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‘Ain’t Gonna Go To Hell For Anybody’: Dylan’s Christian Years

In 1978 Bob Dylan had embarked on a world tour that had induced a form of mass-hysteria in Europe. Fans, mostly unsuccessful, had queued for up to 48 hours over a spring weekend for their four-ticket allocation. This demand led Dylan to follow his six-night stint in the cavernous Earls Court Exhibition Centre in mid-June with an appearance before over 200,000 at the ‘Picnic’ festival at Blackbushe aerodrome in Surrey, where the performers variously descended from the heavens by helicopters before ascending whence they came. Dylan played a lengthy two-and-a-half hour set, a toy figure in a top hat on a huge stage amidst the mid-July gloaming, while the sound was relayed to the far-off addled masses through huge towers.[1] As with all the 1978 performances, Dylan was assisted by all kinds of musical fire-power: including saxophonist, Steve Douglas; the multi-instrumentalist prodigy, David Mansfield; and three female singers – Helena Springs, Carolyn Dennis and Jo Ann Harris – of whom the first two would later add such unforgettable potency to his gospel tours.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, these 1978 shows in England garnered euphoric reviews – eight pages of strident puffery in *Melody Maker* for Earls Court, and later a hyperbolic account of Blackbushe. As in Japan and Australasia (where Dylan ‘enjoyed a three-day holiday in New Zealand with a native princess’), the atmosphere of the English shows was a perfect storm of adulation, whipped up out of the unprecedented confluence of audience expectation and Dylan’s evident and uncharacteristic connivance in attempting something spectacular (Heylin 2011: 477). The set-list was a greatest-hits package for the most part, a veritable consolidation (even cashing in) of the musical and counter-cultural capital of the previous sixteen years. These were the first concerts in England since the now-mythical pitched battles of 1966, and they clearly revealed Dylan’s own investment in the mass wish to conjure into being what the *Daily Mail* reviewer at Earls Court wishfully and faithfully termed ‘The Greatest Concert I Have Ever Seen’ (Heylin 2011: 482-83).

Self-celebrating and retrospective, the performances on this tour in fact resembled far more the 1974 stadium tour of the U. S. than the 1966 small venue

shows of Liverpool or Leicester. Dylan himself would later confess how 'I hated every moment of that 1974 tour', feeling that he had been manipulated and packaged, and that people had come for the myth.[2] Listening to those 1974 shows, one hears Dylan's voice for the first time in his career taking on a ferocious and flailing impotence, as if struggling to break out of everything that was imprisoning, exposing, and factitious about the situation. Outwardly different though the glitzy1978 shows were from 1974, they were also bombastic and dispiriting affairs. The rigid and tricksy arrangements of the songs, the extravagant, gimmicky lighting, and the turgid, vulgar accompaniment left Dylan's voice with nowhere to go. At Earls Court, Dylan himself was bizarrely decked out as if he was the reincarnation of a 1970s Elvis, in a white rhinestone jumpsuit with a lightening stripe down the leg. The audience might connive in the collective wish that this was the second coming, and the performances were competent enough. However, what was clear was that Bob Dylan as a creative force had not so much left the building as never really arrived. Indeed, the prevailing note of the retrospective 1978 shows is a kind of *tristesse*, a deflated air of belatedness evident in the blaring or lyrical brayings of the saxophone, where the brazen embellishments sound the note of a performance searching mournfully for an inspiration that has long vanished into the ether. So also Dylan's voice can pace the bounds of the reworked versions: at times in a routine, perfunctory, dismissive way, at others sounding something like a trapped circus animal. This sense of something overblown, gone to seed, and lacking in genuine direction, is suggested also even by Dylan's appearance (as on the Budokan album cover from this time) with all its careless, confused, elements: the scraggy beard, bead necklace, black eyeliner, the clichéd show-time gestures, and the frowsy, overgrown mat of hair.

It is easy to point out the striking contrast between what is inflated, directionless, and self-glorifying about these 1978 extravaganzas and the utterly different values that would characterize Dylan's residency in the small 2000-seater San Francisco venue, the venerable Fox Warfield theatre, with its small arched stage, balconies and venerable vaudeville history, in November 1979 (and later, in November 1980). Nonetheless, in both cases what is of creative value in the concerts draws on new kinds of direct convergence between Dylan's life and art. Dylan hated the designation, 'Alimony Tour', but the ghost of his wrecked marriage haunts the 1978 tour, appearing to infiltrate the singing and inflect it often with a certain

nostalgia or sense of drift and emptiness. At rare moments, loss, regret and emotional pain are turned to expressive advantage, rising to the surface and breaking through enough to sustain a whole song, as in the slow, even languorous, versions of 'Señor', 'I Want You', or 'Tangled Up in Blue'. Of all the songs in 1978, these most of all took on a moving sense of wounded expansiveness in performance. A few months after Blackbushe, though, the axis of the latter song has shifted again, as Dylan comes to factor in his religious travails, as in the extraordinary rendering at the Charlotte Coliseum on December 10th, apparently three weeks or so after his conversion, where he mentions the biblical verses that were later to turn up on the cover of *Saved*:

> She lit a burner on the stove
> Wearing a dress made out of stars and stripes
> "Thought you'd never say hello" she said
> "You know you look like you could be the silent type"
> Then she opened up the Bible and she started quoting it to me
> Jeremiah, Chapter 13, verses 21 and 33…[3]

Here the rebarbative, gnarled snarl that often provides a kind of dispiriting default in 1978 is eclipsed by a voice that increasingly tears the self open with each agonized inflection, as if the only escape from the pain of personal history was abandoned self-evisceration.

Ironically enough (in view of this performance and others such as the Memphis), the American leg of the tour had attracted very different reviews, where it was fatally dubbed the 'Disco Tour' or 'Vegas Tour'. But by the end of the tour Dylan was singing an early version of 'Slow Train Coming' in sound-checks, and in the final show, on December 16th (at the wonderfully named Hollywood Sportatorium in Florida) he debuted a Christian song for the first time on stage: 'Do Right To me Baby'. According to Dylan, three months earlier, singing with a high fever in San Diego, he had picked up a cross thrown on to the stage.[4] At this time, he was surrounded by born-again Christians, like band-members David Mansfield and Steven Soles, and was coming under the sway of Christianity. Together with Dylan's friend, T-Bone Burnett, these two played in a Californian church band and one occasion Dylan sat incognito in the back of the church. The decisive turning point though,

came about apparently due to the influence of a woman (ironically comparable to the way that Suze Rotolo had steered him towards political protest). Dylan's girlfriend, Helena Springs, herself a Christian, had found herself supplanted by an actress, Mary Alice Artes, who in turn broke up with him under the influence of the Vineyard Fellowship.

This led him to take stock spiritually, to convert, and ultimately to attend a three-month course of bible-based, apocalypse-infused, evangelism at the Vineyard School of Discipleship in Reseda. There he came under the tutelage of Hal Lindsey, who was, as Heylin dryly put it, 'the man to whom God in his infinite wisdom had revealed the true code of Revelation' (Heylin 2011: 498). It is tempting to dismiss Lindsey as God's A. J. Weberman, yet he is not easily dismissed. His theology, with its heady, uncompromising mix of cold-war paranoia, fundamentalist literalism, and millennial eschatology offered Dylan an appealingly absolute belief-system and support network within which a biblically reduced selfhood could be directly taken on. Lindsey's best-known book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, first published in 1970, sold in the tens of millions in the 1970s and 1980s, and drew straight-line connections between current events, biblical prophecies of the end-times, and the now-imminent return of Christ, an event further anticipated by Lindsey's (impatient-sounding) 1980's tome, *Countdown to Armageddon*.[5] It would be a study in itself to elaborate how Lindsey's influence frames the attitudes and ideas that configure Dylan's Christian songs, or that surface in the nightly injunction to his audiences in late 1979 that they need a 'solid rock' to cling to, before he pounds them with the song itself.

I

Accounts of Dylan's Christian work and concerts from 1979 to 1981 tend to divide into those that style it a creative 'period', and those that designate it a biographical 'phase'. But the confounding problem for many was the vanishing distinction, since Dylan was for the first time in his career personally inhabiting the songs, and employing them as forms of witness, confession, prayer, accusation, hell-fire sermon, reaching out, intimate self-searching, and prophecy. In this respect, one can still

appreciate the astonishment, and anger of Dylan's listeners in 1979 in finding Dylan now as available and committed as they could wish, but in a form that was pure anathema. As Stephen Scobie lucidly commented:

> What was surprising was not so much the commitment to a religious worldview (the prophetic element had always been present in Dylan's work) but the rigid, dogmatically based form in which that view had been adopted. (Scobie 2004: 168)

For Scobie, the 'most distressing feature' of the gospel material was the adoption of fundamentalist clichés and rhetoric, as Dylan subordinated his verbal gifts to the inflexible urgencies of his message. Greil Marcus's 24th September 1979 dismissal in *New West* was characteristically forthright: Dylan's religion was self-regarding and self-righteous (but not self-questioning), complacent in its self-blinding compliance with a 'southern Californian suburban', degraded brand of Christianity:

> What we're faced with here is really very ugly… Throughout his career, Dylan has taken biblical allegory as a second language… What is new is Dylan's use of religious imagery not to discover and shape a vision of what's at stake in the world but to sell a prepackaged doctrine he's received from someone else… the songs on *Slow Train* are monolithic. Jesus is the answer, and if you don't believe it, you're fucked… Dylan's received truths never threaten the unbeliever, they only chill the soul…. (Marcus 2010: 95-96)

Taking a different tone, Ron Rosenbaum in an article published the same day in *New York Magazine* shrewdly and comically assembled various theories on the conversion (notably number 1: '*cherchez la femme*'), before concluding in a comparable way that it was the Californian brand of Christianity and the lack of humor that was the real problem: '[t]he disturbing thing about the new album is not that it's Christian but that it's so humourlessly preachy … The trouble is not the Christianity but the Californian in the conversion.' (Rosenbaum 2001: 236)

Even today, there can be a dismaying sense of contortion in hearing a Dylan hidebound by doctrine, and preaching on *Slow Train Coming* or *Saved*. The monster-riffs and narrow repetitions of 'Saved', 'When You Gonna Wake Up', 'Solid Rock',

‘Are You Ready’, or ‘Slow Train’, for instance, can easily come across as ‘monolithic’ as Marcus says. The songs sound less about witnessing to the unbeliever than about bludgeoning him into stupefied acquiescence with the creed. Within them, a pile-driving, accumulative insistence is an integral component both lyrically and musically. At certain moments, Dylan aims vacuous dogmas at the listener with a cantankerous inflection, and the rigidifying effect can be lowering. To coin a phrase: he can sound like a cracked bell or washed-out horn, blowing into your face with scorn… For Charles Shaar Murray in the *NME*, Dylan was preaching a narrow fundamentalism, ‘not of liberation but of punishment’ (Heylin 2011: 131). In this aspect, his creative sensibility can appear captive to literal-minded attitudes, conservative principles, and second-hand opinions of the kinds that it had always essentially contested. Sometimes this takes the form a kind of incongruous ventriloquizing, as Dylan hypnotizes himself into compliance with fundamentalist axioms: ‘Well don’t know which one is worse / Doing your own thing or just being cool…’ (Dylan 2004: 408) At other times, his words betray bizarre, niche fixations, as when he fulminates against ‘Sons becoming husbands to their mothers / And old men turning young daughters into whores’ (Dylan 2004: 408). Again, for all their considerable lyrical beauty, the un-ironic, incongruous grafting of the erotic onto the biblical in the love songs can be enough to make the head spin, songs like ‘Do Right to Me’, ‘Precious Angel’ or ‘Covenant Woman’: ‘Covenant woman got a contract with the Lord’ (Dylan 2004: 427).

At their most extreme then, the lyrics can bear out Marcus’s charge, that something unconvincing and coercive, even ugly, emerges in the second-hand certainties and self-toppling prejudices - the resources of Vineyard auto-think - that Dylan marshals like artillery shells on *Slow Train Coming* and *Saved*, and often fires off with a scabrous snarl, whine, or yelp. When Dylan sings about ‘his loved ones turning into puppets’ in ‘Slow Train’, though, the words ironically recoil on him in the same song, since one can almost see Lindsey’s hand up his back as he mouths the lines about ‘Sheiks walking around like kings / Wearing fancy gold and nose rings / Deciding America’s future from Amsterdam and Paris’ (Dylan 2004: 406-07). On stage too, Dylan could rehearse breath-takingly crass attitudes of a kind that would have shamed the Moral Majority. At a concert in Denver on 21st January 1980 Allen Ginsberg pressed on Dylan the notion of a God of forgiveness, to which he responded

(somewhat uncompromisingly Heylin suggests) 'Yes, but he also comes to judge'. (Heylin1996: 214).

One gives fervent thanks that Ginsberg was not present at the May 8th show in Hartford when Dylan shared with the audience the almighty's somewhat convoluted and paranoid judgment on San Francisco:

> San Francisco is a kind of a unique town these days. I think it's either one third or two thirds of the population there are homosexuals. All right! I guess they're working up to a 100 per cent, I don't know. Anyway, it's a growing place for homosexuals, and I read they have a homosexuals politics, it's a political party, I don't mean it's going on in somebody's closet, I mean it's just political. All right, you know what I'm talking about. Anyway would just think ... I guess the iniquity's not yet full, and I don't wanna be around when it is! (Björner 2012)

However, it takes little inspection to realize that few of Dylan's Christian songs are in any way unabashed jeremiads or sermons. In the first place, if the singer is uncompromising in his claims on the listener it is because, as his words and accents betray, he is so unsparing on himself. Again, the songs often turn on conundrums or questions, on something unanswered. Further, without disputing the evident attractions of dogma, it can also be said that Christopher Ricks's luminous close readings show just how far the prevalent verbal quality of the lyrics can in fact be taken to be a subtly restrained and controlled implication. From this angle, the occasional stridency of the songs appears a kind of excrescence on material that is, like the voice itself, innately searching and provisional, or riven by painful commitment.

What is certain, though, is that through performance as well as the words, the songs unfold values of self-division that are deeply characteristic of Dylan. On stage, the songs sound like *communiqués* from the front line of a spiritual battleground where every intonation shows how deeply embroiled he is in what he sings. Renewal had always been a key element in Dylan's inspiration, of the alchemy whereby it can take ownership of the deepest experiences of a dispossessed and opaque self, and transmute them into emancipating possibilities. One thinks, for instance, of the

relations between the bravura expressiveness of the songs on *Blonde on Blonde* and the often solipsistic universe they voice. In the Christian music this ratio is a matter of the triumphant intensity of the performances that voice someone caught up in perpetual struggle and urgent self-projection, in restlessness and insecurity that makes him cleave to the fragile light of faith. This is also to suggest that the music transposes into the domain of Christian belief what are the authentic, temporally divided, values of Dylan's art, as it registers a transitory and provisional subjectivity, moving away from a rejected self towards an as yet unrealized one. This is incontrovertible on stage where moment by moment he communicates someone holding to his faith or trying to catch hold of it, rather than holding forth about it. He is a refugee from his former life, and his words are all the time imbued with visceral reverberations of sadness, longing, distress, abjection, regret, need, and a desperate kind of hope. Faith impels him to pursue service and salvation, but his fervor is driven and shadowed by fears of temptation and back-sliding... There is an endlessly rehearsed forward-pressing affirmation of commitment, testimony, and witness in Dylan's Christianity, but little current joy, contentment, or forgiveness, and a perpetual sense that he has turned his back on his past. 'Pressing On' is clearly a signature song in this respect, and in concert was to become one of the most enduring and powerful enactments of these aspects of Dylan's faith.

Certainly, fans tended to be more receptive than the critics, perhaps by screening out the message and enjoying the soulful aura and vigour (or delicacy) of the music. As Heylin points out, '*Slow Train Coming* managed to outsell both *Blood on The Tracks* and *Blonde on Blonde* in its first year or release' (Heylin 2011: 506). Even Christopher Hitchens would later describe it as 'Dylan at his most beautiful'.[6] Produced by Jerry Wexler of Atlantic Records, the heart of the album is the seductive effect of loose assurance and swing conjured from the utter rhythmical certitude of Wexler's blended, muscular, soulful sound. Over-dubbing Dylan's vocals with horns, organ, electric piano, backing vocals, bass and electric guitars and percussion, Wexler used Tim Drummond's irresistible bass as the anchor of the music, while articulating a call and response texture out of the soulful interjections of the gospel singers, the vibrant shifts of rhythmical momentum within the songs, and the often exquisite embroidering of Mark Knopfler's lead guitar. This antiphonal impetus carries the voice along, imparting flexibility and vitality, as Dylan variously inhabits the

perspectives of jeremiad, faith, dedication, and witness. *Saved* followed the same formula and used most of the same personnel, though the songs tended towards a more personal - now restrained, now affirmative - statement of belief. By *Shot of Love*, religion as a theme, and the gospel elements in the music, were now components within a more varied personal and musical universe. *Shot of Love* is an album that has suffered for being so disparate, its parts greater than the sum. Nonetheless, it contains 'Watered Down Love', one of Dylan's best Christian songs, and is musically very beguiling. For most people, though, it will also always be an album over-shadowed by some of the great, unreleased songs that never made it onto the album.

Above all, however, any assessment of Dylan's Christian period has to acknowledge that in concert Dylan's inspiration became positively and consistently electrifying. Indeed, as Sean Wilentz points out, 'the songs sounded much better in concert than they did on record; in fact … they were overpowering' (Wilentz 2010: 179). In front of an audience, the literal mindedness and apostolic simplicity of Dylan's faith takes on a kind of totalizing intensity, as if the compressive limits of belief put him on his mettle as an artist. In the first 1979 shows this had the effect of narrowing his vision to a powerful, surging expression of a subjectivity driving itself on and on through its fervent reiterations, and its combative or plaintive claims on God, self, and audience. Dylan's creativity, I have suggested, had always been driven by dislocation, by a turning away and a beginning again *ab initio* and *ex nihilo*, that converted the impetus of aversion into eventual self-renewal. On stage this was nightly enacted as a drama of faith in confrontation with the audience, as if his salvation needed to be refreshed and proved each moment, his spiritual fate hostage to this avowal, these words, this inflection... The plumb-line of faith sounds deepest of those songs where he nightly voices a faith shoring itself up and waiting on God, as in 'Pressing On', 'I Believe In You', or 'Saving Grace': 'I been broken / Shattered like an empty cup / And I'm waiting on the Lord / To rebuild and fill me up'.

By 1980 and 1981 however, the dynamics of the shows had altered. Though still invested by faith, Dylan's creativity (and set list) was expanding beyond exclusive religious preoccupations. The Christian material was still fundamental, and its power, depth, and pathos were still central, but it now contributed its impetus of

regeneration to Dylan's revisiting of his older material at the same time. And if there are shows in these years that rank with Dylan's very finest, it is primarily because of the artistic resurgence that was taking place on stage. It is as if the thoroughgoing search for redemption and his Christian repertoire had constituted a total break with the past that left Dylan in 1980 and 1981 at a creative cross-roads, allowing him increasingly to rediscover his gifts and his songs again, with a seasoned band and backing singers at the top of their powers.

II

Dylan's on-stage Christian career is often usefully identified in terms of the three 'Gospel Tours' of 1979 and 1980 where he sang almost exclusively Christian material, and the three tours of 1981 - two U. S. tours book-ended a tour of Europe and Canada – which incorporated an equal proportion of his older materials. The first fourteen shows of 1979 all took place at the Fox Warfield Theatre in San Francisco, between November 1st and November 16th 1979. Twelve more concerts followed in quick succession, in California, New Mexico and Arizona up till December 9th. (Björner 2012) The so-called 'Second Gospel Tour' followed a month or so later, between January 10th and February 9th, taking in nineteen further concerts, though now in a wider geographical compass: Washington State, Colorado, Nebraska, Missouri, Alabama, and Tennessee. The concerts would begin with a monologue by Regina McCreary about an old woman finding herself eventually on the lord's train, before the women would offer up a succession of marvelous soulful or up-tempo gospel songs. Dylan would then launch himself – sober, undeviating - with 'Gotta Serve Somebody' and 'I Believe In You' into a sequence of songs from 'Slow Train Coming' and 'Saved' (which would be released in June 1980). The set list in 1979 was exclusively Dylan's Christian material, and was pretty much unvarying, aside from the choice of an interjected song sung by one of the female backing vocalists, and Dylan's more or less extended nightly religious spiel. This immersive relation to the Gospel was evident in his first post-conversion interview with Bruce Heiman for a Tuscon radio show on December 7th 1979:

> ‘Christ didn’t preach religion. He preached the truth, the way and the life. He said He’d come to give life and life more abundantly. He is talking about life, not necessarily religion … These things have just been shown to me and I’ll stand on that faith, that they are true. I believe they’re true. I know they’re true … And the Bible talks about a war coming up which will be a war to end all wars…’ (Artur 2007: 706-07)

Dylan’s tone and words are tellingly eloquent. The doctrinal and historical truth of faith (‘He preached … He said… He’d come… He is talking’) become assimilated into subjective and experiential reiterations fraught with a certain anxiety (‘I’ll stand on that faith that they are true … I believe they’re true. I know they’re true’).

The first bulletin from this front-line came with Paul Williams’s almost instant book, *Dylan – What Happened?*, published in December 1979, and written out of his own kind of immersive attendance of the first seven Fox Warfield shows. Williams described Dylan on stage on the first night, tense and uncertain:

> He was wearing a black leather jacket, open in front, over a white T-shirt, black levis, trace of a Fu-Manchu moustache. His face was puffy, tired, tense – he … sang in a clipped voice… He was tight, nervous. He had that characteristic dour look on his face, and wouldn’t look at the audience or the other members of the band. (Williams 1996: 79)

The clenched intensity is audible in the earliest performances, which tend to have an implacable, set focus about them. Dylan sounds like someone venturing forth, head-down, and determined to forge on, come what may, subduing himself to mission and witness, pinning himself to the songs. As Heylin put it (presumably citing Dylan himself) but with a telling intimation of crucifixion and reincarnation, ‘he was “hanging himself every night”, even as his music was reborn’ (Heylin 2011: 511). This sense of a Dylan embattled and subjecting himself to a continual expressive re-enactment of his conversion on stage is the perpetual, riveting, feature of the Christian tours, particularly those of 1979 and 1980 where Christian material dominated. For Jim Keltner, the power of the occasion and Dylan’s performances were overwhelming:

> ‘There were times, musically, when Bob would elevate just completely off the ground … would go to another world,’ says Keltner. When they reached the second number of the evening, “I Believe In You,” Keltner found himself weeping. He cried virtually every night during the Fox Warfield residency … ‘He’s always had a lyric that will get you right to the bone,’ he says. ‘But in this case it was tremendous.’ (Sounes 2001: 330-31)

The crowds often booed as they had done at Newport, but Dylan would be ‘transfixed’, ‘oblivious to the hecklers, just as he had been in 1965-66’ (Sounes 2001: 330). His usual black leather jacket at Fox Warfield is reminiscent of Newport and the 1965 British tour, but in this context it registers not continuity with the past so much as endurance and hopeful transfiguration. Even Dylan’s posture in these concerts is eloquent. Often his face is tipped upwards, eyes closed, as if in impassioned or rapt supplication, his head flooded in orange stage light. At other times his narrowed gaze is projected into an unspecified mid-distance, as he leans slightly forward, bent on getting his message across. In another posture, he stands upright, in a newly self-contained, precise, way, his closed eyes, compressed mouth, and body language bespeaking temperance, renunciation, humility. More broadly, these gospel shows is evoke on stage a massed, public revival meeting: the female gospel chorus in white robes or differently coloured sequined tops, vividly shaking out percussion and abandoned to the music; Drummond bobbing and bending like a manic cork; Terry Young swaying at the keyboards, entranced; and Fred Tackett bent impassively over his guitar like a fatherly school-teacher, while eking out soulful guitar lines…Above all, the band throughout these years is an utterly grooved and flexible outfit, generating massive or subtle accompaniments, eloquently fusing gospel, blues and rock, and notably driven by Keltner and Drummond, described by Dylan as ‘the best rhythm section that God ever invented’ (Alter 2007: 711). Indeed, the rhythmical swagger of the sound sounds like an irresistible caravan of faith rumbling through the desert of unbelief. As Wexler commented with some understatement of this music: it was ‘funky, always funky’.[7]

It is the dynamism, aggression, commitment, and self-abandonment of these concerts that gives them such a compelling drama. Dylan, of course, as ever thrives on goading the audience and ratcheting up the antagonism, so that the raucous posse

on stage come across less like missionaries than bag-men for some divine protection racket, come to menace the audience and collect God's dues. Every night Dylan would introduce 'Solid Rock' with an apocalyptic preamble spiced up with variable references to Iran or Russia (and prescient of the Christmas invasion of Afghanistan). In Tempe, Arizona on 26th November 1979 he is interrupted by well-timed, ironic cat-calls of 'Rock and Roll!' and 'Praise the lord with puke!', before dispatching the gloriously withering, though not wholly charitable, riposte: 'You wanna rock-n-roll you can go down and rock-n-roll. You can go see *Kiss* and you rock-n-roll all your way down to the pit' (Björner 2012). However, though Dylan might provocatively espouse the Vineyard pieties, when he sings he sounds like Joseph thrown into his desert-pit and calling on God, his soul at stake in every word. Listening to these concerts, it is hard not to disagree fundamentally with Marcus's assessment that:

> What Dylan does not understand is that by accepting Christ, one does not achieve grace, but accepts a terrible, lifelong struggle to be worthy of grace, a struggle to live in a way that contradicts one's natural impulses, one's innately depraved soul… (Marcus 2011: 97)

As the songs are more questioning than Marcus suggests, so also the performances are far more questing, engulfed by spiritual need. Undoubtedly Dylan hectors, and hits false, acerbic notes in the performances as well as the preambles, but the commitment to spiritual warfare is total, and the singing is constantly twisting, as if involuntarily, in the winds of doubt and loss, as well as belief. The authenticity and restlessness of Dylan's faith surfaces also in the way he continually respects the songs by inhabiting and remaking them with total conviction each night. In such ways too, this religious commitment channels and re-inflects the perennial principles of Dylan's art: its animating subtraction of life from social circumstance, its urgent confrontation of self-blindness, and its search for inspiration. What needs to be emphasized though, perhaps above all, is the unprecedented extent to which Dylan makes popular music take the depth and measure of an authentic spiritual engagement, emptying the self of everything except a desire for redemption, and oblivious to any other preoccupation. As he sings 'When He Returns', for instance, he will stop for an instant to separate out the final syllable of the line before subjecting it to a protracted, loudening, intensification that goes far beyond the album version, and that is different each night:

'it is only he who can reduce me --- to *tears*', or 'how long must I stay drunk on fear out in --- the ---wilder--*ness*': the voice drills down in search of spiritual bedrock, but also suggests someone still fearful that his subjective footings are undermined by abyssal depths beneath. At such moments, the listener is spellbound while the venue seems to become a vast echo-chamber for Dylan's interiority, for this rending, divisive, theatre of spiritual aspiration.

III

The third Gospel tour, so designated, is a composite of two smaller ones, the first of which began on April 17th 1980 - with five shows in each of Toronto and Montreal - before snaking across the U. S. to New York State, to take in a further nineteen before ending in Dayton Ohio, just over a month later on May 21st. Before setting out again, Dylan returned to the studio in September to cut some very significant recordings, notably 'Yonder Comes Sin', 'Let's Keep It Between Us', 'The Groom's Still Waiting at the Altar', 'Every Grain of Sand', 'City of Gold', 'She's Not For You', and of course, 'Caribbean Wind' (Heylin 1996: 219), After a six-month break, the second part took place, and included twelve more shows at Fox Warfield before the tour ended in Oregon on December 4th 1980. This geographical broadening out coincided with a greater assurance and expansiveness in the shows themselves (interspersed though they were with interminable, often inchoate and inadvertently comic, sermons about God and the devil). Dylan's singing shows a more poised mastery, a concerted emotional and creative fervor that is now increasingly transforming the internal tensions and instabilities of his faith into the new kind of modulated, expansive control that surfaced in songs like 'Caribbean Wind' and 'The Groom Still Waiting At the Altar', songs which braid together apocalyptic panoramas, oblique quasi-biographical references, and intimations of the failing self.

The different versions of 'Caribbean Wind' constitute successive experiments - each magnificent and eloquent in its way - in developing this huge, inspired sweep between the fracturing public and private domains. The principle of the song is its capacity to link these different dimensions within its own irresistible, rhythmic and

lyrical expression of a world in which self and society are ciphers for nameless creative-destructive forces of loss and desire that blow through them like tumultuous winds, or that drive them forward like waves. Each version shows Dylan's capacity to build a song to a sublime climax, the final verse spinning its global panorama of an outer reality exploding under the centrifugal pressures of catastrophe and evil, and an inner self whose frail constructions are scattered by loss, longing and regret. Political conflicts and family hatreds alternate and interweave in this way with the soundings of a self torn apart both from without and within, and confronting a life reduced to the basic, still-exhilarating, vital need to find within itself the resources to respond, survive, move on.[8] The single concert version of the song, sung at Fox Warfield on November 12th 1980 explicitly figures the desire for Christian redemption as enmeshed with human desire, loss and predation:

> Shadows moved closer as we touched on the floor
> Prodigal Son sitting next to the door,
> Preaching resistance, waiting for the night to arrive.
> He was well connected, but his heart was a snare
> And she had left him to die in there
> I knew he could get out while he still was alive …

On the night Dylan sang 'Caribbean Wind', he would also sing 'City of Gold', 'Let's Keep It Between Us', 'Simple Twist of Fate', 'Like a Rolling Stone', 'Abraham, Martin and John', 'Girl From the North Country', and 'Mary of the Wild Moor'. Above all, though, he also gave one of his finest performances of 'Ain't Gonna Go To Hell For Anybody', prefaced by a dedication to Greil Marcus. This song had always had a ferocious intensity and drive, and had begun the tour as a sublimely self-scourging diatribe ('I can deceive people as well as anybody / I've got the vision, I can cause division / I can twist the truth as well as anybody …'). By the end of the year, though, and this concert it had mutated into something far less coherent, but more mysterious and powerful. It now shared with 'Caribbean Wind' the sense that Dylan was taking the full measure of Christian faith but with a certain inspired, fluent, displacement from it, riding a wave that allowed him simultaneously to scope the world both without and the world within, and to switch between them with a breath-taking force, momentum, and vision. The lyrics on this version are often impossible to make out, but this only heightens the transfixing effect, as if everything

in the song were about the struggle with obscure forces of confusion and darkness, and the transience of human affairs. The song throws out lines and phrases shot through with images of a self now beset by lust, cruelty, abuse, and violence ('keep on rolling whether you're drugged [dragged?], beaten, or shot…'). Yet it is also punctuated with lovely phrases about snowflakes falling, and a rooftop on which the singer can see two lovers sighing. In this later version 'Ain't Gonna Go To Hell' is like a whirlwind, throwing out ephemeral intimations of beauty, love, confusion, evil, and desire, while turning on the marvelous, vortical middle-eight that measures human life against hell itself: ' a one way ticket to ride/ There's a place reserved for the devil and for all the forces of evil/ A place of darkness and chains/ you never return'.

As a geographical correlative to the broadening human perspective, Dylan's final, Christian-orientated performing in 1981 involved two American tours, with a two-month European tour in between. Al Kooper joined the final American and Canadian leg in October, commenting with inimitable comic deprecation that: 'When it started it was almost total Christian and when it was over it was almost totally greatest hits.' (Heylin 2011: 542) In fact, though, as Heylin comments, 'the set lists changed only marginally', and the shows retained in fact too pretty much the same half-half composite of Christian and non-Christian material in the autumn as characterized the European 1981 tour.

The really distinguishing feature of so many of these shows though was the way in which Dylan's voice often infused both the older and newer material with a strange poignancy. The high point of this was reached in many of the English shows where Dylan evolved an eloquent, plaintive, imploring, singing style that unlocked all the songs and took a new kind of startling possession of them. This sing-song style involved reggae-inflected phrasing, reiterated high notes and insurgent or staccato rhythms, and was an innovation as striking in its way as the exotic, languorous cadences of *Blonde on Blonde*, or the astringent vituperation of *Highway 61 Revisited*. Like these it carries a compelling sense of decompression, a new mode of intonation subliming some hitherto concealed, oppressed, area of sensibility into liberating expression. The voice of 1965, for instance, had released powers of rejection and resentment that expanded beyond the personal all the way into headlong, pell-mell,

cultural critique. The voice of 1981 is similarly irresistible, and possesses a searing, soaring power of its own, but it is remarkable because the subjectivity it voices sounds so unguarded, even ingenuous. The impression is all at once of a thrilling openness, pathos and emancipation, as of a self who finds automatic powers of renewal and restitution, of rising again and moving on, through acknowledging and voicing experiences of dislocation and loss.

In perhaps the most sustained and remarkable concert of this type, at June 30th at Earls Court, Dylan sings against the melody and tempo all night with untrammelled intensity, in what Heylin (appreciatively) calls this 'new, highly mannered vocal delivery', a style which Neil Spencer in *NME* called 'quite astonishing, clearly superior to all his many past styles, from all of which he borrows for the present' (Heylin 2011: 541). In discussion with Spencer, Dylan expressed his bemusement at the reviews - unsurprisingly since the inspired dynamism, fervor and inspiration of these concerts, and the beauty and expressiveness of the voice, equal anything in Dylan's career. One can speculate that it was all too much to sustain, or that it was the length of the shows, or the punishing tour schedule, but the shows that follow Earls Court show a falling away of inspiration, and an increasing abandonment of this innately experimental style. Heylin plausibly suggests that it was the strain on the high register of Dylan's voice that took its toll thereafter, and in fact the first Birmingham show was cut. Certainly, by the last shows of the European tour Dylan's voice is ragged and hoarse, though the ardour of the singing persists and the shows that remain are often deeply affecting.

Of course, in the years that followed Dylan has never renounced Christianity, and as if to underline the point, 'In The Garden' has remained a perpetual staple of the live shows.[9] However, the influence clearly dwindled and waned dramatically from the end of 1981 onwards, with *Infidels* in 1983 possessing an eclectic assimilation of spiritual influences. Thus there was one track on that album with Christian references ('Man of Peace'), but others that appear Zionist in ideology ('Neighbourhood Bully') or Rastafarian in influence ('I and I'). One can certainly say though that the best song on that album, 'Jokerman' revealed an apocalyptic mode that remains perhaps the most abiding strain in his work since its earliest beginnings, up till *Tempest* in 2012,

as bleak and unconsoled an indictment of the ways of the world as any in Dylan's career.

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[1] However, this was approximately half the time it took fans to extricate themselves from the now unassisted and garbage-strewn car parks in the small hours.

[2] 1978 Interview with Barbara Kerr for "On The Tracks", in Artur 2011: 609.

[3] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=95pelijnhYQ I have reformatted the lyrics as transcribed on this video, but elsewhere unreferenced transcriptions from concert material are my own. I am grateful to one of the anonymous readers of this piece for reminding me of the connection of this quotation with the cover of *Saved*, and would like to thank both readers for their helpful comments.

[4] Dylan described the event as happening in San Diego, introducing 'Slow Train Coming' on 27th November 1979:

'Last time I was here in San Diego, I was here about a year ago … I was coming from someplace and I was feeling real sick when I got through here. [T]owards the end of the show somebody out of the crowd – they knew I wasn't feeling too well, I think they could sense that – and they threw a silver cross on the stage. Now, usually I don't pick things up that are thrown on the front of the stage. Once in a while I do, but sometimes, most times I don't. But, uh, I looked down at this cross and I said, "I got to pick that up." I picked up that cross and I put it into my pocket'...

Any discussion of these concerts is indebted to the prodigious researches of Olaf Björner whose website has a section 'Still on The Road' that provides set lists and personnel for every concert of these tours, as well as transcriptions of Dylan's addresses to his audience. This transcription is taken from there.

[5] In fact, this belief that 'Christ's second coming was imminent' means, Sean Wilentz points out that this strain of Christian belief is more properly termed 'premillenial' (Wilentz 2010: 177).

[6] Cited by Masciotra (2011).

[7] *Bob Dylan: 1975-1981 Rolling Thunder and The Gospel Years* (2006), DVD, dir. Joel Gilbert, MVD Visual, 2006.

[8] This is my transcription of the last verse of the version sung at Fox Warfield in November 1980, based on a composite of Michael Gray's version (Gray 2008: 451) and what I hear in the performance :

> Atlantic City by the cruel gray sea,
> I hear a voice cryin' 'Daddy!' – I always think it's for me
> But it's only the silence in the Buttermilk Hills that calls
> Every new messenger bringin' evil reports
> 'Bout a rioting army and time that is short
> And earthquakes and train wrecks and death-threats written on walls
> Would I have married her? I don't know I suppose
> She had bells in her braids and they hung to her toes
> But the curtain was risin', and like they say, the ship will sail at dawn
> And I felt it come over me, some kind of gloom
> My voice said, 'Come on with me girl, I got plenty of room'
> But I know I'd be lyin', and besides, she had already gone…

[9] At the same time, the song's complex and lengthy chord progression makes it a suitable number (as Dylan uses it) to close a concert and introduce the band.