

**Note:** *These are selected excerpts from my 25-page senior paper entitled “She’s a Big Girl Now: Bob Dylan’s Blood on the Tracks and My Pathetic Sex Life” written in the spring of 2008. These are the bits that are specifically about the album, rather than my embarrassing relationships, because no one wants to read that. -A.P.*

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My love affair with *Blood on the Tracks* started at a relatively late point in my Bob career. I’d been listening to *Bringing it all Back Home*, *Highway 61 Revisited* and *Blonde on Blonde*, the so-called golden triumvirate of his early career, since the age of twelve. My early love of 60’s pop led me to those. I devoured the “flashing images” he piled on syrup-thick. The “foggy ruins of time” and the “haunted, frightened trees” of the last verse of “Mr. Tambourine Man,” particularly, would knock me flat every time for reasons I could never quite pinpoint, which was perfect. But, though I’d read some outrageously laudatory things about it, *Tracks* never quite appealed to my Kerouac-crazy teenage sensibilities. It seemed more grown-up. The cover was a hazy maroon, with a soft-focus drawing of an older looking Dylan in aviators. He didn’t look as wild and unhinged as on the cover photo for *Blonde on Blonde*, where he was most likely under the simultaneous influence of multiple exotic drugs. So I left it until my freshman year of college, in an effort to alleviate friendless boredom in my Pitt dorm room, to really get acquainted, and annoy my first girlfriend, with last piece in the major Dylan canon.

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Bob Dylan is, above all, guarded. He's been intensely private and is notoriously short tempered with anything he considers an encroachment. How weird, then, that he would make *Blood on the Tracks*, one of the most soul-scratching, bitterly intimate things ever recorded. The album is an anomaly in his catalog because it simply doesn't make any sense. Here's the scruffy little guy who wrote most of the truly great acid-trip songs of the sixties, who's every word and move were endlessly speculated upon by hundreds, maybe even thousands, of obsessed rubberneckers, and he's giving them exactly what they want. The exact kind of access he'd maintained, through songs like "Ballad of a Thin Man" and "Visions of Johanna," that they would never receive. When he was called out on this he responded first by changing much of the album, and then denying the whole thing.

Dylan's biography is too shrouded to go into much here, but this is the basic deal: In 1974, after the massive tour for *Planet Waves*, his first in eight years, Dylan's troubled marriage to his wife Sara collapsed completely. Biographer Clinton Heylin speaks of the, "very obvious pain that comes through in the songs – the pain of separation from a wife for whom he clearly still carried a torch." (Heylin 371) But he had also started a new relationship with a much younger woman. It was in this contradictory situation in which he wrote the songs, in a flimsy notebook, that would form *Blood on the Tracks*.

Much has been made of The Notebook. Not many have actually seen it, but according to the accounts of various people who may or may not have been close to Dylan at the time, it contains alternate versions of lyrics and various ripped and scratched out pages containing who knows what kind of illuminating treasures. But, alas, we mere mortals have only the final

versions of the songs to go on. I've often wondered why, if the accounts are true, that Dylan found it necessary to destroy his previous drafts. Was it because he was wary of *The Notebook* falling into the wrong hands? After all, crazies like notorious Dylanologist A.J. Weberman had already been caught routing through his garbage several times. Then again it may have just been standard writer's frustration that caused him to rip out those sanctified pages, ball them up, and throw them in the trash bin of oblivion.

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Bob Dylan, before writing the songs for *Blood on the Tracks*, sought out lessons from a New York art teacher named Norman Reaben. He later claimed this teacher changed completely the way he thought about the lyric-writing process. This transformation shows in the way that Dylan combined the plainspoken lyrics from his early seventies albums with the stark images from his earlier work. Consider these lines from "You're Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go":

*Dragon clouds so high above  
I've only known careless love,  
It's always hit me from below.  
This time around it's more correct  
Right on target, so direct,  
You're gonna make me lonesome when you go.*

Instead of concentrating on unusual phrasing, like in, say, "Desolation Row," he uses his word juxtapositions (in this case, "dragon clouds") to describe a single element in the setting. The "flashing images" aren't the point, the story and the emotions are the point. But at the same time there is a much stronger sense of visualization, of actually seeing the surroundings of the characters in the songs. As opposed to the lyrics on his previous album, *Planet Waves*, which contained little more than clunkers

like this:

*Put your body next to mine  
And keep me company,  
There is plenty of room for all,  
So please don't elbow me*

It's tempting to consider songs like these, nestled between the two eras of his most lauded music, as lazy. But with hindsight it's clear that Bob was working something out. It's common knowledge among Bobheads that the years 1969-73 were ones of unusual domestic bliss for Dylan. On the three proper albums from this period, *Nashville Skyline*, *New Morning*, and *Planet Waves*, he's clearly trying to find a way to reconcile his apparently new-found human emotions with his earlier, bitter, surrealist images. Every once in a while, throwback songs like *New Morning*'s "Day of the Locusts" would pop up. But lyrics like "the locusts sang their high whining trill," would sound somehow more empty next to the pretty yet juvenile sentiments of "If Not for You" or "On a Night Like This."

But Bob was creaking closer, experimenting with meter and order.

"Forever Young," from *Planet Waves*, is an exercise in list compiling – in putting things in just the right place to have just the right effect. Even if the words themselves are empty, the sounds of those words together have an effect, a feeling of intangible *rightness*, that say what the words themselves fail to:

*May your hands always be busy,  
May your feet always be swift,  
May you have a strong foundation  
When the winds of changes shift.  
May your heart always be joyful,  
May your song always be sung,  
May you stay forever young,*

*Forever young, forever young,  
May you stay forever young.*

Christopher Ricks, in his exhaustive analysis *Dylan's Visions of Sin*, said of the song: "True, the song is of the simplest. But then these effects are these themselves of the simplest. Inspired, they are a matter of order, of ordering things right." (Ricks 451)

Setting off running from these experiments, Dylan used Raeben's teachings and began to use visual art as an influence in his writing. Not only that, but he began thinking about the whole world differently. In 1978, four years after this transformation, he said:

*I just dropped in to see him [Raeben] one day and ended up staying there for two months... he didn't teach you how to paint so much. He didn't teach you how to draw. He didn't teach you any of those things. He taught you [about] putting your head and your mind and your eye together – to make you get down visually to something which is actual... He looked into you and told you what you were... Needless to say it changed me. I went home after that and my wife never did understand me ever since that day. That's when our marriage started breaking up. She never knew what I was talking about, what I was thinking about, and I couldn't possibly explain it. (Heylin 368)*

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In *Don't Look Back*, D.A. Pennebaker's film about Dylan's 1965 British tour, Bob can be seen spending a lot of time in his hotel room with folk singer Joan Baez, with whom he'd been carrying on a relationship. This was around the time that *Bringing it All Back Home* came out, which

contained his first forays into electric arrangements and, more importantly, contained no direct protest songs (a case can be made for “It’s Alright Ma, I’m Only Bleeding” but that’s a whole other, much longer conversation). They’re very cold toward each other through most of the film, and reports of friends of the time suggest that she was upset that he hadn’t set her up to open his concerts, as she had done for him two years before in the U.S., where she was then a star and he was still relatively unknown. But I always imagined it was more than that. Baez was, and still is, a protest singer. When she’s mentioned, most people’s first image of her is the famous footage of her leading an entire quad’s worth of students through a verse of “We Shall Overcome” on the campus of UC Berkeley during the early 60’s free speech/civil rights protests. Dylan, for his part, was done with all of that. Around this time his previous protest songs, what he called “finger pointing’ songs,” were beginning to become tiresome to him. He said in 1964:

*I used to write songs, like I’d say, “Yeah, what’s bad, pick something bad, like segregation, okay here we go” and I’d pick one of the thousand million little points I can pick and explode it, some of them which I didn’t know about. I wrote a song about Emmett Till, which in all honesty was a bullshit song... I realize now that my reasons and motives behind it were phoney. I didn’t have to write it. (Heylin 142)*

Dylan was, at the same time, trashing and transcending Baez’s bread and butter. By late 1964 he was refusing to attend civil rights protests with her, fearing he’d be further pigeonholed by the press. I imagined their arguments during that 1965 tour, in private, away from the cameras, were something like:

Dylan: Why don’t you just do something *different*?

Baez: What do you mean different?

D: I just mean, you could, like sing about something other than

the usual; your music could be a little less boring. I don't know.

B: Are you saying I'm boring?

D: Oh, god.

Their relationship, of course, ended.

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I put away *Blood on the Tracks* for a while after that. Partly because of the strong association with Sandy, but mostly because I'd gotten everything out of it that I thought I could. You can only get so far living your life through someone else's words, and despite his wealth of ire and indignation and sublime revelation, the Bob Dylan of *Blood on the Tracks* was just as human as I was. He didn't know any real, true secrets. Hell, by most accounts his wife left him because of repeated infidelity, not because of a mysterious change of perception brought on by some hippie art teacher. If we had anything in common it was a mind-blowing potential for denial, for seeing things as we wanted and bending them to our own needs and desires – for cloaking our inability to look real life straight in the face in antiquated notions of art, intent, and perception.

They say albums mean different things to you as you grow older; that, as you mature, subtleties will either emerge or disappear. That's how I see *Blood on the Tracks* now – as a testament to one man's unwillingness to face the truth. Language I once thought was dense and hazy and gloriously complicated now seems cozy and simple – a defense mechanism. Because in the end Dylan held something back. For all the knives in the back and the soldiers leaving at dawn, it didn't add up to a real picture. There were still secret demons to be excised behind those frilly, poetic curtains. He was, in a word, dishonest.

I still pick up *Blood on the Tracks* every now and then. But when I

throw it on the turntable I get a bit of a turn in my stomach, not unlike the feeling I got during my few subsequent encounters with Sandy, and the one I get now whenever she sends me an email or I hear her name mentioned in conversation. It's not so much a feeling of pain or of regret. It's more like a twisted nostalgia for a time when I believed that songs held all the answers – that there was a certain “way things were” that a few lucky poets had managed to decode. I usually enjoy it though; I kick back with headphones on the couch and dream of Dylan in his white face paint belting “Tangled Up in Blue” to a room full of middle-class intellectuals in high-heels, and not to his wife. I dream of Sandy in her big white sunglasses throwing M&M's out my car window at anti-abortion protesters and not saying a word to me all day. I dream, without a hint of absurdity, of when things were simple.