CHIMES OF FREEDOM

The Politics of Bob Dylan's Art

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Meanwhile, the artist who had vowed "I will not go down under the ground" had burrowed into a basement in the Catskills. There, for several months in mid-1967, Dylan conducted a communal musical workshop, an experimental laboratory in which melodies, lyrics, rhythms, instrumentation, and voices could be swapped and varied and reshaped according the passing whims and moods of the participants. Crucially,

there was no album-making agenda; no business pressure. This was a private affair. And in that privacy, Dylan and his colleagues—Robbie Robertson, Rick Danko, Richard Manuel, Garth Hudson, and Levon Helm (i.e. The Band)—found freedom. The freedom to plagiarize and to improvise, to say everything or nothing, to leave experiments incomplete, to indulge whims. The freedom to play. This is music liberated by its sheer inconsequentiality.

In their full glory the Basement Tapes comprise 160 recordings of more than 100 individual songs. The vast majority are covers: forgotten pop hits from the fifties, country ballads from the thirties and forties, folk revival standards, blues, rockabilly, bluegrass, songs by John Lee Hooker, Hank Snow, Johnny Cash. It's a rich and idiosyncratic selection of American people's music (the sole non-American number is Rimsky-Korsakov's "Flight of the Bumble Bee"). In among the covers are a score of Dylan originals, mingling easily in this motley company. Even The Band couldn't be sure, when Dylan brought them an unfamiliar tune, whether it was one of his own or something retrieved from his vast interior storehouse of popular song.

The Dylan originals on the Basement Tapes boast a startling profusion of memorable hooks and melodies. Song after song features swelling, emotion-choked choruses that are both instantly accessible and impenetrably mysterious. The verses, in contrast, are often wayward, half-told anecdotes, passing impressions, verbal fragments, and nonetheless seductively intriguing for that.

For five years—the first half of his twenties—Dylan had been in the van, racing ahead, sustaining a precarious balance on the crest of a wave. But at the very moment when avant-gardism was sweeping through new cultural corridors, Dylan decided to dismount. The dandified, aggressively modern surface was replaced by a self-consciously unassuming and traditional garb. The giddiness embodied, celebrated, dissected in the songs of the mid-sixties had left him exhausted. He sought safety in a retreat to the countryside that was also a retreat in time, or more precisely, a search for timelessness. The basement sessions have the air of soothing a fever—the fever of incessant innovation

that Dylan had embodied so intensely for a few eventful years. Vindictiveness and righteous indignation have been replaced by a more reflective and less judgmental temper.

> And remember when you're out there
> Tryin' to heal the sick
> That you must always
> First forgive them.

In the Basement Tapes, Dylan is once again writing against the times, though also very much from within them. The songs might even be interpreted as a running critique of the ephemeral delusions of the summer of love. They are delicately balanced between absurdity and grandeur, laughter and terror, brooding fatalism and the lingering taste of freedom.

Inevitably, this private creative moment soon became public. Basement Tape tunes were quickly covered by Peter, Paul and Mary, Manfred Mann, the Byrds, and, of course, The Band themselves on *Music From Big Pink*. More significantly, unlicensed copies of the tapes circulated among ever wider circles. Within two years the Basement Tapes had become the first mass-distributed bootleg. The laid-back, down-home sound proved a trendsetter (by no means always a positive one*). What Dylan and his friends were doing in the privacy of the basement, without purpose or plan, somehow reflected the needs and mood of a broader public mesmerized and discomfited by a series of titanic social clashes.

From the moment the Basement Tapes began seeping out into the world, their musical language struck many as distinctively and self-consciously "American." Robbie Robertson and Garth Hudson both described what they were doing in Woodstock as making "American music." This thesis is at the core of Greil Marcus's study of the Basement

* "Turn up the Eagles, the neighbors are listening . . ."—Steely Dan.

Tapes, *Invisible Republic*, where he argues that the tapes are an invocation and exploration of "the old, weird America" whose idiosyncratic voices had been assembled in Harry Smith's *Anthology*.

While the "Americanness" of the music is something that almost everyone claims to hear, it is exceedingly difficult to define. Specific allusions are few and far between. The cast of characters and the landscape may suggest an "invisible republic," but perhaps less so than in the mid-sixties albums. Marcus locates the Basement Tapes' Americanness not so much in scattered lyric references as in the musical environment and the tone of voice—the flat, wary, masked tone that he associates with America's paradoxical historic development. While his book—easily the most thoughtful meditation on the meaning of Dylan's music—goes a long way to defining this tone, it does remain elusive.

Marcus argues that Smith's *Anthology* is unified by intimations of a "perfectly, absolutely metaphorical America—an arena of rights and obligations, freedom and restraints, crime and punishment, love and death, humor and tragedy, speech and silence . . ."[12] The American "arena" is here so widely drawn that almost any cultural product, from any nation, could qualify for inclusion. As so often in American writing about American popular culture, there is an America-shaped hole at the heart of the analysis. What the songs in Smith's *Anthology* have in common is that they were produced, initially, by and for working-class people, and mainly outside the great urban centers. Why then should Americanness be presumed to be their primary binding agent? Are these songs really any more American than Broadway or Hollywood show tunes? Only, of course, if you redefine America as essentially a rural and small-town entity. And that mythology freezes America, removes it from history, and makes it a plaything for repression and empire.

As Dylan himself was fleetingly aware, "America" is a selective construction; in the end, like other nation-states, the U.S.A. is defined more by the conflict and interaction among its constituent elements than by any lowest common denominator. The critical resort to national identity explains little and obscures the fact that many of the *Anthology* songs more closely resemble the folk art of foreign societies than Holly-

wood or Tin Pan Alley or rock 'n' roll. In the end, Marcus commits the same sin with which he charges Lomax and the popular front: he homogenizes a variegated tradition in pursuit of a political vision. That vision may be darker, more fatalistic than anything Lomax (or indeed Smith) would have endorsed, but it is, no less than theirs, the product of ideology and historical experience.

Nonetheless, there can be no doubt that in the basement Dylan and his colleagues were trying to reestablish a relation to a tradition from which they felt severed. The songs are saturated with memory and loss, though what is being remembered or lamented is usually unspecified and unclear. Marcus argues that:

> . . . every American harbor[s] a sense of national ending . . . a great public event locked up in the silence of the solitary. For any American it is a defining moment; no promise is so precious as in the moment one knows it can never be kept, that it belongs to the past. In 1967, in the basement of Big Pink, this event was in the air . . .[13]

The starting point in these backward-looking songs is a sense of discontinuity. Dylan turns to the past—to those things which are or seem to be permanent—out of a fear and disgust with contemporary society and its succession of passing whims. It's an escape from history into history. For Dylan it was clearly no longer year zero.

> We carried you in our arms
> On Independence Day,
> And now you'd throw us all aside
> And put us on our way.

Opening with a patriotic allusion and a parental grievance, "Tears of Rage" turned "The Times They Are A-Changin' " upside down. Here, generational alienation is presented from the parent's viewpoint:

> Now, I want you to know that while we watched
> You discover there was no one true
> Most ev'rybody really thought
> It was a childish thing to do

The naively disillusioned daughter to whom the song is apparently addressed seems not to be listening. "The Times They Are A-Changin' " is a public rallying call; "Tears of Rage" is a private howl of grief. The power of the chorus—"tears of rage, tears of grief"—lies in part in the sense that no one will hear, that no one can fathom the narrator's tragedy. "Why must I always be the thief?" he asks plaintively. Why am I always cast in this role: the criminal, the accused, the outcast? Marcus notes that Dylan sings on this track with "an ache deep in the chest, a voice thick with care." In "Tears of Rage," love has been forfeited; guilt and betrayal are mutual. "Oh what kind of love is this / which goes from bad to worse?" The song is haunted by the feeling that patriotic solidarity, national identity, intergenerational bonds have all been dissolved, both sometime in the remote past and immediately, in the here and now. There's no popular-front optimism in the America of the Basement Tapes. (Woody Guthrie is a ghost, but only one of many.) There's no faith in progress, democracy or the people. The music certainly evokes an American heritage, but it is a darker one than the sentimental banalities of either the television jingoists or the social patriots.

In the Basement Tapes, America is a hermetic enclosure. It's a construction outside of which Dylan never steps. Having abandoned year zero, Dylan now sees the same grand tragedies, the same small comforts, repeated cyclically. When, a year later, an interviewer mentioned the deaths of Kennedy and King and the war, Dylan responded: "We're talking now about things which have always happened since the beginning of time. The specific name or deed isn't any different than that which has happened previous to this. Progress hasn't contributed anything but changing face and changing situations of money and wealth."[14] This is the conservative, antimodernist Dylan who can be traced back to the folk revival. But the cyclical view is distinctly post-accident. It is also, as laid out by Dylan in the interview, glib. In the songs it has power because it's not a ready-made self-serving philosophy but an incomplete, pain-riddled vision, not a cheap answer, but a more radical posing of the question.

The Basement Tapes are filled with the sound of young men singing like old men. Young men who had prematurely acquired a ruminative

sense of a lost past. Rudderless and adrift in an unstable and violent present, they longed for the enduring, for musical modes and lyric moments beyond fashion and hype. In an age of relentless neologism, the attraction of the Basement Tapes was their timeless quality. However, as Marcus notes, "there is no nostalgia in the basement recordings; they are too cold, pained, or ridiculous for that. The mechanics of time in the music are not comforting."[15] Retreat may be a palliative, but it is not a cure.

The freedom of the Basement Tapes allowed Dylan to indulge his appetite for nonsense to the full (Robertson described the sessions as "reefer run amok"). The playfulness, the casual, improvisatory approach (to music-making and to daily life) can be heard in the dry babble of "Tiny Montgomery:"

> Scratch your dad
> Do that bird
> Suck that pig
> And bring it on home

In the Basement Tapes, Dylan adopts a relaxed attitude toward the grotesque, the bizarre, the inexplicable. The encounter with the surreal inanity of the mundane is more equable, more accepting than before; the jokiness is less manic, less defensive. It's as if the artist found it a relief not to have to be serious about anything at all. He could be chirpily bucolic in "Apple Suckling Tree" and jauntily bathetic in "Please Mrs. Henry" ("I'm down on my knees, and I ain't got a dime"). He mocks his own inertia and impotence, but with a much gentler touch than in *Blonde on Blonde*. In place of that album's strangled urgency, Dylan adopts a laconic humor, a deadpan tone that speaks of resignation and self-preservation in the face of absurdity and betrayal.

Escape and escapism are among the dominant themes of the Basement Tapes, but there is always an ambivalence—about the possibility, desirability or permanence of escape. In the mournful "Goin' to Acapulco," the boys sing the chorus, "goin' to have some fun," like men facing a prison sentence. The verse offers only a wry, self-protective renunciation:

> Now, if someone offers me a joke
> I just say no thanks.
> I try to tell it like it is
> And keep away from pranks.

"You Ain't Goin' Nowhere" appears to celebrate bucolic retreat: "Oh, oh, are we gonna fly / Down in the easy chair!" But on closer inspection it proves to be a curious kind of retreat. Where the chorus hymns an escape that offers both elation and safety, the verses elaborate the paradox of a static journey. In a stark reply to his own "Baby Blue," Dylan sings:

> Pick up your money
> And pack up your tent
> You ain't goin' nowhere

Here, shelter from the storm is found in forging a connection to something deeper and more lasting.

> Strap yourself
> To the tree with roots

It's not surprising that this tune became a key track on the Byrds' influential *Sweetheart of the Rodeo*, the album that first ploughed the country-rock furrow. Still, it remains altogether more arch and discomfiting than the paeans to rural verities that were to become commonplace as the sixties turned into the seventies. In the last verse, the drawled seriocomic delivery moves dreamily from the frustrations of the world conqueror, Genghis Khan, to what sounds like a lazy person's revision of a freedom song:

> We'll climb that hill no matter how steep
> When we come up to it

The sense that there may be something ghastly lurking in the backwoods, a void at the heart of the retreat, fills "Too Much of Nothing." In the plangent chorus, there seems to be a reference to T.S. Eliot's wives

("Say hello to Valerie, say hello to Vivien"). The poet of dread-filled stasis certainly has a place in this song. The easygoing shuffle of the tune contains a subterranean foreboding:

Now, too much of nothing
Can make a man feel ill at ease . . .

As the singer's anxiety levels rise, so do organ and guitar in the background. The song reaches a climax of constrained panic:

Now, it's all been done before,
It's all been written in the book,
But when there's too much of nothing,
Nobody should look.

Dylan is overwhelmed by the totality of the past, the impossibility of the genuinely new. It seems that in stasis there is no peace. (It's also bad for the character: Too much of nothing "can turn a man into a liar" and "just makes a fella mean.") The same sense of unease is given comic treatment in the delightfully indecipherable "The Mighty Quinn, (Quinn The Eskimo)."

Nobody can get no sleep,
There's someone on ev'ryone's toes
But when Quinn the Eskimo gets here,
Ev'rybody's gonna wanna doze

The escape theme is turned around again in "Nothing Was Delivered," where the singer appears to be keeping someone hostage. The lyric could be addressed to anyone who has promised something and failed to deliver it (politicians, drug-dealers, advertisers, Dylan himself). Over the Fats Domino–style piano, the singer flatly, soberly explains that the time for paying debts has come.

Now you must provide some answers
For what you sell has not been received,
And the sooner you come up with them,
The sooner you can leave.

Prices have to be paid, promises redeemed, and no one is going anywhere until they are. As in a number of the Basement Tapes, there is a dramatic contrast between the menacing deadpan verse and the full-throated down-home chorus.

Nothing is better, nothing is best,
Take care of yourself and get plenty of rest.

The longing for peace, community, and simple fellow-feeling was common ground with the summer of love. But Dylan did not share the shallow optimism of the flower children, or their embrace of an ethic of irresponsibility, or the hopes of imminent transformation that in some ways they shared with the angry radicals. He looks at human affairs here from a safe distance, but remains troubled by them. The sense of resignation is never complete in any of these songs. They are the songs of a man at rest, but uneasily so.

The song titled "Clothes Line Saga" on the official *Basement Tapes* album was originally labeled "Answer to Ode." In late August, the Beatles "All You Need Is Love" was knocked off the number-one spot in the charts by a curious song by the unknown Bobbie Gentry, "Ode to Billie Joe." Gentry was born in Choctaw County, Mississippi, not far from Greenwood, and her song opens on a landscape familiar to Dylan:

It was the third of June, another sleepy, dusty Delta day
I was out choppin' cotton and my brother was balin' hay
And at dinner time we stopped and we walked back to the house to eat
And mama hollered at the back door "y'all remember to wipe your feet"

The pointless precision of the date lends the song a documentary feel. In Dylan's reply, he adopts the same technique:

It was January the thirtieth
And everybody was feelin' fine.
The dogs were barking, a neighbor passed,
Mama, of course, she said, "Hi!"

Dylan recognized in the Gentry song the use of the vocal mask that gives nothing away, that only hints at ominous truths. The surface banality stands in piquant contrast to a hidden tragedy. Indeed, the song was a hit partly because it implied that our problems, social and personal, were more troubling than we liked to admit. In Dylan, the banality itself becomes sinister; the mask becomes a trap. The uncanny normalcy paraded before us by the narrator is straight out of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*—accurate in all details, yet utterly lifeless.

In Gentry's song, the secret sore weeping under the surface of daily routine is that "Billy Joe Mcallister jumped off the Tallahatchie bridge." The song only hints at why this happened and how the narrator was involved (an unwanted pregnancy is the usual interpretation). It's a private tragedy, a hidden disgrace. In Dylan's reply, the "secret" that troubles the placid surface of daily routine is a highly public one:

> "Have you heard the news?" he said, with a grin,
> "The Vice-President's gone mad!"
> "Where?" "Downtown." "When?" "Last night."
> "Hmm, say, that's too bad!"
> "Well, there's nothin' we can do about it," said the neighbor,
> "It's just somethin' we're gonna have to forget."
> "Yes, I guess so," said Ma,
> Then she asked me if the clothes was still wet.

The vice president in 1967 was Hubert Humphrey, the Minnesota politician whose liberal credentials had been eroded by his role in the exclusion of the MFDP at Atlantic City, and by his support for the Vietnam War. It's inconceivable that Dylan did not have him in mind. In addition, he's one of Dylan's generic authority figures, like the "blind commissioner," the "drunken politicians" and the senators who pop up in the mid-sixties songs; only now his antics elicit no disbelief. There is no struggle against futility. And that is the problem. In "Blowin' in the Wind," Dylan asked: "How can a man turn his head and pretend that he just doesn't see?" In "Clothes Line Saga," he tells a tale of those who see and hear but still turn away, their senses blighted by the continuum of normalcy. The song meanders to a close by way of a line that is the antithesis of every sentiment expressed by Dylan since he'd first picked up a guitar: "Well, I just do what I'm told." At which point, the singer returns to the family house and shuts "all the doors."

It was a bleak social vision against the fevered backdrop of the summer of '67. In this chilling tale of imperturbable American complacency, and in his intuitive sense that most Americans remained disengaged from the unfolding horrors of the age, Dylan proved more acutely aware of the real challenges facing the insurgents than many of those leading the charge. In "Clothes Line Saga", America escapes behind a closed door, and responds to the madness and betrayals of public life by shutting them out, citing impotence and cultivating amnesia.

Among the more self-conscious pieces of Americana on the tapes is "Down In the Flood," whose starting point is the blues response to the Mississippi's menacing habit of periodically breaching its banks. The harrowing flood of 1927, which displaced hundreds of thousands of African Americans, inspired three songs Dylan knew well: Bessie Smith's "Backwater Blues," Blind Lemon Jefferson's "Rising High Water Blues," and Charley Patton's "High Water Everywhere." In all of them, the singer confronts a force of nature, a community is overwhelmed. "Down in the Flood"'s invocation of a collective tragedy takes us back to Dylan's earliest work, not least his songs about the bomb. But the body of the song is preoccupied with unnamed individuals who seem to be in dispute about the desirability, practicality, and fairness of making a bid to escape the rising waters. As in many of the Basement Tapes, the mythic is offset by the anti-mythic. In the enigmatic chorus only one fact is salient: events and choices are irrevocable.

> Oh mama, ain't you gonna miss your best friend now?
> Yes, you're gonna have to find yourself
> Another best friend, somehow.

For all their jokiness and deliberate inconsequence, the Basement Tapes are permeated by a sense that loss is real, that not "everything can be replaced," "life is brief," "lost time is not found again."

"Take care of all your memories"
Said my friend, Mick
"For you cannot relive them . . ."

In the past, Dylan had spoken glibly about his own mortality, as a kind of justification for doing his own thing. The accident and the violent flux of the times seem to have shifted his mood. In the Basement Tapes, there's an echoing sorrow, a shrouded intensity, that feels like the brooding underside of all the extreme manifestations of the era.

In the soaring chorus of "This Wheel's On Fire," the out-of-control driver races toward his doom in an ecstasy of rock 'n' roll. As he detaches himself from the careening immediacy of the violent present, he reaches into the past. Each verse begins and ends with the phrase, "If your memory serves you well." But what is being summoned to memory? Only the plan to meet again, fragments of past interaction, a few bright, palpable, inexplicable details ("I was goin' to confiscate your lace / and wrap it up in a sailor's knot / and hide it in your case") flashing out from a general murkiness.

And after ev'ry plan had failed
And there was nothing more to tell,
You knew that we would meet again,
If your mem'ry served you well.

It was little more than a year since the same artist had insisted "please don't let on that you knew me when." The man who was so eager to outgrow the past, who sloughed off identities and relationships with a change in the season, and who had celebrated that freedom in song, is now prophetically intoning: "you knew that we would meet again"—and it doesn't matter whether that's in the here or the hereafter. The past surrounds us, clings to us, but we only see it and know it when it's too late.

The same frail balance between the yearning for freedom and a sense of predestined tragedy swells up inside "I Shall Be Released," the fragmentary Basement Tape destined to become a global standard. Repeated renditions have made the song robustly anthemic, but in its original incarnation it's sung by Dylan and Richard Manuel with a tremulous frailty, as if the singing were an effort to keep fear and exhaustion at bay. It's a song of simplicity and beauty that manages to be immensely evocative in its short span. Somehow its sheer sketchiness conjures up the poignancy of the desire for release and the immutable reality of confinement. It echoes with anonymous injustices committed through eons. While Dylan brings us close to the nameless, faceless narrator, at the same time he wraps this immediacy in a longer view, almost a cyclical view of freedom and incarceration that seems to take in the course of a whole lifetime. That reenforces the sense here, as elsewhere in the Basement Tapes, that the yearning for freedom is also a yearning for oblivion, for death, for immersion in the setting sun.

I see my light come shining
From the west unto the east.
Any day now, any day now,
I shall be released.

The first person narrator here speaks from a prison cell. Prison—and more broadly the cruelty of the criminal justice system—is a leitmotif in Dylan's work, from "The Ballad of Donald White," through "The Walls of Red Wing," "Hattie Carroll," "Percy's Song" ("He ain't no criminal / And his crime it is none, / What happened to him / Could happen to anyone"), "Seven Curses," "Chimes of Freedom," "Bob Dylan's 115th Dream," "Absolutely Sweet Marie," and beyond. On one level, "I Shall Be Released" is a prisoner's lament. Certainly, many who've found themselves incarcerated have heard it and sung it that way.* But prison here is also, of course, a metaphor—for an oppressive social order or corporeal life itself. It was precisely this kind of flexibility of metaphor than made it possible to turn gospel songs into freedom songs. But here Dylan has taken the hunger for deliverance that fills

* "I Shall Be Released" served as an anthem for the campaigns to free the Birmingham Six, Guildford Four, and other victims of miscarriages of justice in Britain in the eighties.

both the gospels and the freedom songs and detached it from religious or political teleology.

They say ev'ry man needs protection,
They say ev'ry man must fall.

We are all weak and fallible; we all aspire to some greater freedom, some less oppressive daily existence. In the third and final verse, the prisoner discovers that in his loneliness he is not alone:

Standing next to me in this lonely crowd,
Is a man who swears he's not to blame.
All day long I hear him shout so loud,
Crying out that he was framed.*

When David Riesman's sociological study of the modern American character, *The Lonely Crowd*, appeared in 1950 it became a bestseller and put its author on the cover of *Time* magazine. The phrase *the lonely crowd* was, in fact, invented by the publishers, and does not appear in the book, but its paradox captured the growing unease about the fate of the individual in a mass society. For Dylan's purposes, all that mattered was the title, not the book. The members of the "lonely crowd" are locked up in individual cells, and yet they share the same grievances and the same aspirations, and live in the same prison. The wistful reaching for the ineffable that animated "Blowin' in the Wind" is very much at the core of "I Shall Be Released," as in other Basement Tapes, but it's been inverted. The indefinitely hopeful has given way to the indefinitely sorrowful. The historical opportunity that could be plucked out of the wind has been spent, and is now a thing of the past—haunting the present. In his earlier guises, Dylan had made ancient modes (folk, blues)

* The lyric sung by Dylan and Manuel on the Basement Tapes is different:

Now yonder stands with me in this lonely crowd
A man who swears he's not to blame
All day long I hear his voice shouting so loud
Crying out that he was framed

sound contemporary; here he made contemporary feelings and experiences sound ancient.