enriched harmonic palette. Although in the key of G major, the song, from the opening bars, tends toward C major: the F-natural, to which the word "peace" is sung, hints at a G7 chord which would cadence neatly on to C. But it doesn't. And Dylan follows it with a flat seventh chord (F major), which is also the alienation chord of "I Believe In You". So the tonality has been further confused: just as we begin to feel secure (at "with his candle lit into the sun..."), Dylan changes direction yet again, ending with that weird chromatic sequence before the gates of Eden. All very strange and quite unlike anything Dylan had ever written before, but wholly consistent with the "dream" nature of the song.

"It's Alright Ma" and "Ballad Of A Thin Man" can be coupled together. In their monodic declaration (which, in classical terminology, might be likened to *recitative* or *sprechgesang*), they derive from the talking blues but have developed well beyond it. "Ballad Of A Thin Man", with its electric backing, becomes Chicago-style urban blues.

The vocal line of "It's Alright Ma" consists almost entirely of a reiterated E; only at the capping words ("Dying... crying") does Dylan sing a minor third, first rising and then falling. (Some scholars consider the minor third to be the most significant interval of traditional Jewish music). The "whining" sound of the motif is perfect word-painting, and from this germ, the final couplet develops.

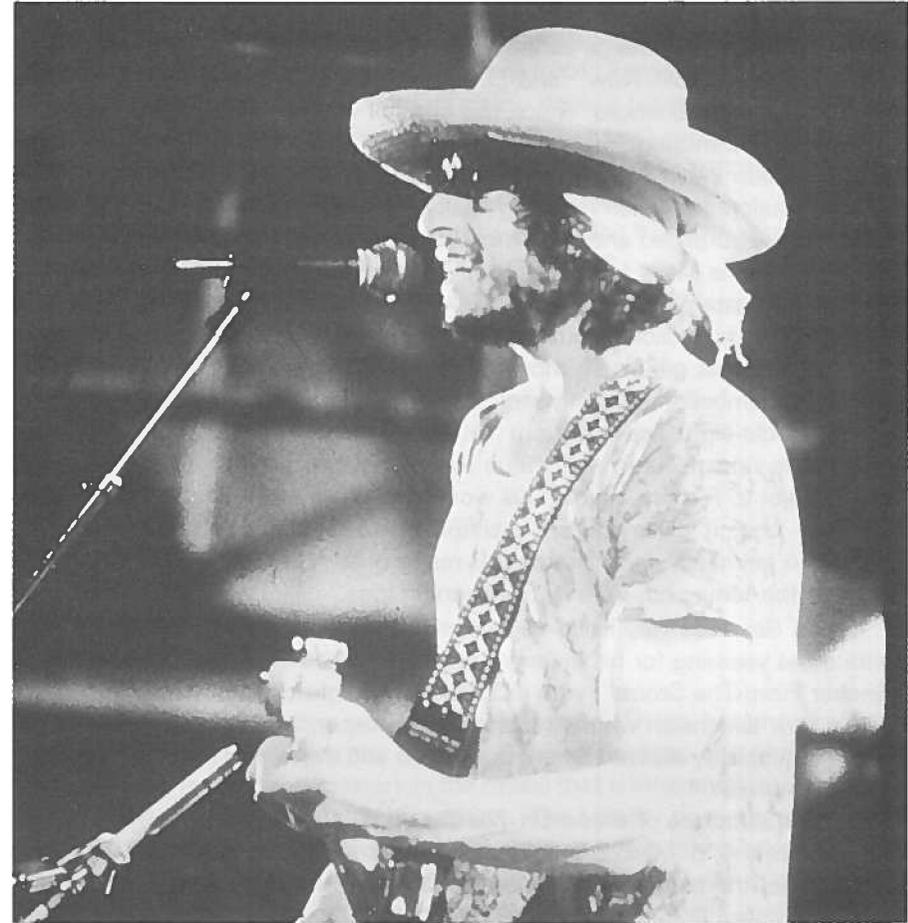
These two elements - the monody and the minor third - are also essential to the melody of "Ballad Of A Thin Man". Both songs share a similar descending chromatic contour. In "It's Alright Ma" it's a bass line (which supports altered E minor and C major chords), and in "Ballad Of A Thin Man" the figure is disguised within the texture, so obscuring the tonality.

It may be coincidental, but the symbolic "3" certainly acquires significance here. The minor third is vital; the middle-eight uses a triplet rhythm; and many of the chords have a third relationship to each other - for example, Bm7 - G -

Bm(7) - G - Em7. (This sort of sequence results in a lack of "conventional" cadences, adding a spooky feel). Obviously, a good deal of the song's haunting character is due to the driving rhythm, bar-roomy piano and Al Kooper's searing organ.

From a technical point of view, *John Wesley Harding* sees certain advances in Dylan's songwriting. Melody, harmony and rhythm complement both each other and the words more consistently than ever before; the melodies are now developed more subtly.

The much-vaunted "All Along The Watchtower" shows the combined musical influences of folk-rock and country, with a vocal line derived from both Jewish and Negro chants. It is modal in character and narrow in range, embracing variants on a single motif which aptly illustrate the search for "some way out of here".



Courtesy CBS

Blood On The Tracks is, perhaps, the most structured album from the musical standpoint. Most of the songs have a feeling of *real* development, a reaching toward something. On the first side especially, they move beyond the more predictable tonic-dominant relationships toward new key centres - "progressive" tonality. Key is frequently less defined than previously, to an extent that sometimes recalls The Beatles' work.

"Idiot Wind" draws much of its power and explosive energy from these factors. The song crashes in on a C minor chord that is by no means alien to the tonic key of G major but certainly shatters expectations. The lyrical structure of declaration, narrative and chorus are paralleled in the melodic structure, which skilfully develops and extends melodic motifs. Inner key relationships are explored and only in the chorus is the harmony straightforwardly diatonic and defined. The musical content and Dylan's own performance are perfectly integrated, much more so than on the outtake version, so that on the finished album the song can emerge as the work of a mature artist.

"You're A Big Girl Now" and "Tangled Up In Blue" are both rooted in vacillating chord sequences, which rise and fall with the singer's emotions and the rapid scene-shifting. "Tangled Up In Blue" is in a kind of binary form, the second section inverting and developing earlier material. The harmonies tend toward D major, and when the song finally ends in the home key of A major, we are somehow surprised and it's almost as if we haven't been there before.

"You're Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go" is the simplest of songs yet a minor masterpiece. On paper, the words appear almost trite, a variant on the old moon/June clichés, but the melody and harmony *really* touch our emotions: the song is genuinely moving. Although well-defined tonally, it incorporates that embellished falling sequence in the bass. What amounts to an extended middle-eight uses different yet clearly related material and the music shifts, quite unexpectedly, (at "Blue river running slow and lazy") up a tone from E major to F-sharp major. This works on both a musical level as well as an emotional one: it gives the song shape. We are then kept momentarily in suspended animation by a chord of B major over A in the bass, before a final return to the tonic and, with it, the opening idea.

"If You See Her, Say Hello" again uses an unanticipated alien chord to illustrate the yearning for his beloved, in a piece of otherwise clear-cut tonality. "Shelter From The Storm", with its slow and straightforward harmonic pace, is given a new dimension where the chords are suspended over a prominent bass line. This simplicity allowed Dylan, in 1978, to add those very tight and haunting vocal harmonies.

The total structure of *Blood On The Tracks* is interesting. The key sequence of the songs is A,E,G,G, E,E,D,D,E and E majors - a preponderance of E - yet, we don't get the feeling of sameness, of being in the same key. That's due to the fact that, while a song may be *nominally* in E major, the constant thrust toward new key-centres means that we spend very little time actually there.

Many numbers don't "end": tonality is simply arrested mid-flight.

The whole album has a feeling of light and air; the music "breathes". Even in the densest songs, such as "Idiot Wind", we can hear the layers in the texture. They're the things that give *Blood On The Tracks* an extra-special quality. Although no subsequent Dylan opus has recaptured this level of musical achievement, these traits are sporadically evident in Dylan's more recent work. "Senor" is well-structured from a technical point of view and seems specifically evocative of time and place. Much of its power derives from its modal melody, which rises and falls with a natural speech pattern, while remaining eminently musical. The harmony, too, is modal and there is a consequent lack of perfect cadences, the "third" relationship being explored extensively once more. The bass again makes use of that falling motif which adds direction to the whole. The arrangement is, fortunately, just right - subtle, clear and im-

aginative with a certain "south of the border" feel to it.

In "I Believe In You", our attention is caught by the chord of D major, the flat seventh chord, in a song that is very firmly rooted in E major. This Dylan uses to point the words: the "alien" chord musically depicts his spiritual isolation from friends. But, because he is firm in his belief and God is, in turn, firm in His guidance, the music can return straight away to E major harmony, never really straying beyond its confines.

"In The Garden" is Dylan's most adventurous song from the harmonic standpoint, moving way, way beyond folk and most rock:

"When they came for Him in the garden,
B B/A-sharp
Did they know?
G-sharp minor G+
When they came for Him in the garden
C minor G+
Did they know?"
E-flat F

By harmonic side-stepping and partial sequences, Dylan has moved, in the space of two phrases, from the opening B major chord to one on F. Thus, he builds up the tension and mystery in the music that is inherent in the words and the hitherto only partially-formed question. The tonality becomes more clearly defined, though still progressive, as we hear the questions themselves. Through chords of G,C/G,A,D/ A,B,E/B and F-sharp majors, we finally make it back to the opening B major, so that the whole process can be started again. Certainly, the chords give an aura of ethereal mystery appropriate to the subject - the eerie betrayal of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, the "magic" of his teaching and healing and so on. Yet, ultimately the changes are somewhat rambling and cease to surprise.

Moreover, the melody lacks direction and drive, so we can really only admire Dylan's daring as the song neither lives up to the promise of its opening, nor stands up well as a unified whole.

More than ever forsaking poetry for scripture, *Saved* inevitably disappoints us. At the same time, it contains the seeds of a continuing *musical* development. In terms of production alone, the album is more satisfying than its predecessor. The all-pervasive indolence of *Slow Train Coming* is banished in favour of a tighter mix. The sound, though not the "wild mercury" of *Blonde On Blonde*, is alive and committed. While perhaps *Saved* contains no really outstanding songs - the previous album did better in this respect - there is, as we've seen, no sense of musical stagnation.

In "Trouble In Mind", the B-side to "Precious Angel" issued here in 1979, we first saw Dylan playing with the old Spector technique of building an entire song around a single riff. There, it was little more than a sophisticated blues. Now, it has matured: in "Are You Ready" and, most notably, in "Solid Rock", it effectively augments the urgency and intensity of Dylan's personal commitment as expressed in the vocals.

In some ways, the collaboration with Spector, much talked (and laughed) about around the time of Cohen's work with the producer in 1977, even seems less far-fetched than before. *Saved* might have fared well with a "wall of sound" - it already has elements of it in the frequent use of a heavily reverbed bass drum - and the big sound of some gospel isn't a million miles away from the Spector production technique anyway. If Dylan could control the often wayward superstar of the back room, both careers could gain a new lease of life. Using frequency of output as our yardstick, it appears that Dylan has already found his muse, whether we like it or not. And yet, if for the moment *Street Legal* emerges as the transitional album - poised between the acute personal anguish of *Blood On The Tracks* and *Desire* and the spiritual fulfilment of the last two albums - we can make the wider observation that Dylan has always been on the move, never stopping for too long in any one place. Just as the total preoccupation with his Saviour may fade, so the gospel may be better integrated with the other elements of his style. Then the resurgence would be complete. But, for now, Dylan seems content to play out his 1978 assertion that "you can be a priest and be in rock 'n' roll".³

'Struck by the sounds before the sun: Dylan as composer' By Liz Thomson
from *Conclusions on the Wall: New Essays on Bob Dylan* (Thin Man, 1980)

FOOTNOTES

- 1 The *Playboy* Interview with Ron Rosebaum, March, 1978.
- 2 "Freedom And Responsibility" by Wilfrid Mellers, From *Dylan: A Retrospective*, edited by Craig McGregor. UK: Angus & Robertson, 1980.
- 3 The *Playboy* Interview, March, 1978.

