

"THIS BOOK IS TERMINAL. GOES DEEPLY INTO THE SUBCONSCIOUS AND PLOWS THROUGH THAT PERIOD OF TIME LIKE A RAKE. GREIL MARCUS HAS DONE IT AGAIN." —BOB DYLAN

# THE WEIRD OLD AMERICA

GREIL MARCUS

THE WORLD OF BOB DYLAN'S  
BASEMENT TAPES

ANOTHER COUNTRY

19

His milieu was that of the folk revival—an arena of native tradition and national metaphor, of self-discovery and self-invention. Here one sought and expected to take people as they appeared to be. It was a place of the spirit, where authenticity in song and manner, in being, was the highest value—the value against which all forms of discourse, all attributes inherited or assumed, were measured. One could make oneself up, as Bob Dylan did—creating a persona that caught Charlie Chaplin, James Dean, and Lenny Bruce in talk and gesture, Woody Guthrie and the French symbolists in writing, and perhaps most deeply such nearly forgotten 1920s stylists as

mountain balladeer Dock Boggs and New Orleans blues singer Rabbit Brown in voice—but only if, whatever one's sources, the purest clay was always evident, real American red earth.

The folk revival, the historian Robert Cantwell wrote in 1993, looking back on a milieu that had disappeared, "made the romantic claim of folk culture—oral, immediate, traditional, idiomatic, communal, a culture of characters, of rights, obligations, and beliefs, against a centrist, specialist, impersonal, technocratic culture, a culture of types, functions, jobs, and goals." Folk chronicler Robert Shelton, writing in 1968, still believing he was part of a movement whose future remained to be made, set forth this argument not as argument but as wish, as faith:

What the folk revivalists were saying, in effect, was: "There's another way out of the dilemma of modern urban society that will teach us all about who we are. There are beautiful, simple, relatively uncomplicated people living in the country close to the soil, who have their own identities, their own backgrounds. They know who they are, and they know what their culture is because they make it themselves." . . . Long before the Kennedy Administration posited the slogan, "The New Frontier," the folk revivalists were exploring their own new frontier, traveling to the country, in actuality or imagination, trying to find out if there was truly a more exciting life in America's continuing past.

Thus when Bob Dylan sang the antebellum song of runaway slaves, "No More Auction Block" (or "Many Thousands Gone"), or when he took its melody to fashion his own tale of repression and resistance, "Blowin' in the Wind," a tale for the present and the future, he symbolized an entire complex of val-

ues, a whole way of being in the world. But while he symbolized a scale of values that placed, say, the country over the city, labor over capital, sincerity over education, the unspoiled nobility of the common man and woman over the businessman and the politician, or the natural expressiveness of the folk over the self-interest of the artist, he also symbolized two things more deeply, and these were things that could not be made into slogans or summed up by programmatic exposition or romantic appreciation. As Bob Dylan sang—like Joan Baez, Pete Seeger, or any of hundreds of other folk singers, but more powerfully, and more nakedly—or as he was heard, he embodied a yearning for peace and home in the midst of noise and upheaval, and in the aesthetic reflection of that embodiment located both peace and home in the purity, the essential goodness, of each listener's heart. It was this purity, this glimpse of a democratic oasis unsullied by commerce or greed, that in the late 1950s and early 1960s so many young people began to hear in the blues and ballads first recorded in the 1920s and 1930s, by people mostly from small towns and tiny settlements in the South, a strange and foreign place to most who were now listening—music that seemed the product of no ego but of the inherent genius of a people—the people—people one could embrace and, perhaps, become. It was the sound of another country—a country that, once glimpsed from afar, could be felt within oneself. That was the folk revival.

As an art movement, the folk revival was rooted in the nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century song collecting—in England and Scotland, in Appalachia, in the Deep South—of Francis Child of Harvard, Cecil Sharp of London, John Lomax of Mississippi and Texas, Bascom Lamar Lunsford

of North Carolina, and many more. As a social movement it emerged out of the aggressively defensive Americanism of the American Communist Party, the ideology of the Popular Front, and the vast and fecund art projects of the New Deal. As a fact, the folk revival was brought to life for the public at large in 1958 by the Kingston Trio's "Tom Dooley"—a hearty (perfect for singalongs), insistently mysterious performance of a traditional, quite local Appalachian murder ballad, with allusions to barely described characters and unspoken motives drifting into dark hollows and disappearing in the woods' surround. What *is* this? the radio almost asked every time the tune came on. It was, it turned out, a true-crime fable about the 1866 killing of one Laura Foster by her ex-lover Tom Dula and his new lover Annie Melton—an event that, depending on how you look at it, took ninety-two years, or just over the six months from the time of the disc's release, to travel from an unmapped corner of the national psyche to number one, from Wilkes County, North Carolina, to every town and hamlet in the Great Forty-eight.

For all this, though, there is a reason why, in the annals of American history, the folk revival is only a footnote, if it is that. More than its own art movement, its own social movement, or its own fact, the folk revival was part of something much bigger, more dangerous, and more important: the civil rights movement. That is where its moral energy came from—its sense of a world to rediscover, to bring back to life, and to win. The two movements were fraternal twins, for the civil rights movement was also a rediscovery, a revival: of the Constitution.

The folk revival reached its height in the summer of 1963, at the Newport Folk Festival and the March on Washington,

the latter an event that itself entered into American folklore as the occasion of the speech by Martin Luther King, Jr., that ended with crescendos of "I HAVE A DREAM." At Newport on July 26, the festival closed with Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Pete Seeger, Theodore Bikel, Peter, Paul & Mary, and the Freedom Singers—the stars white, the white-shirted Freedom ensemble black—singing Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind," then linking arms and holding hands for the old Baptist hymn "We Shall Overcome," now the anthem of the civil rights movement. Symbolically, they spoke for the nation, or their nation; three weeks later, King spoke for and to the nation directly.

All who stood on the stage at Newport were present on August 28 when three hundred thousand people from all over the country gathered before the Lincoln Memorial. Some were black preachers and civil rights workers from Louisiana and Alabama who had left their fire-bombed churches and bullet-riddled communal homes to travel to the capital by bus or in old cars; some were affluent white college students who had flown in from California. They took their places in the Washington sun as the nation watched on television, as George Washington watched as pure abstraction from his monument in the distance, and then they called upon the sitting administration, the Congress, the courts, their own governors, their own legislators, their mayors, councilmen, school boards, sheriffs, police chiefs, and the people at large to honor themselves by honoring their national charter, to reaffirm the credo of equal justice under the law.

Bob Dylan like everyone else was there to hear King replace the Old Testament jeremiads of Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address with a New Testament sunburst that, so many years

later, still sounds like a miracle unfolding, a waking of the dead. Speaking little more than a month before the surrender of the South, with John Wilkes Booth and his accomplices present in the crowd, Lincoln had taken the country back to the foreboding piety of its Puritan founders.

The Almighty has His own purposes. "Woe unto the world because of offenses! for it must needs be that offenses come; but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh!" If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South, this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a Living God ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mightry scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bondman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn by the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

With the rolling cadences of the trained orator, yet picking up the burrs and cracks of the Reverend J. M. Gates, the most famous black preacher of the 1920s, whose recordings of thrilling sermons sold in the hundreds of thousands, King invoked the Declaration of Independence, the Gettysburg Address, and "My Country 'Tis of Thee." He made them his own—and anyone's. Again and again he evoked the call and

response of the black church, as the people nearest him turned themselves into an Amen Corner and answered his rhetoric with eager hosannas. And then, with all metaphors assembled, ranging across the continent from mountaintop to mountaintop, in one of only two American political speeches that can be compared to Lincoln's, he reached the peroration that shocked the nation with its eloquence. One could almost believe, listening then—or, worse, now—that the debt finally had been paid.

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, and the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.

That was the faith of the folk revival. This was its platform—the promise it made to the nation—and in the early 1960s the Newport Folk Festival was, for those who took part, a national convention, less a counter to the merely quadrennial conventions of Republicans and Democrats than a rebuke. Here were brought together the privileged and the forgotten, white students from the finest colleges and their academic elders along with rediscovered and reclaimed singers and musicians from the past, unheard for thirty, for forty years, black guitarists and white banjo players who now stood together on stage, gathered for photos, as they never had in the official America: Skip James of Mississippi, Buell Kazee of Kentucky, Mississippi John Hurt, Eck Robertson of Arkansas, Son House of Mississippi, Dock Boggs of Virginia, Clarence Ashley of North Carolina, legends all, now addressing an audience, a

society in miniature, a country in fantasy, they could hardly have imagined existed. Their authenticity was in their hands and faces and it could not be questioned; as authentic beings they sealed the words and airs of those who now, Bob Dylan first among them, sought their many pieces that together made their one true voice.

Even as a folk singer, Bob Dylan moved too fast, learned too quickly, made the old new too easily; to many he was always suspect. From 1963 at Newport there is a photo that sums it up, a picture of graffiti scribbled on an ad, for sportswear, apparently: over bare legs and a pair of shorts someone has written "Bob Dylan doesn't know his ethnic musicology." "*That's the point!*" someone else has written; someone else has crossed out the last part of "doesn't" so that it reads "does"; and a fourth person, as if to seal this whole discussion (though for all one knows, in the archaeology of graffiti, this hand began it), has written "ASSASINS" in the biggest letters of all, though someone else has thoughtfully added the missing S. Still, as at the March on Washington Bob Dylan sang "The Ballad of Medgar Evers" (later released as "Only a Pawn in Their Game"), or shared a phone call with President Kennedy in "I Shall Be Free," or laughed at George Lincoln Rockwell in "Talkin' John Birch Paranoid Blues" (the "one man," he said of the head of the American Nazi Party, "who's really a true American"), his wit and passion—his ability to dramatize—overrode most doubts. Here he entered a kingdom where suffering and injustice, freedom and right, were the coin of the realm, and he spun injustice into right, straw into gold: this is where "With God on Our Side," "Blowin' in the Wind," "The Times They Are A-Changin'," and "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna

Fall"—the songs that took him past his contemporaries—came from.

These songs were embraced as great social dramas, but they were not really dramas at all. Whether one hears them ringing true or false, they were pageants of righteousness, and while within these pageants there were armies and generations, heroes and villains, nightmares and dreams, there were almost no individuals. There was no room for them in the kind of history these songs were prophesying—and certainly none for the selfish, confused, desirous individual who might suspect that his or her own story could fit no particular cause or even purpose. These songs distilled the values of the folk revival better than any others, and what they said was that, in the face of the objective good that was the Grail of the folk revival, there could be no such thing as subjectivity. Could anyone imagine Pete Seeger demanding a world organized, even for a moment, according to his foibles and perverse desires? Could anyone even imagine him having foibles or perverse desires? In the folk revival such a subjective demand on the world was all but indistinguishable from nihilism—the nihilism, in Manny Farber's words, "of doing go-for-broke art and not caring what comes of it"—and that was because of a fatal confusion in its fundamental notion of authenticity, at its heart the philosophy of the folk revival, its idea of the meaning of life.

Art was the speech of the folk revival—and yet, at bottom, the folk revival did not believe in art at all. Rather, life—a certain kind of life—equaled art, which ultimately meant that life replaced it.

The kind of life that equaled art was life defined by suffering, deprivation, poverty, and social exclusion. In folklore this

was nothing new. "Thanks to folksong collectors' preconceptions and judicious selectivity, artwork and life were found to be identical," historian Georgina Boyes writes in *The imagined village*. "The ideological innocence which was the essence of the immemorial peasant was also a 'natural' characteristic of the Folk and their song." A complete dissolution of art into life is present in such a point of view: the poor are art because they sing their lives without mediation and without reflection, without the false consciousness of capitalism and the false desires of advertising. As they live in an organic community—buttressed, almost to this present day, from the corrupt outside world—any song belongs to all and none belongs to anyone in particular. Thus it is not the singer who sings the song but the song that sings the singer, and therefore in performance it is the singer, not the song, that is the aesthetic artifact, the work of art. In a perfect world, in the future, everyone will live this way.

That is a leftist translation of what began as a genteel, paternalistic philosophy; it is a version of socialist realism. In 1966 folklorist Ellen J. Stekert saw it alive in the folk revival, and traced it to Communist folk music circles in New York in the 1930s. Woody Guthrie and Aunt Molly Jackson, she wrote, celebrated as great artists by their sponsors, were not even good artists, judged either by the traditional standards they were seen to embody or by the urban standards of their primary, political audience, which embraced them for political reasons—because the singers brought authenticity to the politics. "It was a pitiful confusion," Stekert wrote. "It was monstrous for urbanites to confuse poverty with art." When art is confused with life, it is not merely art that is lost. When art equals

life there is no art, but when life equals art there are no people. "The tobacco sheds of North Carolina are in it and all of the blistered and hurt and hardened hands cheated and left empty, hurt and left crying," Woody Guthrie himself wrote of Sonny Terry's harmonica playing. He didn't say if Sonny Terry was in it.

This, finally, is what Bob Dylan turned away from—in the most spectacular way. In September 1965, as the furor over his replacement of object with subject was growing, he tried, at a press conference in Austin, Texas, site of his first performance with the Hawks, to explain. He argued, it seems, that in a profound sense his music was still folk music, though that was a term he would refuse soon enough: "Call it historical-traditional music." Despite the phrase, it was as if he saw traditional music as being made less by history or circumstance than by particular people, for particular, unknowable reasons—reasons that find their analogue in haunts and spirits. One can hear him insisting that the songs he had been writing and performing over the previous year were those in which events and philosophies with which one could identify had been replaced by allegories that could dissolve received identities. Such songs as "Desolation Row," "Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues," "Bob Dylan's 115th Dream," "Highway 61 Revisited," "Tombstone Blues"—somber or uproarious songs populated by Beethoven and Ma Rainey, Ophelia and Cleopatra, Columbus and Captain Ahab, Poor Howard and Georgia Sam, Abraham and Isaac, Mexican cops on the take and the fifth daughter on the twelfth night—carried the tradition in which he had taken his place. "What folk music is," he said,



it's not Depression songs . . . its foundations aren't *work*, its foundations aren't "slave away" and all this. Its foundations are—except for Negro songs which are based on that and just kind of overlapped—the main body of it is just based on myth and the Bible and plague and famine and all kinds of things like that which are nothing but mystery and you can see it in all the songs. Roses growing right up out of people's hearts and naked cats in bed with spears growing right out of their backs and seven years of this and eight years of that and it's all really something that nobody can really touch.

But this sort of talk was simply one more allegory. It quieted no one's anger and calmed nobody's despair. For when Dylan turned away from the equation of life and art, when he followed where his music led him, he turned away not just from a philosophical proposition but from an entire complex of beliefs and maxims that to so many defined what was good and what was bad. Thus when he appeared before them holding a garishly shaped and colored electric guitar and dressed in a bizarre tight suit that looked like a single piece of checkered cloth, like some medieval court fool's costume bought on Carnaby Street, he signified no mere apostasy, but the destruction of hope. As he stood on the stage he was seen to affirm the claims of the city over the country, and capital over labor—and also the claims of the white artist over the black Folk, selfishness over compassion, rapacity over need, the thrill of the moment over the trials of endurance, the hustler over the worker, the thief over the orphan. In the crowd, many would clench their fists and gather their breath in anger and disgust, feeling, if not quite picturing, whole dramas of despoliation: coal companies stripping eons of natural wonder and centuries

of culture off the southern highlands where the treasured old ballads were still sung; police beating peaceful black teenagers bloody and even to death; the whole planet convulsed by hydrogen bombs.

Dylan's performance now seemed to mean that he had never truly been where he had appeared to be only a year before, reaching for that democratic oasis of the heart—and that if he had never been there, those who had felt themselves there with him had not been there. If his heart was not pure, one had to doubt one's own. It was as if it had all been a trick—a trick he had played on them and that they had played on themselves. That was the source of the betrayal felt when Bob Dylan turned to his band, and he along with Danko and Robertson turned to face the drummer, who raised his drumstick, the three guitarists now leaping into the air and twisting off their feet to face the crowd as the drummer brought the stick down for the first beat. That was the source of the rage.