

## D326 OF CABBAGE WHITES AND KINGS ~ THROUGH THE YEARS Vol. 2

*Certain truths I know ... One is that if you try to be anyone but yourself you will fail. If you are not true to your own heart, you will fail.*

(BD, Malibu, January 1978)



Introducing the White House Music Of The Movement concert (D917) on 9 February 2010, Barack Obama referred to the young Bob Dylan as a *storyteller from Minnesota* - a delightfully droll description that, whether intentionally or not, fit the tale-spinning Iron Range exile closer than a skin. But if the boy Bob told stories about his past as readily as stories in song, it was all grist to his psychic mill – *Bob Dylan*, after all, was every bit as much a construct as John Brown, Hollis Brown, the Mighty Quinn or Mrs Henry and, because drawn in a different medium (the hapless youth Zimmerman's flesh and blood, no less), more fully realised than all those quick study, Etch-A-Sketch, 2-D others put together. But if early sixties Bob, head full of visions and the character the President was talking about, had been able to see the content of this DVD, what might he have felt? Fascination? Pride? Dread? Or how about detached disregard? Chatting with *USA Today* journo Edna Gundersen in September 2001, he mused:

*How do I see my future? I don't.*

Similarly, his ingrained aversion to retrospect - encapsulated in the mantra *Don't Look Back* - is well known. This is in keeping with other committed artists who, declining to look far forward or back, strive, rather, to live in the eternal present, the only *real* moment there is and surely the only one in which anything positive (rather than speculative) can be achieved. But if the artist is more interested in what he's doing than what he's done, or in where he's going than where he's been, what does that tell us about his attitude towards what he leaves behind? If there's a degree of unevenness evident here on D326, what else would you expect in a body of work

created over almost 40 years? (It's also worth remembering that, with TTY #1 ([D274](#)) already out, what we have here is *second pickings*. Lucky for us, as was conclusively proved by *Bootleg Series I-III*, Bob's rejects and left-overs beat most others' best into a cocked hat.) Besides, that the standard here should vary is all to the good. When Oscar Wilde said that consistency is the last refuge of the unimaginative, what he meant was that, while any dullard can be consistently mediocre, only the adventurous, the questing, the driven, the bold will aspire to something better and, in sometimes succeeding, sometimes not, inevitably achieve, at best, inconsistently. What's important, in other words, is not that sometimes they should fail but, rather, that, in refusing to accept defeat and continuing to try, next time they may not. So for every *H61R* there's a *Dylan & The Dead* and for every *Blood On The Tracks* a *Knocked Out Loaded* - but which would you sooner have, all four or none? Not complacent or resting, never satisfied or content, the artist perseveres, through the fat years and lean, the barren and blessed, to meet his personal destiny. I look at Thomas Hardy's books on my shelf and imagine his dismay at the thought that, in owning them, I own him; that 88 well-lived years could transmute into twenty books, two feet of paper and board. Likewise with D, though we may run around like so many butterfly hunters, avid, net in hand, scooping in DVDs like [D274](#) or [D326](#), we then watch to find him both there and not. Yes, a shadow is caught - but it *is* just a shadow we're seein', ever chasin'. Meanwhile, the man himself is off somewhere, another gig, another joint, keepin' on keepin' on, doing what he must do and doing it well - or well, at least, as time and circumstance allow. And when he's finally gone, though something will remain, it won't be him, or yet even any substantive essence of him, but just some words and music and a fast-fading memory of ... what exactly? Bob Dylan is not a poet or maverick or shaman or sage. He's Something Else.

Remember David Blue at the Big Valley pinball machine rapping to camera in *Renaldo & Clara*\*? Though so long ago now - at a time, indeed, when D was just half his present age - still Blue intuitively understood the fictive, quasi-existential nature of his subject:

*You know what a myth is - a myth! He lives like a human being! He has a wife and family, you know what I mean? It's ridiculous!*

Maybe so, but I'll bet Blue still enjoyed all those wonderful shows. RTR #1's Cup Of Coffee is one of the two outstanding tracks on [D326](#), with Ballad Of A Thin Man from 1966 the other. The pair show a Dylan utterly possessed by passion for his work, surrendering himself freely, consumed absolutely. (*You cast your spell and I went under* he sang in another time and place, but see it here before your eyes.) Oddly, on the '81 European Tour, Thin Man was the song he sang more theatrically (hands-free, animated, see [D570](#)) than any other and it's intriguing back in '66 to find the same instinct apparent. As for jolting inconsistency, it's mildly shocking to note just how radical the successive changes in both man and music the passing years disclose - thus from '66 acid-drop sprite to '69 coiffured good ol' boy to '75 elemental spirit incarnate to '76 lock-up-your-daughters gypsy minstrel to '79 Darby and Joan Social turn and so on. That the same man might be responsible for this dire D/Cash Mornings hokum and Toronto '80's spellbinding When He Returns is extraordinary, for the latter, though visually tame, features a vocal performance audaciously inspired, nakedly devout as you'll ever hear (and, for another, try I Believe In You - see [D001.sf](#) / [D187](#) - from the same source show).

Sadly, with the grim License To Kill (pic below) that follows, D steps away from the Lord and into the empty fakery - posing, pouting, that popping, pinging digi-beat - that would come to typify his bleak, bitter eighties. Though you'll see Mark Knopfler and Mick Taylor on this video, not only is there no Jim Keltner, but no drummer at all, and miming, drum-machines, contrived promos, MTV are all anathema\* to an artist who thrives on looseness and spontaneity, who trusts his own instincts and canny resource over any new-kid-on-the-block director's orders. Indeed, once away from the road (which in nearly all these post-1980 cuts is where we find him), King D, familiar troubadour *par excellence* is liable - more or less, depending on your luck and the year - to go absent without leave. Even on stage, for a while, you paid for your ticket and travelled more in hope than expectation.



1984's Jokerman promo, a groundbreaking prize-winner in its time, now looks amateurish and dated (though the song still sounds fine). As for the cloyingly sentimental Emotionally Yours, watch out for the priceless straight-into-camera look he gives about a verse in - a troubled, almost pleading look in which his eyes speak far more eloquently than his deceitful tongue concerning the beleaguered state of his heart and soul. Like the gaze of a condemned man through prison bars, not easily forgotten. I Shall Be Released (MLK Tribute, January '86 - see also [D851](#)) finds him dressed up like a pimp and trading shamelessly on his reputation in brazen but hollow style. On stage in Sydney with Petty and Co. five weeks later - home from home, JLAW, a responsive crowd and a marked improvement, for though but a pale shadow of his '66 or '76 former selves, this D is at least honest, doing what he can.

The best thing about '89's Political World promo, on the other hand, is his effortless rhyme of *haunted* with *unwainted* (Jokerman's *scahlit* / *hahlit* is particularly pleasing too). This 1990 T Man showcases a radiant Roger McGuinn alongside fellow old-Byrds Crosby and Hillman, latterly joined by a D whose body language, demeanour and shades all make it plain he'd rather not be there. But consider how hard, almost to the point of impossibility, it must be to be *Bob Dylan* your whole life. *I'm only Bob Dylan when I have to be*, he claimed in 1986. Yet, because implicit in

that statement is the admission that it's an unwelcome role he assumes as infrequently as possible, his disavowal, brave as it is, fails to convince. *Fame is a curse* - another attributed quote - probably states the case better. Though McGuinn eventually coaxes out of him a grudging performance of sorts, it's not until all is over that he smiles with touchingly obvious relief.

Then, finally, in the '93 Letterman clip in which, to promote *World Gone Wrong* he plays, bizarrely, *Forever Young* (even though *Blood In My Eyes*, *Ragged And Dirty*, *Jack-A-Roe* and *Delia* had all been performed at The Supper Club just two / three nights before) it quickly becomes evident that *we've got him back*. Yes, with his full road-band behind him (and Bucky given notably more rein than the luckless Donnie ever is now) blighted eighties Bob, demons banished, is gone at last to reveal once more the diamond shining within. Bucky, Bob and Tony wear natty matching black boleros (D - pic below - carries it off best). Surprisingly, both he and Bucky (to show just a touch of contempt for the medium?) also chew gum.



Hard Times (pic below): nice setting, decent try, wretched, maudlin song (if only the lovely *You Belong To Me* had made it onto *Good As I Been To You* instead). *Ring Them Bells*, in contrast, is one of Bob's prime, top-drawer specials - but with the Tokyo New Philharmonic? What distinguishes the sublime *Oh Mercy* take is its spare homespun humility. In Nara, unfortunately, buried beneath an overwrought and unsympathetic arrangement, most of its charm and elegant dignity are lost. Hall of Fame '95 Watchtower is gold lamé Bob and band having a night off - fun, yes, but forgettable. Pay attention during next up languidly enjoyable 4th Street from Hyde Park '96, first for Val Kilmer and kids (right at the start) then at *Why then don't you show it?* for a quick shot of notorious and now departed über-fan Larry "Lambchop" Eden (crowd, beard and hat) in bellicose full cry. (He's also on [D056](#) / [D639](#).) And as Bob sings *Hard Rain's* *mouth of a graveyard* line before Pope John Paul II, watch the cruel camera seek out the frail 77 year old to see how he's taking it. Note, too, at both ends of the song, a pontiff showing clear signs of wishing he were, if not actually six feet under, at least *elsewhere*.

Gratifyingly, this '98 Grammy Love Sick is the full unexpurgated take complete with loopy SOY BOMB interloper Michael Portnoy (second pic below). (When he's edited out, as on [D510](#), [D680](#) etc, 95% of the clip's compelling interest - not to mention one of its four verses - is lost.) Though the performance is, as usual with this band offering this song, impressive in any case ([D674.su](#), [D126.su](#), others), what makes this one better still is the superb sang-froid of not just Bob but all concerned in playing through, even though Portnoy is with them on stage for more than half a minute, without missing a collective beat. '99 Cash Tribute Train Of Love: a spirited one-off performance of a mediocre song. Things Have Changed: with the exception of Meiert Avis's superb Series Of Dreams, probably D's most satisfying promo video and another chance to hear the song's killer line: *All the truth in the world adds up to one big lie*. Which, after a lingering look in Cry A While at the most recognisable, post-modern D on show here (and, yes, there's Charlie in the band) sort of takes us back to where we started. What is a man's life worth? What does it amount to? And if, ultimately - 39 years in two and a bit hours - not so very much, then why bother with writing, performing, anything at all?



*I've never been able to understand the seriousness of it all, the seriousness of pride. People talk, act, live as though they're never going to die, and what do they leave behind? Nothing. Nothing but a mask. (D to Jonathan Cott, 26 January 1978)*

*We're all wind and dust (D to Scott Cohen, December 1985)*

He can't draw, but draws, he can't paint, but paints and he can't act, but acts. Many people have insisted, both when he was younger and again now he's grown old, that he can't sing. Fortunately, though, he's irrepressible (he *boobs*). Fortunately, though, he listens only to his heart - you know, the one that - burnin', still yearnin' - just won't give in. Maybe we should strive to follow his example. Just maybe there's a lesson here for us all.

**THANKS** VK, Mr D

**STARS** 137 minutes of rollercoaster fun scores four.

\* From *Rolling Stone*, 1978:

Jonathan Cott: *But Bob Dylan made* (Renaldo & Clara).

BD: *Bob Dylan didn't make it, I made it.*

...

BD: *Bob Dylan is the one with the hat on.*

JC: *Almost everyone in the film has a hat on.*

BD: *Right.*

*The film (is) an examination of the beauty of the myth of identity.* (Allen Ginsberg, WBAI Radio, 1979)



\* *Videos are out of character for me ... The latest ones I've done with Dave Stewart are alright. The other ones, I don't know, I was just ordered around. I didn't pay much attention to those videos. You have to make them if you make records. You just have to. But you [also] have to play live. You can't hide behind videos. I think once this video thing peaks out, people will get back to see[ing] who performs live and who don't.* (D to Scott Cohen, date as above)

*(Unless I'm) playing music ... I don't really feel alive.* (D to JC, date as above)