

New Writing on Bob Dylan: Chris Gregory, *Determined To Stand*

This year of grace 2021 is also the year of Bob Dylan's 80th birthday. The occasion is being marked with the appearance of numerous books, new or updated, on the great songwriter, and over the year I shall be noting some of them on this blog, beginning with the volume by Chris Gregory which I examine below.

Chris Gregory, *Determined to Stand: The Reinvention of Bob Dylan*, London: Plotted Plain Press, 2021, 336 pp., ISBN 978-0-955-7512-1-9

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The addition to Dylan lore that Chris Gregory offers us is nothing if not ambitious. Its title reflects something of that ambition: it is a quotation not from a song, but from a 1997 *Newsweek* interview in which Dylan declared: 'I'm determined to stand ... I've got to go out and play these songs. That's just what I must do' (42-43). The resulting title has an air of resilience and 'Restless Farewell'-type defiance about it, which feels appropriate too for the subtitle, 'The Reinvention of Bob Dylan'. For Gregory, 'the extent of the cultural impact of Bob Dylan's work is almost impossible to measure' (6), while Dylan as artist 'remains so much more than just a « popular entertainer »' (15), and the focus of his book implies that such statements are as valid for the later as for the earlier work.

The 'reinvention' referred to concerns the period from 1997 to the present day, in other words the creative renaissance which is generally seen as first manifesting itself with the release of *Time Out Of Mind*. The author takes this period as a whole as constituting the 'later Dylan', and proposes a reading of that period that throws light on it by alternating two different types of text. The first type takes the form of close textual analysis of, if I mistake not, every single song from the period's six albums of originals (*Time Out Of Mind*, *Love and Theft*, *Modern Times*, *Together Through Life*, *Tempest* and 2020's *Rough and Rowdy Ways*), supplemented by a number of non-album songs ('Things Have Changed', 'Cross the Green Mountain', etc). The second text type consists of concert narrations from what until recently we knew as the Never Ending Tour: Gregory sets the scene for a given concert and, typically, then offers a detailed appraisal of a particular song (famous or otherwise) performed within it. Structurally, the book thus alternates between lyric analyses and concert recollections.

The song analyses are arranged not chronologically but thematically, with songs juxtaposed according to their subject-matter (dream narratives, murder ballads ...), rather than which album they are on. They consist of a mixture of source information and textual exegesis. The author is commendably careful not to identify the songs' narrators with Dylan himself, correctly reading them as invented characters - and by no means always sympathetic or reliable. Thus, following Michael Gray's pioneering lead from years ago, Gregory locates these songs (albeit he does not actually use the term) in the genre of the *dramatic monologue*, à la Robert Browning. For certain songs ('Workingman's Blues #2', 'Beyond the Horizon' ...), lyric variants are important, and the analyses take due account of such variants, be it in live performance, in released outtake versions or found on the official website (though the Christopher Ricks variorum edition has not been used).

A substantial part of many of the analyses is taken up with the identification of sources, musical, biblical or literary. Alongside Robert Johnson and Hank Williams, Shakespeare and Keats are there, and Edgar Allan Poe, seen as 'the master storyteller of American darkness'

(46), gets frequent mention, notably for his use of the unreliable narrator. This is the aspect of the book probably most useful to students of Dylan. Intertextuality is a later Dylan watchword: as Gregory states, 'the fact that his [later] songs were partly constructed of quotations from and references to other songs, works of literature and even obscure informational texts [has] become common knowledge' (185), and to have the source information at one's fingertips can only improve our appreciation of songs like 'Tweedle Dee & Tweedle Dum', 'Highlands' or of course the recent 'Murder Most Foul' (which song, as is only fitting, gets the book's longest analysis).

The concert sections interspersed with the analytic parts range from the well-known (the 1995 Sinatra birthday event, the papal gig in 1997) to what might seem the randomly selected (indeed, the book opens with 11 March 1995 in Prague and homes in on that night's 'Man in the Long Black Coat' – not the most obvious of choices).

There is much to be harvested from Chris Gregory's study. The live accounts are richly atmospheric, and the song analyses seek (and attain) a comprehensiveness not always to be found in Dylan studies. I do, however, feel that while the book has considerable potential as a research aid, its effectiveness in practice is somewhat limited by the organisation the author has chosen. The book's structure privileges what might be called the 'poetically effective' over considerations of practical utility. There is a (not always reliable) index, but no subheadings or detailed chapter breakdowns, and with the songs not being arranged by album navigation is not always easy. Cavils apart, however, Chris Gregory is to be praised for paying so much detailed attention to the later Dylan, and for the freshness and sheer interest of the interpretations that he offers, in a book that needed writing.