

Bob Dylan's Lost Classic by James Calemine

I been double-crossed now for the very last time / And now I'm finally free (Idiot Wind)

In an age of DVD, reissued classics emerge every so often. For those aficionados seeking obscure music cinema, Bob Dylan's *Renaldo & Clara*, a film he wrote, directed, and produced, remains an unreleased prize. *Renaldo & Clara* contains threads of traditional southern music throughout the film. Dylan's cinematic epic, originally released in theatres in 1978, unfortunately exists only as a rare bootleg in the mainstream world of rock and roll films.

Renaldo & Clara remains Bob Dylan's classic subterranean film. Dylan intended the four-hour movie to be twice as long, considering the filming process for *Renaldo & Clara* began with Dylan's Rolling Thunder Revue tour in 1975 and continued for nearly two years. This enigmatic motion picture features an all-star cast including Ronnie Hawkins, Harry Dean Stanton, Roger McGuinn, Allen Ginsberg, Sam Shepard, Ronee Blakley, David Blue, Sara Dylan, Joan Baez, Arlo Guthrie, Ramblin' Jack Elliot, Bobby Neuwirth, Scarlet Rivera, Mell Howard, Rob Stoner, T-Bone Burnett, Helena Kallianiotis, Mick Ronson, Steven Soles, Luther Rix and David Mansfield. It's a wonder such an obscure gem remains buried in a vault.

Renaldo & Clara operates deep beneath the surface compared to other films involving Dylan, such as *Don't Look Back*, *Eat The Document*, *The Concert For Bangladesh*, Sam Peckinpah's *Pat Garrett & Billy The Kid* and the disastrous *Hearts Of Fire*. The film's narrative weaves a mysterious musical and visual chronicle of Dylan's travelling medicine show during a time when America celebrated its bicentennial anniversary. Dylan biographer Robert Shelton wrote about the movie:

The finished film, running nearly four hours, became a candidate for commercial suicide. It was a complex, often non-communicative film that was triumph musically but a dramatic failure.

In 1978, *Renaldo & Clara* confused critics and most gave the film low marks. Somewhat disturbed by the criticism, Dylan said:

Reading the reviews of the movie, I sensed a feeling of them wanting to crush things. Those reviews weren't about the movie. They were just an excuse to get at me for one reason or another. I was disappointed that the critics couldn't get beyond the superficial elements. They thought the movie was all about Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Sara Dylan ... and it wasn't.

In the movie's opening concert footage, Dylan wears a clear rubber mask while leading the Rolling Thunder Revue through a swirling version of When I Paint My Masterpiece. This masked stage appearance seems strange, even for Dylan. Filmed in an atmosphere of improvisation, the movie alternates between scenes of intense live performances and abstruse vignettes providing an interesting collection of images.

Perhaps while playing Alias in Sam Peckinpah's great 1973 western *Pat Garrett & Billy The Kid*, Dylan (who wrote the film's soundtrack) absorbed certain cinematic techniques from the legendary maverick filmmaker. Some of the grainy film's best shots capture austere landscapes, railroads, churches, graveyards and rivers, accompanied by an undeniable soundtrack. An early scene filmed from a train window reveals a desolate winter landscape covered with snow at sunset, echoed by a lonesome fiddle and piano version of Dylan singing Hank Williams' Kaw-Liga.



Another interesting live performance scene shows Dylan wearing eerie white face paint during an intense, theatrical version of Isis. Dylan plays harmonica and roves the stage without his guitar like a medicine man orchestrating a band of musical gypsies. The Rolling Thunder musicians, mostly from New York, served as Dylan's band for the studio albums *Desire* and *Street Legal*. The musicians included Rob Stoner (bass), Steven Soles (rhythm guitar), Bobby Neuwirth (rhythm guitar), Roger McGuinn (twelve-string guitar), Mick Ronson (lead guitar), David Mansfield (violin, dobro and pedal steel), T-Bone Burnett (rhythm guitar), Howie Wyeth (drums), Luther Rix (percussion) and Scarlet Rivera (electric violin). Dylan discovered Rivera walking the streets of New York and asked her to join his band on the spot. Dylan released a live album, *Hard Rain*, involving the Rolling Thunder Revue musicians. After completing *Renaldo & Clara*, the next underrated studio album, *Street Legal*, foreshadowed Dylan's Christian albums that were mostly recorded in Muscle Shoals, Alabama.

Sara Dylan, Bob's ex-wife, appears throughout the movie. From the time filming began in 1975 to its release in 1978, the Dylans suffered a bitter divorce, soaking the film with irony, considering Sara Dylan's paradoxical role as "Clara" in the film as Joan Baez's rival. The movie operates on a delicate balance between fiction and non-fiction. In a 1977 interview, Dylan spoke about *Renaldo & Clara*:

Let's say that in real life Bob Dylan fixes his name on the public. He can retrieve that name at will. Anything else the public made of it is its own business. The film is no puzzle, it's A-B-C-D, but the compositions

are like a game - the red flower, the hat, the red and blue themes. The interest is not in literal plot but in the associated texture - colours, images, sounds.

Ronnie Hawkins and Ronee Blakley portray Mr. & Mrs. Dylan in the film. In a kitsch motel lobby press attack, a clueless reporter asks Hawkins *Who is the real Bob Dylan?* to which Hawkins replies *A hero of the highest order.*

Connections from Dylan's past represent another cultural and personal layer in the film. Dylan stole The Band (then the Hawks) from Ronnie Hawkins years earlier. At most of the venues where the Rolling Thunder Revue played to a sold-out house, Dylan and the Hawks had endured booing crowds a decade before.

Later, the film progresses onto a scene involving a contemporary Iroquois Indian town hall gathering. To Native Americans, Rolling Thunder translates into "speaking truth". At one point, Dylan walks through the crowd shaking men's hands, kissing an old woman on the cheek and smiling at the children during a Thanksgiving celebration. The soundtrack transmits a soulful piano rendition of Dylan singing Curtis Mayfield's *People Get Ready*.

The songs hold this dense film together. At least forty tracks performed in rehearsed, unreleased and live arrangements bend the listener's ear during the uncut film version. At one point, a two-hour version of the movie circulated for television consisting mostly of live footage. Some of the Dylan compositions include *A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall*, *I Want You*, *It Ain't Me Babe*, *Catfish*, *Knockin' On Heaven's Door*, *She Belongs To Me*, *Sara*, *It Takes A Lot To Laugh, It Takes A Train To Cry*, *If You See Her Say Hello*, *Just Like A Woman*, *Romance In Durango*, *One Too Many Mornings*, *One More Cup Of Coffee* and *Sad Eyed Lady Of The Lowlands*, as well as songs by Baez, McGuinn, Elliot and Blakley.

Dylan informed playwright Sam Shepard that he wanted to create a film with an atmosphere resembling the French films *Children Of Paradise* or *Shoot The Piano Player*. Shepard later published a book about the tour called *The Rolling Thunder Logbook*, but much of his work was discarded for *Renaldo & Clara*. Shepard later collaborated with Dylan in 1985 when they wrote *Brownsville Girl*, an eleven-minute epic on Dylan's *Knocked Out Loaded* album. In a 1978 interview Dylan elaborated on the script situation:

Renaldo & Clara was originally intended as a more structured film. I hired playwright Sam Shepard to provide dialogue, but we didn't use much of his stuff because of a conflict of ideas.

Even though Shepard felt somewhat frustrated on the tour, he never doubted Dylan's musical talents. In his *Rolling Thunder Logbook*, Shepard described Dylan's power in a quiet hotel bar on that tour:

Dylan moves up on the platform to the rickety old upright piano used for years for the sole purpose of producing middle class pabulum Big Band sounds of the '30s and '40s. He sits, stabs his bony fingers into

the ivories, and begins a pounding version of Simple Twist of Fate. Here's where it's at. The Master Arsonist. The place is smoking within five minutes. The ladies are twitching deep within their corsets. The whole piano is shaking and seems on the verge of jumping right off the wooden platform. Dylan's cowboy heel is driving a hole through the floor. Roger McGuinn appears with the guitar, then Neuwirth, and the whole band joins in until every molecule of air in the place is bursting. This is Dylan's true magic. Leave aside his lyrical genius for a second and just watch this transformation of energy which he carries.



[Sam Shepard](#)

Dylan's gruelling tour schedule added a complexity to the filming. Dylan edited some one hundred hours for *Renaldo & Clara*. In 1978 he said:

I knew it was not going to be a short movie because we couldn't tell that story in an hour. Originally I couldn't see how we could do it under seven or eight hours. But we subtracted songs and scenes and dialogue until we couldn't subtract any more. There was a lot of chaos while we were making the film. A lot of good scenes didn't happen because we had already finished improvising by the time the cameras were ready to film. You can't recapture stuff like that. There was a lot of conflict during filming. We had people who didn't understand what we were doing because we didn't have a script. Some who didn't understand were willing to go along with us anyway. Others weren't and that hurt us. It hurt the film.

On another occasion Dylan told *Maclean's* magazine:

There's no way I should or could explain the movie ... but I can't explain Desolation Row either ... Sara (Dylan) and Joan Baez were the

same woman ... it's like a cubist painting. Maybe there are only two or three people in the universe who are going to understand what the movie's about.

In one scene, Sam Shepard and Sara Dylan portray a married couple in a transparent domestic setting, discussing staying together, having babies, and earthly strains between a man and a woman while Dylan's beagle dog sits next to Shepard on the couch. Subtle conflicts arise between man and woman throughout the film. After the Rolling Thunder tour, Shepard wrote a play called *Suicide In B Flat*. The play deals with an artist's death of his own self, a concept Dylan had in mind for *Renaldo & Clara*:

It's about the essence of a man being alienated from himself and how in order to free himself, to be re-born, he has to go outside himself. You can almost say that he dies in order to look at time and by strength of the will return to the same body.

David Mansfield wrote soundtracks for the movies *Heaven's Gate* and *The Apostle* and at seventeen years old played violin, pedal steel and dobro in Dylan's Rolling Thunder Revue. Recently, Mansfield told *On the Tracks* magazine about *Renaldo & Clara*:

Bob owns it lock, stock and barrel. He distributed it himself, I think with his brother's help. It played on the BBC and some other places, so there are tapes floating around, like check air tapes. To a certain degree the film, as a dramatic piece, was sort of conceptualized after the fact. Bob asked Sam Shepard to come along to be the writer of the film. Sam got out on the road and was thoroughly confused and bewildered because it was unlike any other gig he had before as a writer. He became a participant like everybody else. As I gathered - and I think I'm right about this - it seemed somebody would come up with an idea and say "Okay, let's grab the crew and go do it!" It was all extemporaneous and consequently, on the technical level, there were never any reverses or reverse angles, because it was just one hand-held camera for the dramatic sequences. I mean really, for me, more than anything else, it's like a very surreal home movie documentary, an extemporaneous psychodrama.

Joni Mitchell appears briefly in the film. Although she played a more prominent role on the Rolling Thunder Tour than *Renaldo & Clara* revealed, Mitchell really shone in Martin Scorsese's *The Last Waltz* which eventually coincided with the release of Dylan's film. In his book *This Wheel's On Fire*, Levon Helm mentions Dylan's reluctance to be filmed the night The Band recorded *The Last Waltz*:

*I wasn't that surprised. Howard Alk had been saying all week it wasn't going to work because Bob didn't want to compete with himself, having *The Last Waltz* and *Renaldo & Clara* going head to head.*

A sad mood guides *Renaldo & Clara* like an undercurrent, evident in a desolate silent shot of a marble angel located in a graveyard under bare winter trees outlined against

the pale blue sky scattered with pink and grey clouds as a distant piano version of Dylan singing *In The Pines* lingers over the screen. Dylan's epic overloads the viewer with mysterious images, scenes, characters, and songs throughout this dense film. In one moment, a shot pans quickly from a mad preacher shouting his sermon at a crowd gathered on the street to a live-shot of the Rolling Thunder's swirling and reckless sound sending Dylan out on a desperate fringe, singing, in white face paint, *Where have you been, my blue-eyed son?*

A certain vaudeville intensity masks *Renaldo & Clara*. Cinematic qualities of the film's theatrical dynamic resemble Ingmar Bergman's *The Magician*, or the silent frames call to mind Federico Fellini's *8½*. Yet even in its glorious self-indulgence, the film operates on a humble appreciation for beauty in the ordinary.



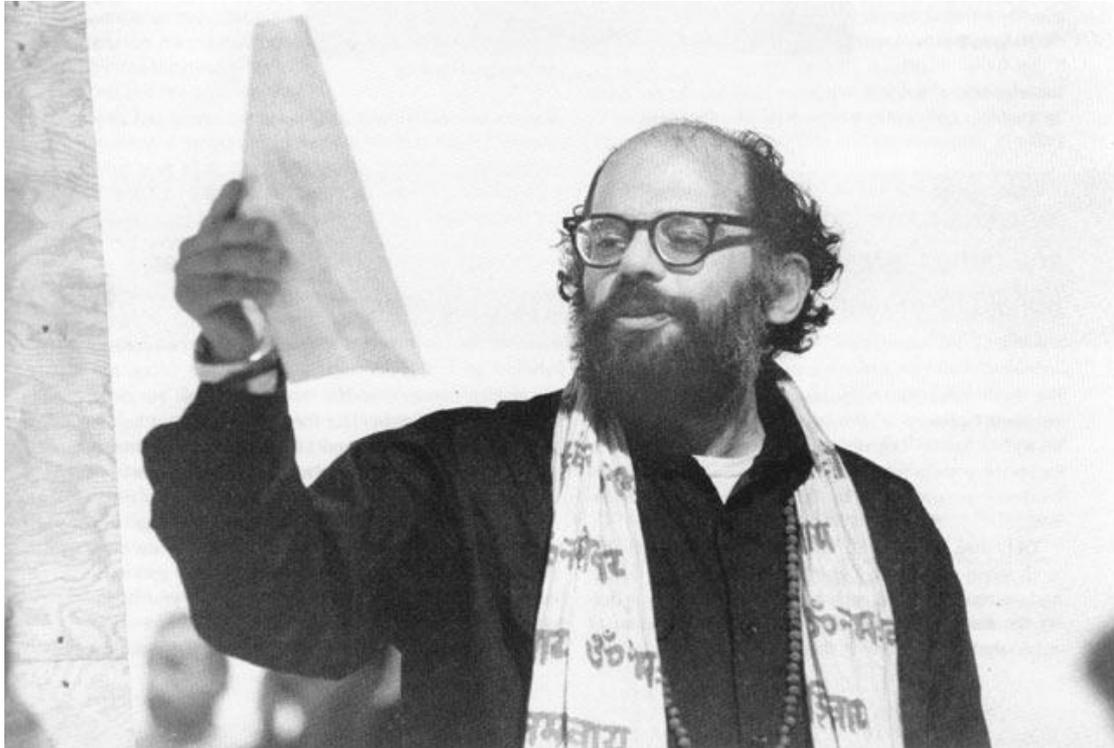
An interlude of *Renaldo & Clara* concentrates on actual footage of boxer Rubin "Hurricane" Carter bidding for a new trial for release from prison, inspiring Dylan's song *Hurricane*. Carter tells the story of Dylan coming to visit him in prison on a special trip from France after receiving Carter's book *The Sixteenth Round*. Dylan then organized a concert for Carter at Madison Square Garden. Shepard wrote in his *Logbook*:

It is billed as a benefit and it's for sure that the public interest generated by the presence of Muhammad Ali and Dylan in the same space is going to leak down to the New Jersey jailhouse and work its own kind of leverage on the law. Already the papers are talking about reprieves and retrials and there's no doubt that this event will add some muscle to the whole cause.

Harry Dean Stanton (an old Peckinpah actor-friend) surfaces out of nowhere in the film, strolling down an anonymous street in a conspicuous manner. Soon he's singing and kissing Baez in a scene where Renaldo trades his woman for a horse.

Beat poet Allen Ginsberg also appears throughout the film. Ginsberg travelled with the Rolling Thunder Revue and the beat writer serves as another dimension in *Renaldo &*

Clara, saluting that American literary tradition* Dylan admired. In one unforgettable scene, Dylan and Ginsberg read from Jack Kerouac's work while standing over his grave. For faithful fans and scholars, this one scene redeems years spent searching for this rare film. Ginsberg points down and asks Dylan: *Is that what's gonna happen to you? No, I want to be in an unmarked grave*, Dylan responds.



[Allen Ginsberg \(1926-1997\)](#)

In such scenes, a stark clarity impresses upon the viewer a rare glimpse into Dylan's soulful cinematic intention, especially when he sings:

*Tell me what will you do when Jesus comes?
Tell me what will you do when Jesus comes?
Will you kick him out in the street?
Will you drive him out in the heat?
Tell me what will you do when Jesus comes?*

A final confrontational scene culminates between the Dylan, Baez and Sara Dylan characters, reminding the viewer of a thin line between an artist's life and his work. Possibly the most viewed clip from *Renaldo & Clara* remains the last live performance scene in the film, with Dylan playing Tangled Up In Blue solo on an acoustic guitar. The infamous close shot reveals Dylan's painted white face and every once in a while his wild blue eyes peer out from under the grey hat with a red flower in the brim, projecting direct intensity.

Perhaps one day Dylan will decide to release *Renaldo & Clara*, especially in this golden age of DVD, but it's doubtful. Unheard versions of old Dylan songs and his choice of cover tunes render the film a classic. After searching for ten years for a copy of Dylan's buried film (conjuring a certain thrill searching for something so elusive all

those years), in 1997 I obtained a mid-grade full-length version in Atlanta. Perhaps this obscure movie satisfies only avid collectors, bootleg freaks, film aficionados and Dylan fanatics. If you ever get your hands on a copy, you'll scratch your head wondering how long this mysterious musical vaudeville must remain asleep in the tomb.

STARS Four

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*** Bob Dylan And Poetry**

Dylan's writing is often held in disrepute by academics who don't understand musical lyric writing and by those threatened by innovation, rebellion and individualism in art. In poetry for the last 100 years or so, there has been a continual tension between writers who favor tight structures of rhyme and meter combined with a refined and even specialized language easily identified with the great poetry of the past and those who look to experience itself (as opposed to literature) for the necessary expression of poetic feeling. These latter types also have a long and venerable tradition in poetry, often as outsiders, rebels and visionary prophets.

In the 17th & 18th centuries, many of the folk songs from oral tradition that we know and love were being recorded by writers, partly out of curiosity and partly out of a growing sense that the oral tradition was in fact dying or at least subsiding beneath growing literacy rates, improvements in publishing technology and a radical change in social circumstances i.e. the displacement of a working class formerly tied to land and rural communities into urban areas and grim lives of wage labor ... by the rise to power of a merchant / manufacturing class. So while Shakespeare and Jonson and Milton and the King James Bible and other high points of literature in English were being produced, there were also a number of important anthologies published containing versions, sometimes "improved" by the editor, of traditional ballads such as Tam Lin, the Robin Hood tales, Two Corbies, Sir Patrick Spens, Froggie Went A-Courtin' and other traditional songs dating between the 13th & 17th centuries. The popularity of these songs and the ballad singers encouraged more original compositions in the ballad style, songs such as Barbara Allen, The Roving Blade, Katie Bar The Door and The Golden Vanity. These were the "broadside ballads" published one at a time on single sheets and widely circulated.

So the poetic tradition even at the beginning of modern English had both high poetry and folk poetry. Many of the best poets such as Sir Philip Sydney loved the ballads, others such as Shakespeare occasionally mocked the ballad singers as annoyances, but Shakespeare himself bridged the gap between high and low art in most of his plays. During the 18th century, literary poetry tended to use Classical models from Greek and Latin poetry, working traditionally poetic themes and concentrating on a refined rhetoric as opposed to originality and individualism, as most art sought to affirm the order of a class system, Christianity, and monarchy.

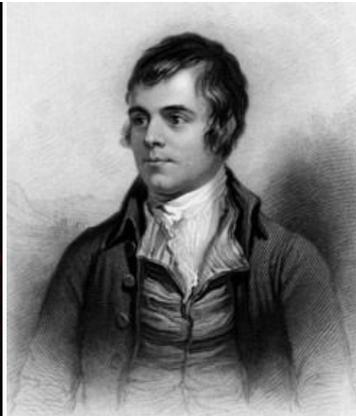
The popular tradition of lyric and narrative poetry (as embedded in song as well as recited verse) continued to thrive and be collected and this writing was often in a more vernacular or simplified language, or regional dialect. The content was often harsh and

unsentimental, reflecting the hard reality of daily life and death for the vast majority of people. Mothers murder children, husbands abandon wives, wives take lovers, robbers roam the countryside and love somehow manages to find death before it conquers all. During this period of social and political tensions and eventual revolution, some poets found the lives of ordinary people full of unexplored grace, dignity and drama - Gray's *Elegy in a Country Churchyard* is one of the finest examples of this - and other poets began to explore what would soon become known as individual psychology i.e. the poet's own experience, personality and feelings became the subject of the poem. This was truly revolutionary and the Romantic movement in poetry was truly a rebellion against an entire way of life, not just a way of writing. William Blake, Percy Shelley, Lord Byron, early William Wordsworth and S. T. Coleridge were political radicals (though not without certain ironies or ambivalences) who favored democratic reform and revolution if necessary.

In the Romantic period, the crucial poets influencing Dylan's development would be William Blake, Robert Burns and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Blake remains among the most radical artists who ever lived and his use of extravagant imagery and the ballad meter (and eventually free verse) is an important direct and indirect influence on Dylan. Look at *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* for an example. The poem is a parable about love and sex and how authoritarian patriarchy distorts and perverts something natural and holy into something shameful. It's an argument for free love and you can sing it to any number of Dylan melodies, as the meter fits Gates of Eden, Tangled Up In Blue and other songs. Gates of Eden is the most obvious parallel (and takes its title from Blake's *Gates of Paradise*) as it is one of Bob's great visionary lyrics.



Blake



Burns

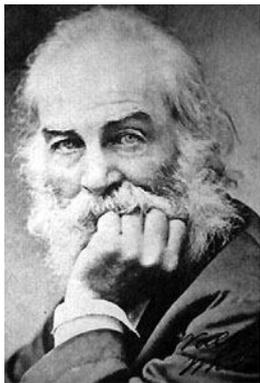


Coleridge

Coleridge is one of our founding fathers of the modern drug-induced creative process, and his *Kubla Khan* is a opiate dream poem of extraordinary beauty in a loose ballad style. An interesting comparison could be made with Mr. Tambourine Man on many levels, beginning with the particular ways description is used to bring out some unusual quality in some relatively ordinary object: Coleridge's "sunless sea", Dylan's "jingle-jangle morning" and so forth. But also in the figure of the Tambourine Man as siren / muse, playing a role similar to the Abyssinian maid in Coleridge's opium dream who sings a song so beautiful that the poet cannot bear to recall it without an intense longing to be transported once again into a visionary (psychedelic) state and a conviction that if he could survive this and render the song well enough, the world or at least the listener would also be transformed.

The Romantic movement is still with us, but in the 19th Century, more establishment-oriented arbiters of taste tried to tame Romanticism and reconcile it with mild reform as opposed to revolution. I'm oversimplifying here, but Romanticism in America began to take hold with our own political revolution and early fiction writers. American poetry had to wait a bit for Walt Whitman in the 1850's (60 years after Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798) for a monumental voice of individual vision and poetry based in speech and experience as opposed to literature.

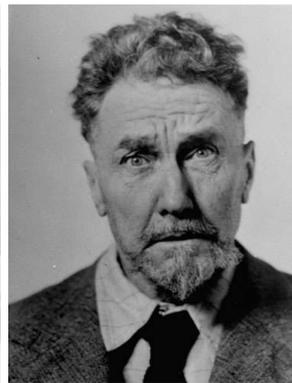
Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* contains socially conscious poetry protesting slavery and the degradation of ordinary people, a wondrous appreciation of daily life in New York City and a grand vision of America and humanity itself ... In the "I sing the body electric" section, Whitman praises his own experience of his physical self and notes that his atoms have no personality and therefore at the most essential level we are all equal. He goes on to tell the tale of a man who lived a simple but loving life, then summons up a slave auction and uses irony at first to praise the human body for sale but finally summon a curse upon all those who defile it. There were many writers opposed to slavery, some of them former slaves, and the inevitable rise of a politically radical art in America stems from the unresolved contradictions of its founding, as did the Civil War. Whitman and Emily Dickinson are the essential poets of 19th Century America, and useful touchstones for listening to Dylan.



Whitman



Dickinson



Pound



Eliot

Dickinson is just as individual, maybe even stranger than Whitman or Dylan and her tight ballad meter poems make good comparisons to Dylan's work on *John Wesley Harding*, even though I don't think they are a direct influence. But Dickinson's attachment to death, her appreciation of the infinite within the minute, might be compared to Bob's best late work even when he is not writing in strict ballad meter. His more overt hymns like *Disease Of Conceit* are even closer to Dickinson's style which derives much of its character from hymns (even as she veers from ordinary Christian theology into something more personal and abstract).

The revolutionary aspects of Romanticism were tamed by Victorians. Byron and Shelley were commonly printed and their less radical lyric poems were immensely popular; both were titled aristocrats and acceptable rogues. Blake and Keats were largely neglected until the 20th century. Wordsworth grew increasingly conservative and stopped writing important poems after 1815 or so, though he lived many years longer. Coleridge remained a charming drug addict, the Gregory Corso of his generation, but his output was very inconsistent. In America, Dickinson worked largely

in private, publishing almost nothing and Whitman was scandalously frank about sex and so not spoken of in polite company. By the late 19th / early 20th century, poetry was dominated by fairly traditional poets once again, writing formal verses with moral uplift, commemorating historical events and using language derived from other poems and insulated from the passions and quirks of ordinary life and language.



Byron

Shelley

Wordsworth

Keats

Modernism in England and the US sought to bring back the direct language of the best Romantic writers and looked anew to the poet's own life and psyche as the crucible of the poem. Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot eventually became the symbolic avatars of this movement, which was to a large degree Pound's own creation as a relentless critic and advocate for Modernism and poetry, as well as a prolific poet. In *Desolation Row* - a direct literary descendant of Eliot's poem *The Wasteland* - Dylan sees the pair "fighting in the captain's tower". While Eliot and Pound eventually became icons of conservatism and even Fascism (mostly but not entirely their own fault) their place in academic and literary culture was peaking from 1950-1970 during the years Dylan became literate, went to school and became an artist himself. In Eliot's relatively small body of work the key poems are *Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock*, *The Wasteland* and *The Four Quartets*. Dylan doesn't really have the command of English to write at this level technically but the panoramic vision of a world gone wrong in *The Wasteland* is also one of the most startling elements in Dylan's songs throughout his career. *Cold Irons Bound* might be compared to passages in *The Wasteland* and *Four Quartets* and *Blind Willie McTell* presents a vision of America in some ways consistent with Pound's view of his native land - hopelessly corrupted by history and ignorant of its own artist / prophets like *Blind Willie McTell* - or Ezra Pound and Bob Dylan for that matter.

Modernism produced a range of poets, some intent on producing extremely complex personal visions and poems full of literary allusion and technique. Pound, Eliot and Yeats are the obvious champions of this way of writing - all three tainted by Fascism and anti-Semitism eventually. Other modernists like William Carlos Williams sought a simpler, more direct approach to writing, based in common speech and free verse and daily experience. Williams is like a Zen master without the Zen and the main influence he brings to bear on Dylan is through the Beat poets, particularly Allen Ginsberg who was a great champion of Williams and something of a protégé (they were both from Paterson, New Jersey).

Beat poetry and literature is an extension of American romanticism, emphasising individualism, vernacular speech, personal psychology and vision and fairly radical

politics and theology. Key Beat writers influencing Dylan are Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Michael McClure, Gregory Corso and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Kerouac's principles of Beat poetics were treated as gospel by Ginsberg, even though Kerouac was a somewhat indifferent poet (his heart was in narrative prose). But if you read more than a few pages of *Chronicles* against a similar number of pages in *On The Road*, you will easily see the influence of Kerouac. It's a bit early to judge, but to my eye, *Chronicles* is better than most of Kerouac's output, with less sentimental extravagance and self-involvement, and consequently a sharper eye toward the world. [See also Scott Warmuth's illuminating "Bob Charlatan: Deconstructing Dylan's *Chronicles Volume One*" in Issue 6 (May 2010) of the *New Haven Review*.] Kerouac's basic principal was to know and trust yourself, that nothing else mattered. He was a freelance Buddhist, assembling a personal creed but a bit too undisciplined and psychologically unintegrated to make it coherent in practice. He was one of the popularizers of the notion of karma that we all throw around so glibly these days. The best place to read Kerouac's poetry would be *Mexico City Blues* which is a book-length improvisation in short segments, consciously modelled on what Kerouac understood of jazz improvisation. Read this against Dylan's own early writings on the back of albums like *Another Side Of Bob Dylan*.



Kerouac



McClure / Dylan / Ginsberg (1965)



Corso

Ginsberg was an extravagant prophet of personal and social liberation and he sought to bring forward William Blake and Walt Whitman in particular. He considered Dylan the greatest living poet (after himself, I suspect) because of his worldwide popularity and the ease with which millions of people memorized his greatest songs. Ginsberg loved folk songs, ballads, blues - he loved more poetry and music than anyone I've ever met. He was friends with Harry Smith of the American Anthology of Folk Music, loved Charlie Patton and Rabbit Brown. I think it was to his everlasting torment that he had no singing ability whatsoever and couldn't sing the blues to save his soul. I think he saw in Bob the completion of his own revolution in literature.

Ginsberg's *Howl*, *Kaddish* and *America* are good places to start reading. In *Howl*, you will see the dense adjective / noun combinations that will re-appear in Dylan's work as early as A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall (based on the folk song Lord Randal) before he was a user of psychedelics, as well as in later songs like Tombstone Blues, Gates Of Eden, Where Are You Tonight, Sad Eyed Lady Of The Lowlands (a very Kerouacian song also - *sad* was one of the key adjective for Kerouac, a lifelong depressive) and Visions Of Johanna.

(A May 2005 harmonica albert ER post, too good to lose. With thanks.)