Modern Pea Pod

Masked and Anonymous:

Bob Dylan in the 21st Century

by Zach Hoskins

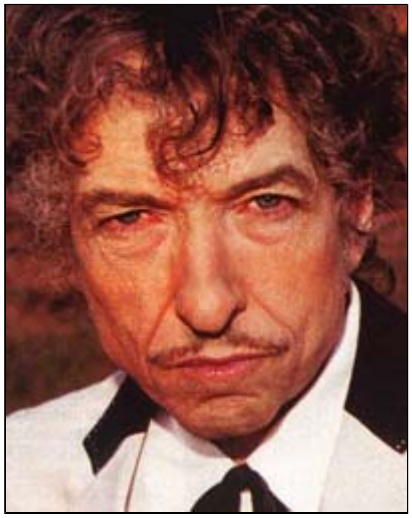
Well, it's official . For the first time since - oh, *Another Side of Bob Dylan* in '64, liberally speaking (pretty much never otherwise), Bob Dylan has released three albums in a row without any major stylistic or personal shakeups. Even more startling: those three records have taken him a full nine years to complete, making for a decade's worth of shuffing, haunted, cowboy-hatted apocalyptic blues croaks from the man who once changed skins like a perpetually moulting snake. Of course, this in and of itself isn't such a bad thing. Anyone who remembers Dylan's notoriously uneven years of the '80s and early '90s, when he seemed to adopt a new work ethic, production style and even religion virtually every time we turned around, can attest to the fact that consistency has its merits. But at the same time, it's hard not to look at *Modern Times*, the legendary - hell, damn near mythical - singer-songwriter's 31st studio album, and not feel at least a twinge of disappointment. After almost a half century of constant, electric, and yes, sometimes bewildering change, it seems that Bob Dylan has finally settled down.

Ike Turner

For context's sake, let's compare the last ten years or so - roughly from 1997's Grammy-winning comeback *Time Out of Mind* to day - with the ten years that, for better or worse, Dylan will never truly be able to escape: the Sixties. In those days, Bob Dylan seemed more like a force of nature than a man, or even an artist. His rise from a humble debut as a dyed-in-the-wool Woody Guthrie disciple to the world-straddling, controversy-engendering peak of *Bringing It All Back Home*, *Highway 61 Revisited* and *Blonde on Blonde* took only three years; and somehow, during that time he developed a highly individual, enormously influential songwriting style, one which tapped deep into the roots of the American cultural consciousness and yet still managed to transcend everything that had come before. The music of Bob Dylan at his mid-'60s zenith (which itself only lasted a little over a year) is beyond folk, beyond blues, beyond pop, rock'n'roll, and even poetry. It is, somehow, all of those things at once; a staggering body of work by any account, made all the more incredible by the fact that its creator was only 25 years old at the time.

But Dylan didn't stop there. Instead, he pulled off the first in a rapid-fire series of major about-faces in late 1967, with the release of *John Wesley Harding*, a return to pastoral, acoustic-based music which may have been called a throwback to the folk days had it not also contained some of his densest, most impenetrable and richly allegorical lyrics to date. Then, a year and a half later, he surprised us again with *Nashville Skyline*, a more or less straight-faced stab at traditional country and western long before such genre-dabbling was an accepted norm. And from then on, it's been more or less a

given that wherever Dylan might go, he won't be staying there for long. Even the mid-'70s releases which are considered his "first comeback," *Blood on the Tracks* and *Desire*, are only companion albums in the sense that both are of great quality and both seem to deal with Dylan's impending divorce from Sara Lownds; listen to these two records back to back and you'll realize soon enough that Dylan could hardly have found a *more* different way to follow up the austere, confessional *Blood* than with the strange, vibrant musical gypsy caravan that was *Desire* and the Rolling Thunder Revue. It may seem strange to assert that, in a career which spans 44 years and over 30 albums, no two Bob Dylan records are quite alike, but it's true.



So why, after setting such a precedent, has Bob Dylan decided to release not one or two, but *three* like albums in a row? The practical answer, of course, is that they're a "trilogy"; certainly a fact given the musical and thematic consistencies of *Time Out of Mind*, *Love and Theft* and *Modern Times*, but it's doubtful that this was the master's plan from the beginning. The cynical answer, on the other hand, is a lot more troubling. It's essentially true that most great artists will blaze through their formative years on a chariot of seemingly divine inspiration; after even a decade or so of that kind of pressure, however, anybody would get tired. So it's tempting to suspect that Dylan, now that he's eligible for a discounted meal at Denny's, just isn't relevant anymore. He can't keep up with the musical or even cultural trends of the last 30 years - the guy hasn't even acknowledged punk, after all - and so he's settled back into a comfortable groove, growling epic, ancient but hardly earth-shattering turns of verse over the same kind of full-tilt blues-rock boogie he pioneered in '65, albeit in streamlined, traditionalist, NPR-friendly form. Distressingly, recent comments from the man himself would seem to bear this theory out: his remarks to *Rolling Stone* interviewer Jonathan Lethem in the weeks leading up to *Modern Times* about the

"atrocious" quality of 21st century recordings, while mostly spot-on, were just bitter and crankish enough to leave a sour taste in the mouth, leaving many speculating whether Dylan realizes that the times didn't stop a-changin' after he stopped singing about them.

For all the compelligness of this argument to the naysayer in me, however, I don't believe that Bob Dylan has stopped being relevant. Or, more specifically, I don't think he's stopped being *of the times*, because as far as I'm concerned, he never has been. Dylan's rise as the poet laureate of early '60s protest folk was purely incidental, a cosmic accident for a young man who would have been playing the same ancient-sounding songs whether there was a commercial "scene" to embrace him or not. After all, "Blowin' in the Wind" may be ostensibly about the conflicts which troubled the American consciousness in 1963, both at home (the Civil Rights Movement) and abroad (the growing conflict in Vietnam), but its themes - freedom, peace, justice - would have been just as relevant in 1863 (or, as we've seen by its continued use in anti-war movements, the early 2000's). And even when Dylan dropped the folkie schtick for his "thin wild mercury" postmodern blues sound, he was referencing William Faulkner and modernist art, not explicitly trumpeting the hopes and dreams of the youth culture; about the most topical things Dylan wrote in this trailblazing middle period were the references to "getting stoned" in "Rainy Day Women #12 & 35," and cats had been singing about dope since at least the 1920s.

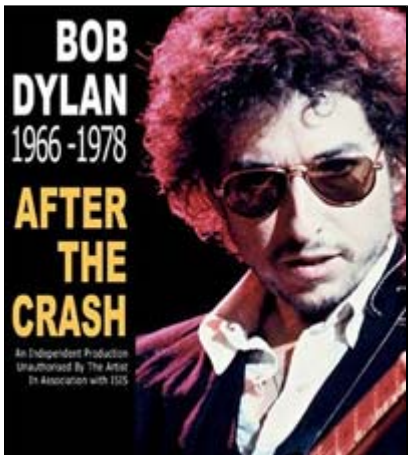
In this sense, then, *Modern Times* is not a departure or a move backwards from Dylan's beloved mid-'60s aesthetic - instead, it's more of the same, a sideways squint at the culture occupied by the songwriter, filtered through the layers of anachronisms with which he's always surrounded himself. Though his lyrics, in their oblique Dylanesque way, address the floundering economy, Hurricane Katrina and even Alicia Keys, the "Modern Times" to which the title of his new album refers bear a lot more resemblance to the so-called Modern Era (particularly the years between 1900 and 1950) than to anything recognizably 21st century. From the cover art, with its classical Hollywood movie poster typeface and 1947 photo by Ted Croner ("Taxi: New York at Night"), to the music itself - an impassive mix of boogie blues, folk balladry and even a few breezy, Tin Pan Alley-styled love songs - *Modern Times* crackles with a deep, almost instinctive appreciation for the last American century, albeit a truncated 20th century which begins with the Great Depression and ends (curiously) long before the '60s. But if, again, that doesn't entirely set it apart from an album like *Bringing It All Back Home*, it also sounds a lot less alive.

Which, I should add, isn't necessarily the rebuke it seems to be. Actually, I like *Modern Times* quite a bit, and I admire it even more than I like it. It's an album whose depth reveals itself more and more with every listen; even the uptempo shuffle blues numbers like "Rollin' and Tumblin'" and opening track "Thunder on the Mountain" grow on you with time rather than blowing you away immediately (probably at least in part because both clock in around the six-minute mark). The problem, though, is it just might be *too* subtle, an observation best exemplifed by Dylan's latter-day vocal style: where once he bellowed and sneered and whined and wheezed, sometimes all within the space of a single stanza, now he delivers all of his lyrics with little but a barely evident smirk. There are great words here, naturally, words that mine the same ponderous, doom-filled vein of "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" and "Love Sick" (the references in "The Levee's Gonna Break" to "people on the road carryin' everything they own") as well as examples of the singer's stilted humor ("I can't go to paradise no more," he croons in "Spirit on the Water," "I killed a man back there"). He just mutters them with such a casual, tossed-off tone that you might miss them the first or second time around.

Musically, too, this set can be a surprisingly tough egg to crack. The charm of Dylan's work on a purely musical level is often its spontaneity, which at its best (think of *Blonde on Blonde*, *The Basement Tapes* or the Rolling Thunder Revue) can give off the

air of a particularly loose hootenany. The
music in *Modern Times* is certainly spontaneous, and I'd be lying if I called it dull - "Rollin' and Tumblin'" in particular is great, and probably even better live. But there's a flatness about the record that I can't quite pin down, except to say (somewhat ironically, in light of that *Rolling Stone* interview) that something must have been lost in translation between performance and mixing. It just doesn't "pop." The piano which ought to drive "Workingman's Blues #2," an otherwise fantastic liberal point-counterpoint to the original by Dylan's former tourmate Merle Haggard, is mixed way to the back, virtually buried by the rest of the band. And, I'm embarrassed to admit, it actually took that iPod commercial for me to notice the rollicking "Someday Baby," which just sounds too similar to the other songs when placed into context.

But what if it wasn't just about production? What if *Modern Times* simply was that difficult to get into - another prestige-filled but inscrutable product from the great Bob Dylan, easy to respect but tough to love? It might sound strange to dig up those same old pronouncements about Dylan's sense of mystery, his alienating remove from the mindset and understanding of his audience, in the midst of a renaissance that has seen him release an autobiography, authorize a documentary and a biopic, and even host an XM Radio show, all in the space of two years. How can we complain of such things when our hero has never been as forthcoming about his life and work as he is today? As laudable as these recent projects are, however, it's worth mentioning that in the long run, they bring us no closer to understanding the man behind the music; *Chronicles, Vol. 1* was a beautifully written snapshot of the Greenwich Village of the early '60s, certainly, but it revealed little of the author aside from his youthful ambitions and reading lists. No, the Dylan of 2006 is not any more comprehensible than the Dylan of 1966, 1976 or 1986; even his face these days seems like a mask, its long, craggy lines and ever-present mustache making him look like he's been sculpted out of wax.



It's this Dylan - the man of mystery, the icon beloved by millions but known by none - on whom the makers of the new documentary *After the Crash* wish to shed light. Whether they succeed, however, is another matter entirely. With cooperation from respected fanzine *ISIS* (but, predictably, none from Dylan himself), filmmakers Rob Johnstone and Andy Cleland seem to posit one pivotal moment as the key to the rest of Dylan's career: the motorcycle accident which he suffered on July 29, 1966. Certainly, it's a compelling argument. The concensus among the "experts" interviewed in the film seems to be that something happened him during the resulting sabbatical; he spent a year in reflection (and almost certainly in drug rehabilitation), and when he reemerged in late 1967 with *John Wesley Harding*, says biographer Clinton Heylin, he was "a changed man." Further complications - the songwriting "amnesia" which beset him between *John Wesley Harding* and *Nashville Skyline*, the battles with dumpster-diving "Dylanologist" A.J. Weberman, and a general feeling of discomfort toward the counterculture which had lifted him to the level of a prophet or even a Messiah - forced Dylan to withdraw even more into himself, and indeed the man we see glimpses of in *After the Crash* bears a very close resemblance to the man I see staring back at me from the blurry photograph on the back sleeve of *Modern Times*: guarded, taciturn, a tight-lipped apparition with a deep distrust of his own audience.

The trouble, though, is that those glimpses we see are *only* glimpses. Without the participation of Bob Dylan himself, which was really what made *No Direction Home* such a big deal, *After the Crash* is the sum of its talking heads' testimonies. More to the point, these talking heads, aside from having researched him extensively (who hasn't?), have very little more authority on

their subject than you or I; aside from a handful of former collaborators, some more significant than others, about the closest thing we have to an actual friend of Dylan's here is the late Beat journalist Al Aronowitz. The rest are all journalists, glorified fans really, whose opinions and speculation can sometimes be interesting, but is just as often incredibly patronizing ("I don't think people play it that often," is Patrick Humphries' snooty appraisal of *Nashville Skyline*).

Granted, in the rare occasions when a direct participant in the Dylan story is secured for an interview, the film can be a fascinating watch. One major highlight is the interview with A.J. Weberman himself, including his story about the end of their relationship, when Dylan actually beat him up on the street and Weberman, after dusting himself off, considered coming after the musician with a wine bottle. If nothing else, this anecdote proves once and for all just how much of a nutcase Weberman was (and still is). A little less juicy, but ultimately more satisfying, is the segment devoted to *Desire* and the brief flourish of the Rolling Thunder Revue. Indeed, it's this final act when *After the Crash* comes most alive, because it's here when the most principle players - songwriting partner Jacques Levy, "gypsy violinist" Scarlet Rivera, bass player Rob Stoner - contribute. This segment is so good that it makes one want to see a full-length documentary devoted to the Rolling Thunder era; maybe even attached to a home video release of the notorious but historically vital *Renaldo and Clara* film (are you listening, Columbia?).

But needless to say, a full-length Rolling Thunder Revue doc was not the purpose here, and despite the back cover's promise of "rare Dylan footage," neither was a substantial look at the music. Almost certainly due to licensing and budgetary issues, we get only a teasing glimpse at performances from *The Johnny Cash Show*, the Isle of Wight Festival and "Simple Twist of Fate" with Rivera and Stoner at the John Hammond TV Special; a shame, because these would be high points of the film had they been included in

their entirety. As for Dylan's music, there simply isn't any - the soundtrack, a competent and non-intrusive soundalike score by "Dylanesque," is content to just strum a chord sequence suggestive of "The Ballad of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest," which admittedly is probably a hell of a lot easier on the pocketbook. But budget issues can't explain away *After the Crash*'s perplexing decision to end its story a few years *after* the mid-career peak of *Blood on the Tracks* and *Desire*, with *Street Legal*, an album which is generally considered a missed opportunity, and Dylan's much misunderstood late '70s conversion to born-again Christianity. To say the least, it's difficult to wrap one's head around just why a movie that purports to delve into the vagaries of Bob Dylan's first period in the wilderness would leave us on such an uncertain, deeply unsatisfying note.

Or maybe it isn't. After all, there's nothing more uncertain, or unsatisfying, than attempting to peer into Dylan's dark side; one gets the sense that any attempt, from *After the Crash* to this very essay, is a little like the infamous "Garbology" practiced by Weberman: digging through mountains of apocrypha and "hieroglyphics" and coming up with nothing but more questions, supported by paper-thin speculation. But isn't that part of the fun? Certainly we critics like to grumble, but would we care even half as much about Dylan if he didn't insist on staring at us only through silent movie makeup, endless trails of pseudonyms and those iconic, impassive shades? Maybe; it's not as though he'd turn into Neil Diamond if he let his guard down, although that might be part of what he's afraid of. But however infuriating it can be, an essential element to Bob Dylan *is* that mystique; that quality that makes you put on album after album and wonder, in the best possible way, what the fuck you're listening to. There have never been easy

answers, there probably will never be, and maybe that's a good thing. Even now, when his stylistic kinks appear to be smoothing over possibly for good, Dylan isn't in the business of holding your hand and telling you what you're missing. Thank God.

So yes, *Modern Times* has arrived, and for once it sounds pretty much exactly like what we've been expecting. But who knows? Maybe the old dog's got a couple more surprises in him for next time. Just don't bother asking Dylan...he ain't talkin'.

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