

hot licks | Dylan's latest: A return to commitment?

Bob Dylan: *Desire*, Columbia.

Bob Dylan defies understanding. His career has been like no one else's. It doesn't progress on the linear continuum of most groups; that is, a career with a beginning, high point, and then, the end. Rather, it's a cyclical career of birth and rebirth.

Dylan has been in a rebirth period since 1974's *Blood on the Tracks*. But people who assess Dylan only by his recent output have not grasped the artist who, after all, wrote "Blowin' in the Wind" when many of us were of kindergarten age.

How easy it is to forget Dylan's legacy to popular music. It is awesome. He originated the modern rock lyric. He was the first to record an eight-minute rock song. He was—and still is—a fountainhead of mystique. He stood as the arch-foe of all authority while resisting active involvement in these causes.

He is the most self-reliant of artists. He has no need to respond to the predominant trends in popular music. In fact, he initiates these trends.

Released without hooplah

So what about this newest release, *Desire*? Like most Dylan albums it was released without much hooplah from Columbia's public relations dept. But since this record was not from just anybody, but from Bob Dylan, it kindled excitement.

This is a great album. *Blood on the Tracks* was from an emotionally ripped man. Nothing here matches the sputtering bile of "Idiot Wind." The album is from a different, more stable Dylan.

The quality of a Dylan album is hardly the point anymore. Dylan proved his genius long ago. A new Dylan album must be viewed in relation to the full spectrum of his career.

Dylan is a mythmaker. At every stage of his career he has created a myth about himself.

Bob Dylan, his first album, showed a folksinger of the Woody Guthrie mold. But Dylan was too concerned with

overstatement to be a true folksinger.

Folksinger to folk prophet

With *Freewheelin'* the folksinger became a folk prophet. The Folk Prophet created stereotypes—usually about an authoritarian figure. Upon these he vented hatred. Everything was either black or white, with Dylan, ever the moralist, casting himself above his subjects.

On "The Times They Are A Changin'", the Folk Prophet incorporated a new myth—the imagery of Christianity. He was obsessed with the apocalypse. His voice always has had that quality of morality, of the fragility of life and the inevitable death of all things.

Dylan shed the Folk Prophet guise to become Folk Poet on *Another Side of Bob Dylan*. This album contains "I Don't Believe You," his first rock 'n' roll song. "My Back Pages" shows his ability for self-analysis and criticism, and his honesty, both to himself and to his audience. "Chimes of Freedom" reveals a permanent Dylan characteristic—his love of majestic, epic material.

Dylan had gone electric by 1966. Some called him Judas; many felt betrayed. But Dylan had exhausted almost all the capabilities of the guitar-harmonica instrumentation. When Dylan added the Band, he dissolved an earlier myth—the image of one man against the world.

On *Blonde on Blonde*, Dylan was no longer the political-involvement moralist. He was writing love songs; personal songs, unrelated to his religious epic style.

This Dylan is more a musician; the melodies stand alone without the lyrics. The album closes a cycle. The folk star, in five years, had become a rock star.

Dylan on an adult trip

Since *John Wesley Harding*, Dylan has been on an adult trip—the myth of the moderate man. Love songs—like the majority of cuts on *Blood on the Tracks*—became standard in his repertoire. Dylan also experimented with country music on *Self Portrait* and *Nashville Skyline*. Critics lambasted these tributes to the American common man. Dylan could not make the passion of country music his own.

Dylan has used almost every lyric style imaginable—from grandiose religious-political imagery to psychological themes to drug visions. So, what's he using on *Desire*.

Well, it's a hodge-podge, including bits of almost everything that came before, seasoned with maturity and strong musicianship.

"Isis" is a majestic epic story with Egyptian mythological imagery. Dylan uses a rhyming scheme not often found in popular songs. Every other line rhymes, instead of each line rhyming with the next in couplet form. This sounds rather trivial, but listen to it. It's an unexpected twist. It constantly catches you off-guard.

"Mozambique" shows an innocent charm Dylan rarely uses. "One More Cup of Coffee" is a beautiful love song (again, with an epic feel). Its haunting beauty is enhanced by Scarlet Rivera's violin solos.

The moralist returns

This album also shows Dylan's myth of the moderate man has changed. In this time when political involvement is almost a symbol of embarrassment, Dylan the moralist returns. He records "Hurricane Carter", one of his most powerful protest songs ever.

While many rock performers have become increasingly impersonal toward their audiences, Dylan has gathered a crew of superstars to tour small concert halls in the Northeast.

What does it all mean? Perhaps... hopefully, the return of commitment. Time will tell.

But Dylan always has been one step ahead of the game, and where Dylan leads, others follow.

Deb Gray

arts & entertainment



Photo by Steve Boerner

Henry Fonda recites poetry for the Nebraska Educational Television Network's nationally syndicated series *Anyone for Tennyson?* Fonda taped several poems in Lincoln Monday with the show's First Poetry Quartet including Robert Frost's "The Gift Outright" and Langston Hughes' "Dreams." The series segment starring Fonda, "American Dream," will air in March.

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