

## POP/JAZZ; A Wiser Voice Blowin' In the Autumn Wind

By JON PARELES SEPT. 28, 1997

BOB DYLAN CAN BARELY sit still. He pulls at his curly hair, fidgets with his black T-shirt, constantly shifts position on a comfortable couch. Sitting in his publicist's oceanside hotel suite for a rare interview, the songwriter who transformed rock is in a jovial mood. He's wearing two-tone patent-leather shoes, there's a twinkle in his blue eyes, and he smiles easily and often.

Dylan is proud of his new album, "Time Out of Mind," and rightfully so. The album, to be released on Tuesday, is far and away his best sustained work since the mid-1970's; it reaches the exalted level of "Blood on the Tracks." His new songs -- his first set of them since 1990 -- are embittered, heartsick and weary: "When you think that you've lost everything, you find out you can always lose a little more," he sings in a rasping voice whose familiar cracks have become potholes. **It's the voice of a 56-year-old man who's not hiding any of his bruises. Yet the character who runs through all the songs on the album seems nothing like the relaxed, buoyant songwriter who's talking about them. Asked who the woman was who broke his heart in song after song, he laughs and asks, "Which one? Which song?"**

**"That's just the nature of my personality," he says. "I can be jubilant one moment and pensive the next, and a cloud could go by and make that happen. I'm inconsistent, even to myself."**

During a recording career that now spans 35 years, Dylan has been a cornucopia of inconsistency. Visionary and crank, innovator and conservator, irritant and stimulant, skeptic and proselytizer, rebel and sellout, pathfinder

and lost patrol: Dylan has been all of those things, and many more. He may well be the most restless figure in rock history, constitutionally incapable of doing the same thing twice. Apparently he meant it when he sang, in 1965, that artists "don't look back." "Time Out of Mind" is a typical Dylan album only because it eludes expectations.

In the 1960's, Dylan taught folk singers how to transcend the topical, then taught rock songwriters how to think about something more than the next romance. Casually, he created whole genres: folk rock, country rock and what's now called Americana. Every facet of his 1960's music has been imitated, lately by his son Jakob's band, the Wallflowers. Through the 1970's and 1980's, Dylan followed more wayward, less reliable inspirations. He created the rock-and-roll caravan called Rolling Thunder. He embraced born-again Christianity and then returned to Judaism. He toured with the Grateful Dead and Tom Petty's Heartbreakers, and he sold his anthem "The Times They Are a-Changin' " so it could be used in an accounting firm's commercial.

At first deliberately, and even after he repudiated the role, he became a voice for the baby-boomer generation by singing what was on his mind. Just ahead of many of his listeners, he moved from political fervor and apocalyptic visions to marriage and divorce, from searching for faith to grumbling at the nightly news. Since his bitter divorce from the former Sara Lowndes in the late 1970's, which left her with custody of her five children, including the four they had had together, he has had a home in Malibu, Calif., and kept his private life private. But his reactions to people, ideas and the world have resounded in his songs.

Year in and year out, almost constantly since 1988, Dylan has hit the road. He has become an itinerant musician like the bluesmen and hillbilly troubadours who were his musical education, although his endless tour includes dates like the 1993 inaugural celebration for Bill Clinton and a scheduled show yesterday in Bologna, Italy, before the Pope. "Night or day, it doesn't matter where I go anymore, I just go," he sings in "Can't Wait."

"A lot of people don't like the road," he says, "but it's as natural to me as breathing. I do it because I'm driven to do it, and I either hate it or love it. I'm mortified to be on the stage, but then again, it's the only place where I'm happy. It's the only place you can be who you want to be. You can't be who you want to be in daily life. I don't care who you are, you're going to be disappointed in daily life. But the cure-all for all that is to get on the stage, and that's why performers

do it. But in saying that, I don't want to put on the mask of celebrity. I'd rather just do my work and see it as a trade."

During the 1990's, touring with his best group since he was backed by the Band, Dylan has garnered a new audience. His shows a decade ago, often yelled or sung in a monotone, exasperated even longtime fans. But at Dylan concerts lately, collegiate types in the tie-dyed shirts of Deadheads have joined balding baby-boomer loyalists. Audiences respond to the blues and country roots of his band and to Dylan's mercurial, improvisatory side, knowing he sings his songs differently at every show.

"I like those people who come to see me now," Dylan says. "They're not aware of my early days, but I'm glad of that. It lifts that burden of responsibility, of having to play everything exactly like it was on some certain record. I can't do that. Which way the wind is blowing, they're going to come out different every time, but the intent is going to be the same.

"I've got to know that I'm singing something with truth to it. My songs are different than anybody else's songs. Other artists can get by on their voices and their style, but my songs speak volumes, and all I have to do is lay them down correctly, lyrically, and they'll do what they need to do."

DYLAN HAS NOT LACKED FOR recognition in the 90's. He has collected a lifetime achievement Grammy Award, was named a Commandeur dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in France and will collect a Kennedy Center Honors award in December. Until the 90's, there was one thing that Dylan had not been: silent. Songs had always poured out of him: great, good, indifferent and awful songs, but in a steady stream. That changed after his mediocre 1990 album, "Under the Red Sky." He went on performing older songs while releasing two albums of traditional folk and blues material, "Good as I Been to You" and "World Gone Wrong," played solo like an early-1960's Greenwich Village folkie. "Dignity," the one new song he released after "Red Sky," was an outtake from the 1989 album "Oh Mercy."

What made him quit recording new songs? "Disillusion," he says. "Disillusion with the whole process of it. I started out when you could go in the studio and record your songs and leave. I don't remember when that changed. But I found myself spending more and more time in the studio doing less and less. There wasn't any gratification in it, really. I was writing the songs, because that's what I do anyway. And then I had my stage band, so I figured, well, I'll

write them and I'll play them when I play them. It's not like we lack any songs to play on a stage."

Longtime fans fretted that Dylan wasn't introducing new songs in concert. The reason, he says, was simple: "I don't like to bring out new material because of the bootleg situation." Yet backstage and at sound checks, extraordinary new songs were taking shape.

"Time Out of Mind" (Columbia) is bleak and riveting. Its 11 songs are about the loneliness, anger and desolation of lost love, and about looming mortality. (The album was recorded before Dylan was hospitalized over the summer with a life-threatening heart infection.) "I've been walking through the middle of nowhere, trying to get to heaven before they close the door," Dylan sings. He has rarely sounded optimistic; spite and self-righteous contempt animate many of his best songs. But "Time Out of Mind" provides fewer comforts than ever.

"Environment affects me a great deal," Dylan says. "A lot of the songs were written after the sun went down. And I like storms, I like to stay up during a storm. I get very meditative sometimes, and this one phrase was going through my head: 'Work while the day lasts, because the night of death cometh when no man can work.' I don't recall where I heard it. I like preaching, I hear a lot of preaching, and I probably just heard it somewhere. Maybe it's in Psalms, it beats me. But it wouldn't let me go. I was, like, what does that phrase mean? But it was at the forefront of my mind, for a long period of time, and I think a lot of that is instilled into this record."

Many of the songs echo the chord structures of 1960's classics like "Ballad of a Thin Man" and "Just Like a Woman," but with the youthful cockiness of those sessions turned inside out. The producer Daniel Lanois (who has also worked with U2, Peter Gabriel and Emmylou Harris) makes the band sound as if it is coalescing on the spot. Instruments enter one by one, feeling their way into the tunes as if they're sneaking into a speak-easy jam session.

Yet the impromptu, unsettled sound is a very deliberate choice. "I wasn't interested in making a record that took the songs and made them into a contemporary setting," Dylan says. "My music, my songs, they have very little to do with technology. They either work or they don't work. Daniel and I made that record 'Oh Mercy' a while back, and that was pretty good at the time. But these songs, I felt, were more all-encompassing. They were more filled with the dread realities of life."

"Many of my records are more or less blueprints for the songs. This time, I didn't want blueprints, I wanted the real thing. When the songs are done right they're done right, and that's it. They're written in stone when they're done right."

Instead of constructing the music layer by layer, Dylan worked through the songs with his musicians, including the Tex-Mex electric-organ legend Augie Meyers, the guitarist Duke Robillard and the linchpin of Dylan's touring band, Tony Garnier on bass. Nearly everything on the album, including vocals, was recorded live in the studio.

"We all know what the thing should sound like. We're just getting further and further away from it," Dylan says. "I wanted something that goes through the technology and comes out the other end before the technology knows what it's doing."

The purposely unpolished music -- clattering rockabilly drums and ricocheting guitars in "Cold Irons Bound," loping blues with raw guitar jabs in "Til I Fell in Love With You," slinky electric piano over a reggae backbeat in "Love Sick," tentative gospel in "Tryin' to Get to Heaven" -- has a haunted, precarious tone that connects it to the most harrowing depths of the blues.

The blues has always been a Dylan touchstone, for both words and music. In many ways, his groundbreaking 1960's songs were transmuted blues, from the surreal juxtapositions of the lyrics to the rough-hewn vocals to the blues bands he hired when he plugged in. Throughout "Time Out of Mind," Dylan quotes hoary blues lines like "Going down the road feeling bad." And in his maturity, he is closer than ever to the clear-eyed fatalism of classic blues. In song after song, the singer walks down dark, empty roads, muttering accusations at a woman who left him; he's still wishing she would come back and wondering, in one song, whether he would kiss her or kill her if she did.

WHEN HE'S NOT brooding over shattered romance, he's feeling his age and contemplating death. In the 17-minute "Highlands," he watches young people drinking and dancing, and his voice grows hollow with sadness: "I'd trade places with any of 'em in a minute if I could."

"I can't help those feelings," he says. "I'm not going to try to make a fake Pollyanna view. Why would I even want to? And I'm not going to deny them just because they might be a little dismal to look at. I try to let it speak for itself, but I'm not emotionally involved in it. I can deliver the message. I learned a while

ago not to get personally involved, because if you're personally involved you're going to go over the top."

Watching his son Jakob turn into a multimillion-selling hit maker, Dylan tempers his pride with caution. "He's had an amazing amount of success in a short time," Dylan says. "I just don't want to see his heart get broken in this business, that's all."

For Dylan, the songs he grew up on continue to provide the models, and the yardstick, for his own music; "Good as I Been to You" and "World Gone Wrong" only strengthened the connection. "My songs come out of folk music," he says. "I love that whole pantheon. To me there's no difference between Muddy Waters and Bill Monroe." Going through the tracks on "Time Out of Mind," he points out what he borrowed: among other things, a jug-band guitar line in "Not Dark Yet," an inverted rockabilly lick in "Dirt Road Blues," and a riff and a country-blues lilt from Charley Patton in "Highlands."

"There's a lot of clever people around who write songs," Dylan says. "My songs, what makes them different is that there's a foundation to them. That's why they're still around, that's why my songs are still being performed. It's not because they're such great songs. They don't fall into the commercial category. They're not written to be performed by other people. But they're standing on a strong foundation, and subliminally that's what people are hearing."

"Those old songs are my lexicon and my prayer book," he adds. "All my beliefs come out of those old songs, literally, anything from 'Let Me Rest on That Peaceful Mountain' to 'Keep on the Sunny Side.' You can find all my philosophy in those old songs. I believe in a God of time and space, but if people ask me about that, my impulse is to point them back toward those songs. I believe in Hank Williams singing 'I Saw the Light.' I've seen the light, too." Dylan says he now subscribes to no organized religion.

While Dylan idolized the likes of Mississippi John Hurt and Jimmy Rodgers in the 1960's, he has now achieved their kind of gravity himself. If anything, he sounds more woeful. The voice of a generation has become a voice of experience, telling us that experience hasn't taught him anything he needs. Explicitly or not, the blues and folk masters offered their own survival as reassurance. But on "Time Out of Mind," Dylan refuses listeners that solace; he often sounds as if he would welcome death. "It's not dark yet, but it's getting there," he sings, unguarded and matter-of-fact.

"I've written some songs that I look at, and they just give me a sense of awe," Dylan says. "Stuff like, 'It's Alright, Ma,' just the alliteration in that blows me away. And I can also look back and know where I was tricky and where I was really saying something that just happened to have a spark of poetry to it.

"But when you get beyond a certain year, after you go on for a certain number of years, you realize, hey, life is kind of short anyway. And you might as well say the way you feel."

### A Dylan Library

Bob Dylan's genius blazed steadily for most of the 1960's and has reignited sporadically ever since. Here is a selective guide to the best of more than three dozen albums.

### ESSENTIAL

"Another Side of Bob Dylan" (1964) Dylan repudiated protest songs and anatomized romantic strife, veering from affection to bile.

"Bringing It All Back Home" (1965) With a rock band for half the album, playing acoustic guitar for the rest, Dylan became an oracle, forging indelible images of an underground credo: defiance, subversion, idealism and love.

"Highway 61 Revisited" (1965) Songs that changed rock history -- funny, vicious, tender and Biblical -- with an organ-and-guitar collusion that's still being imitated.

"Blonde on Blonde" (1966) Jaded but buzzing, Dylan stretched folk-rock all the way from slapstick to tragedy.

"The Basement Tapes" (Recorded with the Band in 1967-68, released 1975) Mysterious and raunchy, the songs reimagined American roots, then guffawed.

"John Wesley Harding" (1968) Short, calm, enigmatic songs that revealed themselves as quiet parables.

"Blood on the Tracks" (1975) Dylan sang tellingly about duplicity, wanderlust and loneliness as he pondered his crumbling marriage.

### WORTHWHILE

"The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan" (1963) Dylan's second album pushed protest songs beyond reportage, gave love songs an edge and unleashed his free-associative humor.

"The Times They Are a-Changin' " (1964) Taking his role as king of the protest singers seriously, Dylan mixed generational anthems with hectoring.

"Oh Mercy" (1989) Dylan railed at a conscienceless world as Daniel Lanois's