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### **Bob Dylan - *The Philosophy of Modern Song*, Simon and Schuster: 2022 (pp. 352), ISBN13: 9781451648706**

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The cover of Bob Dylan's 2020 album *Rough and Rowdy Ways* shows a couple dancing. Their heads are cropped off – perhaps they've lost them in the moment with each other and the music. To their right, a man leans over, or perhaps *into* a jukebox, such that his head is all but obscured. A man losing his head in a jukebox: as good a metaphor as any for what Dylan's new book purports to do. And if Dylan does get lost in the tunes that title the 66 chapters of *The Philosophy of Modern Song*, each of which engages with a single song, just as often he loses the songs entirely. For example, Chapter 10, supposedly about Harry McClintock's 1928 recording "Jesse James", does not mention the song at all but rather holds forth on the idea of the outlaw.

Dylan fans are used to this by now: bait and switch, red herrings, the avoidance of straight lines. At its best, this book is a dare – to follow the author's train of thought regardless of how tangentially related it might be to the song that set it off. To enter the book, one has no choice but to trust the most unreliable of narrators. The payoff is what Dylan reveals about himself, though this is unintentional. I'm not talking about anything remotely personal, just the fairly mundane reality that Dylan remains a child of the Eisenhower era.

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Very few of us can escape the imprimatur of our generation – not even the Nobel laureate for literature Bob Dylan. That, essentially, is the argument presented by this book, though it is not the one intended by its author. What is promoted by its publisher as a survey of superlative song writing – a cultural overview led by a master of the art – is instead a series of riffs borrowed from post-World War II dime store fiction in the performance of the emotional themes that haunted the jukeboxes of Dylan's youth. *The Philosophy of Modern Song?* Perhaps *The Emotional Scenarios of Post-war Pop* would be a better fit.

The mindset of a generation is one thing; that imparted by the nationality and gender of the product of that generation, is at least as significant. Another possible title for this book is *The Male Psychology of American Post-war Pop*. Leaving gender aside for the moment, Dylan describes Ricky Nelson as “the true ambassador of rock and roll ... not just for us, but all over the world, magically transforming the image on a black and white television into the American dream” (52).

The use of the word “us” signals a commonplace Freudian slip for American writers of any kind of non-fiction. With this word, Dylan does one of two things: either he asserts Americans as “us” and, by definition, anyone else as “them”. Or perhaps it is a gesture of rhetorical generosity, with which Dylan admits anyone reading the book into a fellowship of American rock and roll. Either way, geographical, generational, and cultural coordinates are set that will determine, for the most part, the boundaries of the discourse of the book. The United States is the centre of the universe; to be American is the aspiration of all others; and in Dylan’s case, the American rock and roll of the 1950s is the peak of human achievement, though crooners such as Dean Martin and Bing Crosby command equal time.

Dylan has been routinely called the voice of his generation. The political acuity and righteousness of his early recordings, his fusion of folk and rock and roll that helped to foster the counterculture, and his distillation of an essence of song-based expression that still defines the paradigm of the singer-songwriter represent some of the most important currents of 1960s youth culture and thought. His status as an iconoclast is based on his reputation as an innovator. We think of him as someone who went against the grain, forged his own path. What is revelatory about *The Philosophy of Modern Song* is what it seems to tell us about Bob Dylan – that really he is not so different from his contemporaries who grew up in the 1940s and 1950s America, the time and place in which his sensibilities were formed, and where to a large extent they remain.

This isn’t the issue, really. What makes the subtext of Dylan’s post-war perspective so pervasive is the lack of any acknowledgement of it. It would be quite a different thing if the book was consciously written, or even marketed, as the evocation of a post-war, American sensibility, though perhaps this should be expected of an American writer in their early eighties. To give this review some context, I think it’s appropriate to acknowledge my own subject position in some way. The most relevant thing to tell you is that I am a big Dylan fan. On a scale of 1-10 of Dylan tragiCS, I would place myself at about a 7. That’s to say that yes, I will buy Volume 17 of his ongoing Bootleg Series when it is released on 27 January 2023. I own all the previous volumes (though not always in the most super-deluxe of editions) and think they are each fascinating additions to his discography. To be a 10, I would need to have a wall full of audience recordings of every possible Dylan concert since the early 1960s. I know at least one person like this.

I share this because although I am disappointed in this book, there was no doubt in my mind that I would buy it (and I did buy it rather than score a free copy to review). I believed the hype of the publisher’s summary: that with the book, “Dylan offers his extraordinary insight into the nature of popular music.” I

expected to love this book, to devour it. I recommended the book to friends before I had read much of it. I came to praise Dylan, not to bury him. And yet here I am.

It is a beautiful book, full of images that tell us so much about the popular culture of the 1940s-1970s. There are several delectable images of record shops from this era. The photographs often play word association with the text. Some might be pictures of the artist whose recording is being discussed (regardless of whether the artist is being discussed), but just as often, the relationship between the images and the text is obscure or even comical. Word association is the excuse for a black-and-white picture of a beautiful woman holding a phone ("London Calling") or an ad for a Plymouth car ("Volare"). Along with a picture of Ray Charles and the Raelettes, the chapter devoted to Charles's "I Got a Woman" is also flanked by a *Best Detective* magazine cover depicting a femme fatale ("Her eyes said, 'Love me!' Her heart said 'Die!'") and a black-and-white of a man apparently paying a woman for sex. Tellingly, although there are credits and permissions for the photographs piled up at the back of the book like sampling credits on a hip-hop album, nowhere are the identities of those in the photographs, or the times and locations pictured, revealed. The book is a feast for the eyes but a puzzle for the brain; the second half of that equation will feel familiar and welcome for any Dylan Tragic. But it's probably more accurate to say that the book is a puzzle until you begin to get its measure.

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Towards the end of March 2020, Bob Dylan released his first recording of a new original composition for eight years. It is called "Murder Most Foul", and the artwork is a photograph of the 35<sup>th</sup> president of the United States, John F. Kennedy. In Australia (from where I'm writing), the international border was closed on 20 March due to the risk of the escalating Covid-19 crisis. Though lockdowns were still a couple of months away, it was an apocalyptic atmosphere into which Dylan's funereal seventeen-minute epic made its entrance. It seemed that in some strange way Dylan had managed to lock into the contemporary zeitgeist for the first time in decades.

The track was widely acclaimed. The approach is familiar in that it is essentially a stream-of-consciousness lyric. Like his classic 1965 recording "Desolation Row" (and much of *Highway 61 Revisited*), a cast of characters and associations are promenaded as much for easy rhymes, chewy consonances, and rhetorical effect as meaning or the demands of narrative. Different to that track though, a historic incident – the assassination of JFK – is at the centre of this ramble through history and pop culture.

I am not interested in reducing "Murder Most Foul" to the total of its references, be they drawn from the pop culture of the seventies and eighties or deep pockets of post-war jazz. It seems significant to me that at this end of his career, Dylan chose to make such a definitive artistic statement based on this event. Put "Murder Most Foul" together with *The Philosophy of Modern Song*, and it is difficult to escape the feeling that the killing of Kennedy is *the* decisive event – and as a murder with a gun, quintessentially American – of Dylan's generation. It occurred at the end of 1963, the year when Dylan emerged from

relative obscurity. The years of 1964-66 saw him at the height of his fame and, arguably, creative powers. Regardless, the assassination is the point in reference to which everything is either before or after. It is the loss of American innocence, the start of decline; the slipping of the façade of the “Great Society”. This is ironic, as the period immediately post-Kennedy was when straight, male, White America made a fractious start at coming to terms with a more inclusive body politic, one prosecuted by Dylan’s early “finger-pointing songs” in terms of race, if not sexuality or gender. In fact, two of the most compelling moments in *Philosophy* are when Dylan holds forth on the immorality and profitability of war (Chapter 43: “War” by Edwin Starr) and the plight of the Native American (Chapter 40: “Doesn’t Hurt Anymore” by John Trudell).

So, for the most part, the book riffs on the forties and fifties and tends to adopt the tone of pulp fiction or the voice-overs of film noir. There are down-and-outs, dangerous dames, and outlaws. Here’s an excerpt from Chapter 34, ostensibly about “Your Cheatin’ Heart” by Hank Williams, that gives an idea of the tone and approach:

Your cheatin’ heart had unlimited power, was unreliable, corrupt, and treacherous – it was responsible for bringing poison and pestilence into the homes of millions, and you commended yourself for it, you celebrated yourself. You pulled the strings, acted as if you owned the world, passed the buck, and went back on your word. You were shameless and couldn’t be depended upon, you bit the hand that fed you. You were immoral, haughty, and falsified the true doctrines of life, you devour human flesh . . . (163-164).

. . . and so on. Many of the entries proceed in this pattern, four or five paragraphs of hyperbolic riffing on Dylan’s interpretation of the central conceit, disposition, or scenario of the given song. For many of them, “essay” is a generous description. He brainstorms associations, lists of variations on a theme. Although Dylan has impressively stretched this technique in “Desolation Row”, “Murder Most Foul”, and many other songs, it’s a tried-and-true for songwriters: once you have the idea, keep the pen moving until you run out of juice. Exhaust the permutations, then go back and edit: which lines, which couplets feel the best wrapped in the melody? Which have a rhythm that invites singing? Which pinpoint the feeling without being too obvious? Dylan does not have the discipline, or perhaps the instinct honed by decades of practice, as a writer of prose that is intuitive to him as a songwriter. Some of the entries pall, despite their brevity. I’ve no doubt that this book has been edited with some care but too indulgently, too forgivingly. It smacks of being written by someone not likely to be said no to, someone for whom any book publication is assured of massive sales, someone who doesn’t give a flying proverbial what anyone thinks of the contents.

Note the perspective of the passage quoted, which is used for many of the chapters: “you pulled the strings, acted as if you owned the world ...”. The use of the second person charges the writing with both intimacy and accusation. It

becomes somewhat tiring and predictable, and together with the inveterate list-making, yields diminishing returns as the book goes on.

As mentioned earlier, the treatment of gender is another aspect that comes across as Eisenhowerian (to coin an adjective: of the era of the Eisenhower presidency, 1953-1961). Here are a couple of illustrative excerpts. Of The Eagles' "Witchy Woman", Dylan writes:

The lips of her cunt are a steel trap, and she covers you with cow shit – a real killer-diller and you regard her with suspicion and fear, rightly so. Homely enough to stop a clock, she's no pussycat. Appears in wigs, artificial eyes, jewels and cosmetics. T-shirts, shorts and hip boots, fur coat and granny glasses ... (253).

And with respect to Santana's "Black Magic Woman":

The black magic woman is the ideal woman – summons demons, holds séances, levitates, is skilled in the art of necromancy, conducts ritualistic orgies with the dead ... Bare breasted, blue veined – short, powerful and ugly (269).

From the suggestion of the titles of these songs and perhaps something of their lyrics and atmospheres, Dylan conjures up strange Freudian nightmares – women with irresistible dark power. Dylan's treatment of women throughout the book is not always this far-fetched but rarely do women seem at all real. I'm not here to "cancel" Dylan for his misogyny. At his best in his song writing – on certain tunes on *Blood On The Tracks*, in the song often used as an *example* of his misogyny, "Just Like a Woman" – people in general are fragile and unreliable; women are not really singled out as villains or angels. Intimate relationships are negotiated at great cost to the protagonists through utterances, silences, and sanguine reflection. We might also consider that he plays characters in his songs, giving us *examples* of misogyny to contemplate rather than writing a diary. This book, though, does not add weight to those interpretations.

Discussing Johnnie Taylor's "Cheaper to Keep Her", a song about the futility of divorce due to its legal and ongoing expenses (alimony), Dylan goes on quite a tear about the benefits of polygamy. Among the gems of wisdom dispensed here are that "It's nobody's business how many wives a man has" (120) and "[W]hat downtrodden woman with no future, battered around by the whims of a cruel society, wouldn't be better off as one of a rich man's wives?" (121). Following a page or so like this, he tries to play the "gotcha": "[W]hen did I ever posit that the polygamist marriage had to be male singular female plural? Have at it, ladies. There's another glass ceiling for you to break" (121). Women everywhere must be thanking Dylan for his magnanimity.

At moments like this in the book – and there are others – Dylan reminds me of my father. They were born a year apart – 1941 and 1940 respectively. Dad delights in horrifying his kids, their partners, anyone who'll listen with his casual sexism. He thinks he's being cute. Although this doesn't play well in real life, it

*really* doesn't play well in print, in the writing of one of the most significant artists of the last 60 years. It seems that most reviewers are giving Dylan a free pass on this stuff. Rather than trying to hold him to account, I'm merely pointing out that it is another aspect of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century perspective of the book and, by extension, that of the author (who is a real killer-diller).

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In one sense, *The Philosophy of Modern Song* makes me think of Greil Marcus. The prominent American critic has just published his fourth book on Dylan, but his writing more generally has something in common with one of the precepts of this book and perhaps Dylan's art more broadly. Whether writing about Dylan, Elvis Presley, Robert Johnson, Sly Stone or *The Great Gatsby*, Marcus is intent on trying to figure out what America means; of weighing up the dreams and promises that have been given or imagined for a nation and how they are reflected, valorised, criticised, and demolished in popular song and beyond. In *Invisible Republic* (1997), where he contends that Dylan's *Basement Tapes* recordings refract The Old Weird America found in twenties and thirties folk and blues, Marcus constructs an America *through* his interpretation of the popular song. It's a similar trick that Dylan tries to bring off in *Philosophy*. To really appreciate either writer, one must enter into the conspiracy of their imaginary America.

On another level, *Philosophy* reminds me of the memoir of Australian singer-songwriter Paul Kelly, *How to Make Gravy* (2010). Dylan chooses 66 recordings to take us through his vision of America. It's in no way meant to be a memoir, though as I've written, it reveals more about the author than he may realise. Kelly chooses 100 of his own songs through which he tells us the story of his life, with many side trips that describe his inspirations, musical and otherwise. The book tells us a lot about songwriting and making records. I don't think it's Australian bias to say that *How to Make Gravy* makes good on the alleged premise of *Philosophy of Modern Song* a decade earlier, gives us a memoir to boot, and is more fun to read than Dylan's *Philosophy*.

Kelly's book is punctuated with lists of songs – great opening lines, songs in tribute of other musicians, cricket songs, Texan tunes – and notably, the records referenced seamlessly traverse much of the 20th and into the early 21st century. One aspect of Dylan's book that almost struck me dumb is the paucity of entries on songs that date after the 1970s. Nearly half of the 66 recordings assayed are from the 1950s; there are six entries on recordings from the 1980s onwards, though by artists such as Warren Zevon and Jimmy Webb, both of whom got their start in the Sixties. Chapters on songs from the late 1970s by Elvis Costello and The Clash reflect the closest to *modern* sensibilities that Dylan engages with. I don't think that Dylan had any duty to engage with contemporary pop or even pop from a generation ago. It is refreshing and typical that Dylan has indulged himself with this book without worrying about who might be reading it. But in this context, we can only receive the term "modern song" in the book's title as a direct provocation. In what sense could the songs covered here be considered remotely modern?

As the word “philosophy” also appears, one could conjecture that “modern” is used in the sense of modernism: that mid-century perspective of art and science being in constant search of the new and the innovative. By contrast, the postmodern era, the beginnings of which are impossible to pin down (Pop Art in fine art? Minimalism in Western art music? Anything following the 1970s ruptures of hip hop, early electronic pop, and post-punk in popular music?), is said to reconfigure the past, having come to the inescapable conclusion that nothing genuinely new is possible. In this sense, Dylan might be making a case that the music of the 1950s represents an aesthetic of modernism. A tenuous interpretation at best. You can see that the old goat has me dancing like a marionette trying to decode his intentions. He’s been doing this to many of us for six decades.

There are about a dozen tracks from the 1960s discussed in the book. The choices are intriguing: rock groups The Who and The Grateful Dead, Motown acts the Temptations and Edwin Starr, political firebrands Nina Simone and The Fugs, and an equal number of artists who made their initial impact in the 1950s, such as Roy Orbison, Frank Sinatra, and Jimmy Reed. The Beatles are conspicuously absent, as are any number of major 1960s rock acts. This is also something that sets me thinking: is this because, subconsciously, Dylan feels the Sixties belong to him? Even now, does he refrain from shining light on his professional rivals? Or is it simply because that sensibility hatched in the 1950s is best reflected in those artists chosen, each of whom demonstrably (perhaps except for The Who) build on styles and political postures emblematic of the pre-Kennedy era?

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It might be a symptom of Stockholm Syndrome, but I would not be without this book. It’s amusing to see Bob Dylan patrolling the borders of mid-century America like some dime store Hemingway. The book is revelatory because it is the perfect counterpart to Dylan’s discography of the last 15 years. Either side of three consecutive albums of standards and obscurities from the Great American Songbook – in which Dylan posits himself as a kind of death-rattle Sinatra – his albums of original compositions are filled with tunes and arrangements redolent of 1950s rock and roll, rhythm and blues and country and western, as well as original variations along the lines of 1940s and fifties torch songs that add twists of lemon and vinegar. “Murder Most Foul” is the notable exception, though even it has the distant whiff of a twelve-bar blues structure. It should be no surprise that these intersecting worlds of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century popular song are where *The Philosophy of Modern Song* lives. Though not satisfying as a book in its own right, for the Dylan fan, it is another somewhat inscrutable piece of the Dylan puzzle, the Dylan project, that millions of us simply cannot get enough of.

## About the reviewer

John Encarnação is a guitarist, singer-songwriter, improviser and composer with over 30 releases to his credit. He lectures in music at Western Sydney University and is the author of *Punk Aesthetics and New Folk* (2013) and co-editor

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