

## On Bob Dylan's Philosophy of Modern Song

When I was asked to review this book, my first thought was: what can I write about Dylan that I haven't already said in a previous essay, *Aint Gonna Work on Bob Dylan's Farm No More* (Quadrant Dec 2016).

None of the observations I made back then have changed. If anything, some of my views, unpopular at the time, have now been embraced by esteemed writers such as UK poet Don Paterson, recipient of the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry and the TS Eliot Prize. Paterson is also a respected jazz musician and is one of the few to straddle the dual art forms, as Dylan has, of music and language. He writes:

Enough already. Personally, I am done with crediting narrowly if uniquely talented men with Leonardo-esque versatility. This nonsense is killing us all. Dylan's Googling chops and Discovery Channel subscription do not make him a polymath.

I decided to rise to the task of the review. It's Dylan's first piece of 'literature' since his *Chronicles: Volume One* (2004).

*Philosophy*, from the Greek word for 'love of wisdom', has many definitions throughout diverse cultures. There are Western, Asian, African, Indigenous, Indian and Islamic schools of philosophy. It is generally a systematic study of questions about existence, reason and language but the definition I prefer, and which I think Dylan subscribes to here, is the *science of essences*. Aesthetics. A critical reflection on art, culture and nature.

The title of the book suggests something deeply researched with insightful connections between past and the present. And one would think some indication of Dylan's study or training in philosophy, referencing some of the seminal aesthetic philosophers in the field such as Aristotle, Aquinas, Hegel, Burke or even Derrida. After all, Philosophy not just a word. e.g. if he had called his book *The Physics of Modern Song*, you'd expect him to have mentioned Feynman and Einstein.

To do what Dylan is attempting in this book would be an impossible task, even for an academically trained philosopher. There are too many creative, brilliant and influential musical artists throughout the world and

throughout history to make this a realistic goal. Also, he is only addressing Western music, which is only one piece of the theoretical pie.

Truth be told, you will find no coherent objective or connective philosophy to be found anywhere in this collection of sixty-six 'essays' about some of Dylan's favourite songs, songwriters and performers.

Amidst reams of adjective-laden rote clichéd descriptions of the importance of each song to him, resembling more of an amateur astrological column, or two-dollar Tarot reading, Dylan seems to have chosen his subjects blind-folded, from a pointy hat, at Michel Foucault's Halloween party. His rambles appear cut-and-paste and, for the most part, are quite interchangeable with one another with no damage done.

I am also loath to use the word *essays* to describe this combination of short, pseudo-poetic observations, which are combined with Dylan's parroting of a Sir Christopher Ricks-style commentary. Ricks, Professor of Poetry at Oxford, wrote that mighty door-stopper, *Dylan's Visions of Sin*, which I made toast of in my article, *Hey Mr. Cowbell Man* (Quadrant, March 2012). I imagine Dylan would have read Ricks' book about him many times as he has clearly absorbed Ricks' gaga-style of analysis.

Some of the chapters of *The Philosophy of Modern Song* are inadequately short, such as the one about the Allman Brothers (197 words) and Ernie K-Doe (169 words). Little Richard gets a couple of chapters (one of them a bare 100 words.) Dylan seems to have opted for quantity rather than quality, i.e. write a little bit about a lot of people, with vague and generic stream-of-consciousness word associations, fill half the book with large full-page photos and see if it all links up.

It doesn't.

The collection is unbalanced, arbitrary and glaringly omits some of the most important influences on Dylan's writing, such as Woody Guthrie.

The tome is a fat coffee-table production, like cheap print-on-demand cookbooks, loaded with '100 carefully curated photos' to pad it out.

Curated is not a word I would use to describe these images. More like surf-the-net-and-drag-anything-that-catches-your-eye-onto-your-desktop. Like a pre-teen's scrapbook. Even Madonna's books of exquisite erotic monochrome photography are more aesthetic than this hodge-podge. For example, in the piece about Johnnie Taylor's *Cheaper to Keep Her*, there is a full facing-page picture of Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor from *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*.

This is the kind of curation one might use to make prosciutto.

When I rang up the local Reading's Bookshop, in Carlton, to reserve a copy of Dylan's book, assuming they might only have a dozen or so left and

would sell out, I was told, ‘You don’t have to bother reserving, we have millions of them.’

I get a lot of good essay-worthy anecdotes from the staff at Readings. When I went in and asked for a copy of Christopher Rick’s book on Dylan’s sinfulness, the girl behind the counter said, ‘that’s all we need – another book about Dylan.’ And that was from one of the sales people!

Obviously the publishers have gone large with this one, with an eye on the vast international market since Dylan won the 2016 Nobel Prize for Illiterature.

To begin my research, I placed the book in front of me and my iPhone to one side. I read each chapter, took initial notes and then used my iPhone to listen to each song referenced. Then I read the song lyrics. I made some further notes.

For the most part, the lyric content of the actual songs have nothing to do with Dylan’s ‘analysis’ of their so-called philosophy.

Unfortunately (or fortunately for me!) to do justice to all sixty-six chapters here would take a much longer review. I will just focus on a few of the songs and artists that I am most familiar with. These few examples should sufficiently demonstrate the waste of space this book is and why you should save your money. If you are interested in a truly creative literary-musical mind, read Paterson’s brilliant recent critical review of Dylan’s book in *The Times* (UK).

*The Philosophy of Modern Song* is dedicated to Doc Pomus, a handicapped singer-songwriter born in 1925. Pomus, primarily a lyricist, recorded in the 40s. He co-wrote, with Mort Shuman, the standards, *Save The Last Dance For Me* and *Viva Las Vegas*,

I’ll start with Rosemary Clooney and the song *Come-On a My House* (1951), written by Ross Bagdasarian and Pulitzer Prize-winning author William Saroyan. These two collaborators were cousins. Bagdasarian, under the name David Seville, later became the voice and producer behind the Alvin and the Chipmunks hits.

*Come-On a My House* was also made popular by Italian-American singer, Louis Prima. I grew up with this version. The song is a positive-vibe classic festive party song, referencing tables of food and big extended-family feasts, with a slight whiff of seduction: ‘Come on-a my house, I’m gonna give you Christmas tree... marriage ring and a pomegranate too.’

So how does Dylan interpret this lyric?

This is the song of the deviant, the pedophile, the mass murderer. The song of the guy who’s got thirty corpses under his basement and human skulls in the refrigerator.

His ridiculous comment is the literary equivalent of dropping your pants and flashing the teacher. I dare him to go into any Italian neighborhood and spout this sick rubbish. Bada-bing!

Elvis Costello's *Pump It Up* (1978) is also familiar. I saw him and his band The Attractions in their prime in a small venue in LA in the late 70s. He was on a double-bill with Robert Palmer. With his Buddy Holly specs and rolled up jeans, over bover boots, they were very dynamic. *Pump It Up*, in particular, was memorable for me, so much so that I taught myself the descending three chord Kinks-like guitar riff.

Dylan suggests that the song was inspired by Costello listening to his own *Subterranean Homesick Blues*. He fails to mention, however, that *Subterranean Homesick Blues* was also closely patterned after Chuck Berry's *Too Much Monkey Business*. Notice the lyric and rhythmic similarities:

*Subterranean Homesick Blues* (1965)

Johnny's in the basement, Mixing up the medicine, I'm on the pavement,  
Thinking about the government.

*Too Much Monkey Business* (1956)

Running to and fro, Hard working at the mill, Never fails, in the mail,  
There comes a rotten bill.

Dylan examines 50s crooner Perry Como's version of *Without a Song* (1951) in a scant 323 words. Como was a fine singer who followed in the wake of the masterful Bing Crosby (also included in this collection but only allotted 246 words). My mother loved Como. I grew up hearing him around the house. But Como and Pat Boone were my definition of American white bread blandness. Neither of these guys inspired me to become a musician. (It took The Beatles to do that.) I think Gil Scott Heron once commented that when Elvis arrived on the music scene, he stepped all over Boone's signature white bucks with his 'blue suede shoes'. Dylan refers to Como as 'anti-American Idol' but this further demonstrates wilful naivety. Como was as commercial as they came and even had his own weekly television show.

In Johnnie Taylor's *Cheaper to Keep Her* (1973), Dylan attempts to jerry-rig the lyrics of the song as a springboard for a polemic about the evils of divorce lawyers: 'Divorce lawyers don't care about familial bonding. They are, by definition, in the destruction business. They destroy families.'

By whose definition? Gandhi initially qualified as a solicitor and once said: 'the job of the lawyer is to unite parties riven asunder.'

Now that's a vision!

Dylan continues down this woeful cul-de-sac with some dodgy spiritual advice, 'The laws of God override the laws of Man every time' - which sounds like it came off of the back of a fundamentalist breakfast cereal box.

He concludes with an almost unbearable extended argument about the benefits of polygamy:

It's nobodies business how many wives a man has. Muslims can have four wives. South Africans can have as many as ten... but before the feminists chase me through the village with torches, consider two points: First, what downtrodden woman with no future, battered around by the whims of a cruel society, wouldn't be better off as one of a rich man's wives - taken care of properly.

He then lamely tried to cover his arse:

Second, when did I ever posit that the polygamist marriage had to be male singular female plural? Have at it, ladies. There's another glass ceiling for you to break.

Whoa! Glass ceiling? Is this guy living in a glass bubble or what? Some critics have called Dylan a misogynist. I wouldn't go that far but he is definitely living in another time. Any intelligent songwriter who still uses the 70s term 'ladies' to refer generically to women (*especially* referring to feminists) is asking for serious trouble. Dylan obviously isn't familiar with Marilyn French's brilliant book on this subject, *The Women's Room* (1977).

And what does *any* of this nattering have to do with Johnnie Taylor or *Cheaper to Keep Her*?

Nothing.

Dylan has omitted from his influences some of the seminal folk songwriter-performers of the late 60s - his own contemporaries - such as Joan Baez, The Kingston Trio, Gordon Lightfoot and Buffy St Marie. Most glaringly is perhaps his single most important mentor: Woody Guthrie.

But I can understand omitting Joni Mitchell. After all, why include this truly influential female songwriter in any 'objective' assessment of modern song when she recently had this to say: 'Bob is not authentic at all. He's a plagiarist, and his name and voice are fake. Everything about Bob is a deception.'

In the field of country music, Dylan passes over Jimmy Rodgers, Patsy Cline, Tammy Wynette and George Jones and one of the cleverest songwriters, Roger Miller, whose traveling song, *King of the Road* (1964) predates Willie Nelson by sixteen years. Dylan claims that Nelson's *On the Road Again* is pure Jack Kerouac-influenced, but in many ways, Miller's song

is much truer to the wild spirit of Kerouac. 'I'm a man of means by no means - king of the road.' Nelson's song is about endless touring in a well-outfitted tour bus. No 'old stogies' or hopping freight trains anywhere to be found in Nelson or Dylan's touring worlds.

The only pop band represented, from Dylan's golden period of songwriting (mid-60s), is The Who. He omits the myriad of brilliant and literate songwriter-performers such as The Rolling Stones, The Doors, The Jimi Hendrix Experience, The Byrds, The Band and even The Beatles.

Surprisingly, the Stones, the Byrds and the Band were all instrumental in bringing Dylan's songs to a wider audience.

But why he omitted The Beatles is beyond me. The Lennon-McCartney songbook is much vaster than Dylan's and has influenced a much wider audience.

In his section about the British band, The Clash, and their song *London Calling*, he illustrates clear disdain for the Fab Four, remarking that through The Clash, 'phony Beatlemania has bitten the dust' and '[they] sneer at the *Fool on the Hill*. That truncheon thing is going to come down on your head while you are singing *Hey Jude*.'

I gave a composition seminar for students at The Australian Institute of Music a few years ago. I used musical and lyrical examples from Dylan, *Michelle* by Lennon-McCartney and a few cantatas by J.S. Bach. The room was made up mostly of hip-hop street teens, wearing baseball caps and staring into iPhones and a few young classically trained musicians.

Everyone knew of The Beatles' music but *no one* in the class had ever even heard a Bob Dylan song! Shocking, but sobering.

As far as music in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Dylan makes no mention of Madonna, Michael Jackson or even Harry Styles. You'd think he might have been paying more attention to what's going on right now in modern song if he wanted to write a book about it.

But I think *modern*, for, Dylan stopped a long time ago. In 2006, he told Rolling Stone magazine:

I don't know anybody who's made a record that sounds decent in the past twenty years, really. You listen to these modern records, they're atrocious, they have sound all over them. There's no definition of nothing, no vocal, no nothing, just like... static... I remember when that Napster guy came up across, it was like, 'Everybody's getting music for free' I was like, 'Well, why not? It ain't WORTH nothing anyway.'

The one positive thing about Dylan's new book is that if you listen to the songs he references, while you read, as I did while writing this, you will rediscover some long-forgotten masterpieces of your childhood. Also many little known songs and artists that slipped through the cracks. This is the most entertaining and educational aspect of the book.

It has nothing to do with philosophy however – only his quirky personal taste.

Don Patterson calls *The Philosophy of Modern Song* '[a] lazy, half-written dog's dinner...'

Personally, I'd be a lot kinder to my dog.

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