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'That Pirate Radio Signal': Dylan's *Rough and Rowdy Ways*

John Hughes

At the International Bob Dylan Conference in Tulsa last year, Greil Marcus spoke of Dylan's '62 performance of 'No More Auction Block'. Marcus brought out how far the audacity of the young man's performance was compounded with its humanity, in Dylan's capacity to be inhabited by the insurgent voice of a slave. The suggestion was that Dylan's performance was powerful enough in what Marcus called its empathy to outface any presumption. And in the years following, as we know, it would be such sheer ambition or audacity, opening himself and voicing a response to the horrors of American racial and social history, and the dysfunctions of the cultural psyche, that would fuel Dylan's art. In a nutshell, my review is not only to celebrate how *Rough and Rowdy Ways* continues to exemplify such an inspiration, at a time when it is sorely needed, but also to emphasise how far too it offers itself as a meditation on it: as a moving retrospective, by a seventy nine year old man, looking back and reflecting on the mainsprings of his career and creativity, and taking his own measure as an artist. As he sings here, 'I opened my heart to the world and the world came in'...

Undoubtedly it is relevant to emphasise (as everyone has done since the release of 'Murder Most Foul') the sheer volume of allusions and name-checking in *Rough and Rowdy Ways*: all those quotations and references to the various heroes of music, warfare, politics, or poetry that turn up everywhere in these songs (insert your own list here). All artists celebrate those whose influence they need to emulate, but there is an openly commemorative impulse shaping and running through this album like a river in full flood. Consequently, *Rough and Rowdy Ways* is a densely populated album, as it pays homage to 'Ginsberg, Corso and Kerouac', or 'Louis and Jimmy and Buddy' in 'Key West'. However, for all the triumphs, it also registers how lonely and painful it can be to submit to the muses, in pursuit of freedom::

Mother of Muses sing for my heart
Sing of a love too soon to depart
Sing of the heroes who stood alone
Whose names are engraved on tablets of stone
Who struggled with pain so the world could go free
Mother of Muses sing for me ('Mother of Muses')

More allegorically, an image of the artist's loneliness is powerfully given in a couple of haunting lines on 'I've Made Up My Mind Up to Give Myself to You', lines that could have come straight out of Christina Rossetti or Emily Dickinson:

I travelled a long road of despair
I met no other traveller there

The cryptic aspect of this last example suggests how much deeper and more extensive is Dylan's self-exploration on *Rough and Rowdy Ways* than mere name-checking. As well as 'Mother of Muses', songs, like 'Goodbye Jimmy Reed', 'Black Rider' or 'Crossing the Rubicon', can be taken as songs about different facets of Dylan's inspiration - its sources, workings, influences, experiences. 'My Own Version of You' is particularly interesting, if one hears it as a parable about the paradoxes of creativity. To begin with, who else but Dylan could have written this song, and breathed such diabolical, gleeful life into this gothic comedy about a present-day Frankenstein? But the vigour and originality that gusts through the performance also gives the lie to those who have denigrated his work as a kind of grave-robbing, and patchwork stitching together of the borrowed (yawn) or plagiarised (yawn, yawn) organs and limbs of other people's work. The song comically overturns and

gives the lie to such criticism, through what it does to us as we listen, in its irresistible, galvanising effects... As Dylan himself acknowledges, his art is a kind of re-animation, a making-new, not just of himself as an artist, but of us:

I'll bring someone to life, someone for real
Someone who feels the way that I feel

We are Frankenstein's monsters, I guess, which explains a lot...

As this suggests, Dylan's reception of inspiration has only ever been half the story, since genuine inspiration is not just what an artist takes, but also what he or she gives, in affecting and transforming the listener. Twice in the marvellous, beautiful 'Key West' - the signature song on the album for me - he refers to the pirate radio stations that inspired him as a youth:

I'm searching for love, for inspiration
On that pirate radio station
Coming out of Luxembourg and Budapest

For a second or two as we hear the lines, we imagine the young boy in his Hibbing bedroom tuning in, being transfixed nightly by what he hears, going through some strange gateway, and never being the same again. And in so doing we experience once again, and reflect ourselves, on how Dylan has always been an antenna of sorts himself, relaying a signal to us, and transporting, even transforming, us in turn... We can think of his legacy here. Marcus also once made a seemingly outlandish claim about the mid-60s Dylan by saying that he seemed less to be someone who occupied a historical turning point, than to **be** someone who **was** that turning point. If one thinks of the imperial sway of *Highway 61 Revisited* or the inaugural proclamation of 'The Times They Are A Changin'', one can get the idea: Dylan did not describe his times or address his audience so much as reject and transform them, transmitting to the responsive listener signals from a time to come. Hearing the songs was exhilarating and emancipating, and it scoped a new terrain, but thereby too one suddenly found oneself someone else, as cut off from one's past, as Miss Lonely, or the singer himself at Newport in 1965.

What more of the album, then? At seventy-nine, one can say, on *Rough and Rowdy Ways*, Dylan's creative powers are in many ways compellingly and movingly undimmed, his linguistic vigilance often as steely, sharp, and snappy as ever. Right from the first play of 'I Contain Multitudes' and on, the listener can tell Dylan is switched-on and means business. Undoubtedly, there are lapses, but they have always been part of the package, and there is no mistaking Dylan's commitment and engagement. The retrospective feel of the album, like *Tempest*, is evident in the melodies, structures and arrangements which often seem to pre-date the sixties (and which take us back again to that Hibbing bedroom). And in the singing too, which draws in subtlety and control on the Sinatra material. Musically, the versatility, sure-footedness, restraint, control, tact. and subtlety of the band is a joy. Lyrically, throughout too, one is aware with a renewed kind of surprise of all the things that no one else could have written or sung: freshly-minted images, delivered with a fleet-footed command of tone, register, idiom:

I carry four pistols and two large knives ('I Contain Multitudes')

Hello, Mary Lou
Hello, Miss Pearl
My fleet-footed guides from the underworld
No stars in the sky shine brighter than you
You girls mean business and I do too ('False Prophet')

I turned the key, I broke it off ('Crossing the Rubicon')

Twelve years old, they put me in a suit
Forced me to marry a prostitute
There were gold fringes on her wedding dress ('Key West')

By turns, the songs are comic, macabre, lyrical, dystopian, murderous, poignant, allusive, sardonic, or generous, and they are continually imbued - moment by moment, line by line, often all at once - by the vitality of their ruthlessness, cruelty, openness, humour, beauty, or sensitivity. Such things, and the management of sudden and invigorating twists, transitions and dislocations, breath-taking and inspiring, have always been Dylan's stock in trade, and they are abundantly on offer here again.

But Dylan is also - as I am saying - taking stock here, of his gift and his past, through the songs and their musing delivery, tone, and perspective. This can make them appear both narrower, but also perhaps deeper. In the future, it might be that people talk of 'late Dylan', in the way they talk of 'late Yeats' or 'late Stevens', and if they do, it will very likely be bound up with noting some such reflective dynamic or inward, backward-turned, crease in the songs. I have written at length elsewhere of how a more or less ruthless repudiation of the past was always internal to Dylan's creativity, and in these songs he seems to contemplate this over and again through figures or scenarios of violence that identify the necessary cruelties of leaving the dead behind, or defeating his foes and crossing another Rubicon:

Got a tell-tale heart like Mr Poe
Got skeletons in the walls of people you know... ('I Contain Multitudes')

I sing songs of love
I sing songs of betrayal...

I'm just here to bring vengeance on somebody's head...

I climb the mountains with swords on my bare feet
('False Prophet')

I had nothing to fight with but a butcher's hook... ('Goodbye Jimmy Reed')

I'll cut you up with a crooked knife...

I'll make your wife a widow
You'll never see old age...

Tell me how many men I need
And who can I count upon
I strapped my belt, I buttoned my coat
And I crossed the Rubicon ('I Crossed the Rubicon')

As always though, the magic is in what is ungrounded in the songs, in real time, as they move between these bracing moments of mercilessness and darkness and those contrary moments or intimations of lyricism, fragility, beauty or vision that punctuate the songs, often delivered with exquisite timing and inflection, so that time seems to stop:

I saw the first fall of snow
I saw the flowers come and go. ('I've Made Up My Mind')

I feel the holy spirit inside
See the light that freedom gives
I believe it's in the reach of
Every man who lives
Keep as far away as possible ('I Crossed the Rubicon')

'I Contain Multitudes' reflects on such turns of the kaleidoscope:

I'm a man of contradictions, I'm a man of many moods
I contain multitudes

This contemplativeness also extends to many scenarios which turn on moments of listening, hearing, seeing, thinking, and reflecting:

I heard all about it, he was going down slow

I'm sittin' on my terrace, lost in the stars
Listening to the sounds of the sad guitars
Been thinking it all over and I've thought it all through
I've made up my mind to give myself to you

I saw the first fall of snow
I saw the flowers come and go
I don't think that anyone ever else ever knew ('I've Made Up My Mind')

These last lines open the lovely 'I Made Up My Mind to Give Myself to You', and set the tone for the song, but it is notably a song book-ended by two much more bracingly dark songs: 'I Crossed the Rubicon' and 'Black Rider'. 'Black Rider' is ominous and nightmarish, and it would be foolish to offer any single interpretation of it. That said, I imagine most people would - at least in part - take the black rider as a figure for death or darkness, an apocalyptic muse whose unsparing visions have visited Dylan's imagination from the first, like an incubus:

Black rider, black rider, all dressed in black
I'm walking away, you try to make me look back
My heart is at rest, I'd like to keep it that way
I don't wanna fight, at least not today
Go home to your wife, stop visiting mine
One of these days I'll forget to be kind

Whatever one makes of the words, this concentration on his artistic self is a world apart from any kind of writing rooted in experience simply. Dylan's fans often used to claim that they wanted to know about Dylan the man, but like most of his work, these songs tell us almost nothing about him. In fact, there are so few songs where Dylan sings more or less directly from experience, and they are almost always junk the more obviously he does so (think 'Ballad in Plain D'). One example is a moment of all-too-evident sincerity in 'Mother of Muses':

Sing of Sherman, Montgomery, and Scott
And of Zhukov, and Patton, and the battles they fought
Who cleared the path for Presley to sing
Who carved the path for Martin Luther King
Who did what they did and they went on their way
Man, I could tell their stories all day

At this moment the song deflates like a large balloon and one starts looking at one's watch. And full disclosure, this is a large part of the problem with 'Murder Most Foul' for me. I can tune into the elegiac, panoramic scope of that song, and I get the sense of shattering, ramifying, trauma that it conveys, but it seems to me still the draft of something much better, and always to be slipping away when I listen to it. Still, it is testimony to another defining feature of Dylan's creativity, which is that Dylan right from the first has been an archivist of his culture and his art, someone whose ambition has been to contain multitudes, and to voice and speak to multitudes, while like that pirate radio station, sending out signals across the ether in search of those who can hear.