

BEYOND HERE LIES ... NOTHING? - some impressions of Bob Dylan's album TOGETHER THROUGH LIFE

Christopher Rollason, Metz, France (rollason54@gmail.com) – June 2009

If nothing else, TOGETHER THROUGH LIFE has produced a new crop of firsts for Bob Dylan. It has become his first-ever album to reach number one in both the US and the UK, and has made him the oldest living artist ever to top the British album chart (a feat he had already achieved in the US with MODERN TIMES), and, again in Britain, the artist distinguished, if that is the word, by the longest time-gap between successive number one albums. Indeed, probably only fact-file obsessives will have known that prior to this album Dylan had had four number ones in his home country and/but six totally different chart-toppers across the Atlantic. The new album's success does, then, suggest there must be a consensus in the air about something.

However, in the British case further examination reveals that Dylan's three previous number ones were NASHVILLE SKYLINE in 1969 and SELF PORTRAIT and NEW MORNING in 1970 - all decidedly minor works. Before those three, he had spent 13 weeks atop the UK chart in 1968 with JOHN WESLEY HARDING, an album generally considered a major artistic achievement but whose commercial success had much to do with the groundswell of sympathy arising from Dylan's near-brush with death in his famous motorcycle accident. Is the commercial success of TOGETHER THROUGH LIFE, like that of MODERN TIMES before it, a reflection less of the album's quality than of a comparable sympathy vote, brought on by the artist's advancing years and the realisation that he won't be with us forever - that 'it's not dark yet, but it's getting there'?

My own feeling at this stage of the game is that we are dealing with a musically agreeable, cleanly produced and perfectly listenable Dylan album, but not one that is saying anything much of interest about anything in particular. Regarding Dylan's 21st-century output, I was and remain highly enthusiastic about 'LOVE AND THEFT' (and wrote at length about that album in THE BRIDGE, No 14), but have yet to be convinced by MODERN TIMES; and intuit that, for all the Latin warmth of David Hidalgo's accordion, lyrically this new offering will have a hard time winning me over. The fact that all but two of the songs are the product of collaboration with Robert Hunter doesn't help the evaluation of this as a Dylan album, but as with the earlier joint efforts with Jacques Levy and Sam Shepard, we may suppose the bulk of the writing process to have been Dylan's own (after all, it is, like 'Desire', billed as a Bob Dylan album) while not concluding therefrom that the resultant songs must be a priori brilliant.

Simplicity appears to be this album's hallmark, but, as with NASHVILLE SKYLINE and PLANET WAVES (the latter, incidentally, being another of Dylan's US number ones), a question mark hovers as to whether this is the simplicity of blissful enlightenment or the naïve simplicity of the banal. Technically, the songs are carefully constructed around clear rhyme-schemes (this may be Hunter's doing), and they are (mercifully) shorter and more economical than the diffuse, rambling MODERN TIMES songs. Nonetheless, on an actual majority of tracks the writing comes over as thin and gruel-like. 'Jolene' is a flat and featureless slice of country blues, and (sorry, Bob) far less memorable than the Dolly Parton song of the same name. 'Shake Shake Mama' is a clichéd blues number in the undistinguished mould of 'The Levee's Gonna Break': I fail to see the interest of lines like 'Shake shake mama like a ship going out to sea' (where is the resemblance?) or 'Down by the river Judge Simpson is walkin' around / Nothing shocks me more like that old clown' (whoever Judge Simpson may be, he's a pale shadow of Dylan's grudge-holding and stilt-walking or false-hearted and web-spinning magistrates from the past). The would-be social criticism on 'It's All Good' is simply anaemic by the side of, say, 'It's Alright Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)' or even, God help us, 'Slow Train'. As to the most place-specific song, 'If You Ever Go To Houston' (the one Dylan

chose to bring out first in live performance, in Dublin on 5 May 2009 - and which does look as if it might perhaps be about something), yes, it may be a critique of George Bush's Texas or the Second Amendment, and it does have a potentially interesting anachronism in the Mexican War reference - but any impact it might have is undermined by the sheer bleating pointlessness of a line like 'Mister policeman, can you help me find my gal?'

All in all, after a few plays I began to wonder whether Dylan had positioned the album's opening track, 'Beyond Here Lies Nothin', as a warning to the listener, to expect precisely ... nothing. Should future listenings sooner or later honour any of the tracks as redeeming this album's lyrical blight, I might just about hand a nickel or a dime to 'Forgetful Heart' and, perhaps, 'This Dream of You'. In both, we find a sliver of intertextuality interacting with some just-about rescuable writing. In the first, the lines 'Forgetful heart / like a walking shadow in my brain / All night long / I lay awake and listen to the sound of pain' recall both Shakespeare's Macbeth ('Life's but a walking shadow') and the Edgar Allan Poe of 'The Raven', and the song also has a Kafkaesque door that may never have existed; the second offers, again, Poe-like imagery - 'shadows ... on the wall / Shadows that seem to know it all'. In these two tracks, there is, perhaps, a faint flickering of the old 'flames in the furnace of desire' - and yet, and yet, surely at this stage in Dylan's career, could we not have been given a bit more to reflect on than whether or not this album is up to the standard of ... well, of NASHVILLE SKYLINE?!! Bob, whatever colours you have in your mind, couldn't you have shown us one or two more of them on this record?