

Living, Breathing Songs: Singing Along with Bob Dylan

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Resonances and retentions of a living oral tradition are activated each night when Bob Dylan performs in concert and are continually renewed and referenced in his vocalizing and in the breath of the audiences who sing with him. In some respects, Bob Dylan might not seem to be the most obvious artist to sing along with—after all, he is not usually perceived as someone who goes out on stage to entertain and engage in dialogue with a crowd. Yet in other respects he is heir to the legacies of social, communal, and ritual music-making that refracts from contemporary pop and rock back to folk and blues, street-sung broadsides and work songs, the melodic observations of medieval troubadours, and the sacred rhythms of Christianity and Judaism. There are many characteristics common to the rich sonic tradition that I am attempting to signal with these brief words; the most notable of these is the way melody in popular song works at the intersection of speech and singing, the elevated and the mundane. Here song begins where talk becomes music, where the ordinary becomes special.

Despite the fact that Dylan's songs have very singable and memorable melodies, most of the writing about Dylan's art has been concerned solely with the words. In many studies, Dylan's lyrics are often interpreted as providing insight into his life. Yet we only have to look at a range of musical biographies to know how little the life of the artist seems to tell us about the art. In this regard, many accounts of Dylan's life are simultaneously perplexing and reassuring by revealing the ordinariness of his early years as well as how large periods of his life have consisted of normal, everyday routine. After all, many people have experienced traumatic marital breakups. However, very few of them have produced anything remotely like Dylan's *Blood on the Tracks*.

Many writers manage to discuss Dylan's songs with barely a mention of his vocal gestures, let alone the more traditional concerns of ethnomusicology and musicology such as melody, rhythm, chords, texture,

timbre, and so on. The assumption in many of the writings on Dylan is that the words are more important than the music. This is apparent in the writings of two of the most prominent and frequently cited of professional Dylanologists, Oxford Professor of poetry Christopher Ricks (2003) and independent Dylan scholar Michael Gray (2000). There are, of course, many others who have devoted their energies to studying Dylan's lyrics on the page—as I write, the most recent addition to this literature is Larry Smith's *Writing Dylan* (2005). Having trawled through numerous books on Dylan, it has been interesting to register just how many authors do acknowledge that the songs are more than words, but then quickly and conveniently ignore this fact in order to discuss the songs purely in terms of the lyrics set out on the page.

I will examine one example as an indication of this methodological oversight and the possible reasoning behind it. Michael Gilmour (2004) sets out to understand the significance of biblical references in Dylan's art. In explaining his approach he makes reference to the following comment made by Dylan: "Some people, when it comes to me, extrapolate only the lyrics from the music. But . . . the music has just as far-reaching effect" (cited in Gilmour 2004:7). Dylan remarks on how people neglect the performance and the "feel" of the music. Gilmour then decides to ignore such views, patronizingly remarking, "But with all due respect to the songwriter . . . we will focus on the written word in this book" (7). Gilmour then explains why he prefers to do this, using a type of reasoning that is typical of writers who dissect Dylan's lyrics (*idem*):

One advantage of the written format is that the reader has the opportunity to slow down, reflect, and cross-reference in a way that the recorded songs do not permit, much less the live performance of a song in concert. Oddly enough, we might even have an advantage over the songwriter himself to a degree.

Putting aside the arrogance of that last sentence, such an approach completely misunderstands how the popular song works in performance. Songs are not something we read slowly on a page, "reflecting and cross-referencing" as we go. Songs are experienced in the very way that they unfold as music in time, connecting with our bodies in a manner far removed from the intellectual contemplation and reflection implied here.

Related problems are apparent in another attempt to "read" Dylan. In Aidan Day's *Jokerman: Reading the Lyrics of Bob Dylan*, the writer does acknowledge the importance of Dylan's voice, but dismisses its significance as a musical instrument in these terms (Day 1989:2):

Typically, the voice engages the line of the melody but its simultaneous jarring, atonal separation from the music, together with the relentless subordination of musical elements to the exigencies of verbal order, opens a space which registers a distance and an unease involving both singer and listener. The singing voice at once solicits and rebuffs. The gratifications it offers are uncomfortable ones.

Again, such an approach is inaccurate and misleading. First, it is highly debatable that the music is subordinate to the verbal order. If anything, the words in Dylan's songs are frequently chosen—or edited during songwriting—to suit the music. This seems apparent from accounts of Dylan's recording sessions¹ and from listening to officially available and unofficially distributed recordings of studio out-takes and rehearsals. It is for this reason that the words often work as sounds, and thus for their phonetic, rhythmic, and evocative character, rather than their semantic or representational value. Words are chosen for the sonorous quality of the rhymes within the music or, as Dylan comments in *Chronicles* (2004:173-4): "The semantic meaning is all in the sounds of the words," a point that reading literary scholars often seem unable to hear.

A further problem here concerns what Day refers to as the "atonal separation" of the vocal melody from the music. All of Dylan's songs have a distinct tonal centre of some kind; all melodies work in relation to more or less distinct keys, scales, or modes. I must therefore assume that Day is using the term "atonal" loosely in order to emphasize the idea that Dylan's voice jars on the listener. Although it is common for those who dislike Dylan's art to dismiss his voice as "grating," I don't really see why we should take this view too seriously in attempting to understand his performance art. Day adopts an aspect of modernist high art aesthetics when he argues that Dylan "solicits" and "rebuffs." Day's position becomes most clear when he asserts that the "gratifications" Dylan offers are "uncomfortable" ones.

Ultimately this claim seems little more than a subjective judgment and an aesthetic ideology posited as a general proposition. Such an argument neglects the ways in which Dylan's melodies, rhythms, and voice draw his audience in and how Dylan's voice intimately engages with his listeners. This claim also ignores how the tunes quite cleverly—and occasionally deceptively—draw us in with their many melodies and hooks, using the well-developed rhetoric of the popular song form. The vast majority of Dylan's songs concern love, loss, and human relationships. Their melodies and delivery are more likely to encourage intimacy rather than distance—

¹ See Heylin 2000.

such a sense of intimacy can be experienced at a concert or even when listening to a recording. It would be quite possible to find many documentations of the ways in which listeners have sought comfort and solace in the songs of Dylan.

This is something that the Chaucer scholar Betsy Bowden acknowledges when referring to her own personal experience of listening to Dylan's recordings. In *Performed Literature* (2001), she argues that the persuasiveness of Dylan's vocal performance arises from his ability as a singer to shift and slide between pitches and to sing with an irregular meter. Bowden assumes that this is somehow subversive because it doesn't strictly correspond to what has been transcribed onto manuscript paper in songbooks. This "irregularity," of course, draws directly from the folk musical traditions that heavily influenced Dylan. As a result of the influence of folk music, the characteristics outlined by Bowden have become stylistic features of much popular music. Yet we should also recognize that in performance, much art music functions according to a particular use of the voice and tuning so that wind, brass, or string instruments deviate from (and subvert the pure pitch implied by) a notated score. There has been overwhelming scholarship to support the fact that notated scores of various kinds are only a very approximate guide, at best, to what we hear when we listen to music. Just because Dylan's various vocal inflections, bluesy slides, microtonal shifts of pitch, and irregular rhythms and phrasing cannot be clearly notated using Western classical musical notation does not mean they are not worthy of extensive study.

Although she acknowledges sonic complexities in Dylan's vocal performance, Bowden, like Day, is explicitly dismissive of the music. She asserts that there's not much for sociologists and musicologists to say about Dylan's songs, and states (Bowden 2001:1): ". . . without words most Dylan melodies and chord changes would be boring." Over the next few pages I will refute such a claim and illustrate that there is much that culturally informed musicology and ethnomusicology can contribute to our understanding of Bob Dylan as a performing artist. To do this I must first take issue with the sweeping generalization implied in the comment about Dylan's "boring" melodies and chords. If the melodies are judged this way, this claim is made according to a very specific (and unstated) high art and modernist aesthetic. Those who judge Dylan's melodies "boring" have not taken into consideration the aesthetics of folk music traditions or the various other practices that fall within the categories of postmodernism, minimalism, or post-minimalism.

That seemingly simple word—"boring"—is actually a sign of some of the issues that those of us studying popular music have to continually

grapple with. When much high theory confronts popular culture and folklore, it often reaches the pejorative conclusion that these musical styles are formally simplistic and repetitive. Hence, the assumption is made that this form of music must be “boring.” A number of writers have attempted to deal with this issue by arguing that popular culture is just as formally complex as canonical high culture. Christopher Ricks (2003) does this with his detailed analysis of Dylan’s lyrics, finding connections to Tennyson, Shakespeare, Rossetti, Blake, the Bible, and Homer—but not managing a single mention of Lennon and McCartney, the latter point noted by Anthony Quinn (2003) when reviewing Rick’s book *Dylan’s Visions of Sin*. The search for complexity in popular culture, allied with the scholar’s desire to legitimize their project within the academy, again leads us away from salient qualities of Dylan’s art. What we should be thinking about are the pleasures, practices, and aesthetic value of repetition and formal simplicity, as well as the ways in which these elements function for us as musicians and as listeners. We should also be thinking about recognizing Dylan’s place among orally performed song traditions before we read him as a “poet” to be scrutinized on the page. With this in mind, we might benefit from accounts of the value of simplicity and gain an understanding of how hard Dylan works to achieve this seeming simplicity, in contrast to the studies that make his art appear overly complex and distanced from everyday experience. In thinking in this direction, my concern in what follows is with the seductions of the melodies, and the ease with which apparently “simple” and “repetitive” tunes allow us to participate.

One such deceptively simple melodic scheme is the “riff,” which can be defined as a short, melodic, rhythmically repeated phrase. In Paul Williams’ most recent book, included as part of his series of studies of Dylan as a performing artist on stage, he highlights the riff when pursuing his guiding principle that Dylan’s “finest work has been done . . . outside of the confines of the recording studio” (1992:xiv). He emphasizes the riff as the key to how Dylan’s music works in concert. Williams writes (*idem*): “It’s all in the riff. That’s the secret of Bob Dylan’s music . . . the riff calls forth the great vocal performances.” Regarding concert performances, Williams (2004:pxiii) states that

When . . . the band is directed to vamp on the riff for long non-vocal passages, the riff itself starts speaking to the song’s listeners as though these were whole new verses of evocative, mind-blowing, Bob-Dylan-in-his-prime lyrics.

Acknowledging how Dylan has been able to achieve a similar effect through the distinct voices that he gives to harmonica solos, Williams stresses how, on good nights, Dylan is able to do this through the riff.

Not all Dylan's songs are riff-based, of course. But in the many that are, it is that short, melodic, rhythmically repeated phrase that drives the selection and articulation of words with music; it is this cyclical, non-goal-directed repetition of musical phrases and verbal sounds that draws us into a very particular sonic experience, allowing us to "enter" the song. The riff becomes the song, and words and vocal melody are held in tension, intimated by (and implicated in) the riff. In many of Dylan's songs, their riff-based character becomes ever more pronounced in live performance, but there are many studio recordings providing ample evidence of how Dylan's songs are built around riffs ("New Pony," "Maggie's Farm," "Seeing the Real You at Last," "Everything is Broken," "Tweedle Dee Tweedle Dum"). The observations of Simon Frith (1996:166) in *Performing Rites* seem pertinent here: "a song does not exist to convey the meaning of the words—rather, words exist to convey the meaning of the song." The riff shapes the song, and the words are chosen to convey the meaning of the song as it arises from the interplay between voice and riff. Perhaps this is why Williams hears patterns of unformed words in the riffs.

Williams' comments on this subject provide me with a route into offering some ideas about Dylan's melodies and how they resonate in people's lives. There is, paradoxically, something quite profound about the way a seemingly simple tune can allow large numbers of people to participate in singing along with the melody, often without being fully aware of what the words mean, or without even worrying about whether they are singing the words correctly. In his discussion on the importance of the riff, Williams writes of his experience of hearing Dylan's words in his head, even when Bob is not singing.

In approaching the issue of melody, it is important to acknowledge that many discussions of melodies carry with them assumptions of the qualities that characterize "good" melodies that are entirely derived from the study and criticism of Western art music. In contrast, Gino Stefani (1987:21-23) argued that scholars of popular music should develop an approach to melody that is connected to the musical experiences of *listeners*, arguing that melody should be treated as

that dimension of music which everyone can easily appropriate in many ways: with the voice by singing, whistling or putting words to it; with the body by dancing, marching etc. . .melody. . .is what people appropriate most in music. . .there is no doubt that the most prominent feature (is) that

it is “singable”. . . . Oral melody is the voice of pleasure: nature teaches us so from childhood.

From our earliest memory we learn to love what might be dismissed as simple, boring, and repetitive melodies. John Lennon instinctively knew this, which is perhaps why he recycled the melody of “Three Blind Mice” in so many of his songs, a “refrain which is so fundamental to John’s music” (Mellers 1976:176) and readily apparent in the songs “All You Need is Love,” “Oh Yoko,” and “My Mummy’s Dead.” The nursery rhymes that children sing, dance, clap with, and march to, often entail chants on one pitch or short diatonic walks up and down the scale, such as rising or falling thirds and fourths. According to the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (Ringer 2001:363), the descending minor third is a “universal manifestation of the melodic impulse” and a characteristic of children’s singsongs around the world.

All of these familiar pitch movements are prevalent throughout Dylan’s songs. But I am not implying a search for archetypal melodic patterns as another analytical route for pinning down Dylan’s music. I do not want to suggest an approach to melody (following Stefani) as a beautiful structure to be appreciated for its grace or formal qualities (or critiqued for how it “fails” according to such criteria), nor as an isolated sonic structure or text. Melody must be seen as something that connects with, and is embedded into, people’s lives. This can be illustrated with reference to the song “It Ain’t Me Babe,” first released in 1964. A number of writers have noted that the “No, No, No” refrain of this song can be heard as a response to the Beatles “Yeah, Yeah, Yeah” in “She Loves You,” released the previous year. Whether or not this was a conscious response, and whether there was any irony entailed or intended is, I think, a matter of debate. Nonetheless there were many ways that Dylan and the Beatles musically commented on each others’ work throughout the 1960s, from complementary homage (Lennon’s “You’ve Got to Hide Your Love Away” and Dylan’s band arrangements on “Bring It All Back Home”) to more ironic or sarcastic references (McCartney’s “Rocky Raccoon” and Dylan’s “4th Time Around”). Bowden (2001:104) is just one of the commentators who have made this point about the two early songs:

The Beatles had until then sung simple love-song lyrics in adapted gospel style; Dylan, adapting blues style, exactly reversed the sentiments. “She loves you, yeah, yeah, yeah,” they sang, and he sang “No, no, no, it ain’t me babe.”

Both The Beatles and Dylan sing “yeah, yeah, yeah” / “no, no, no” with the same three pitches descending within the interval of a minor third (G, F sharp, and E). They are quite obviously harmonized differently. The Beatles melody is more directly related to the underlying chords, while Dylan’s is a typical bluesy folk melody that bears only a tenuous “functional” relationship to the chords. Either way, the melodies of the main chorus hook are the same.

In approaching the songs of Dylan and The Beatles, a musical analyst may not wish to detach the melody from the chords, rhythms, instrumentation, and so on. But, drawing on Stefani’s suggestions, we can think of melodies as tunes that are heard, appropriated, and sung independently from the chords and harmony sung by listeners in their everyday lives, whether or not they are listening to a recording. When audiences sing along at concerts, the performer can recognize and discern the very tangible way that the melodies of the songs have connected with the public. This connection can be heard on the performance of “It Ain’t Me Babe” on the album *Real Live*, recorded in England and Ireland during the summer of 1984, when Dylan stands back from the microphone and allows the crowd to sing the “no, no, no” refrain.

People have been singing at Dylan concerts at least since the 1970s. Andrew Muir (2001) has suggested that Dylan’s live arrangements and willful disruption of familiar melodies are an attempt to subvert and undermine the audience’s attempt to sing along. But, if this is the case, then Dylan’s motivation is not always consistent. After a concert in Barrowlands, Glasgow in June 2004, one of the Dylan websites (www.expectingrain.com) had a number of contributions from people who had been at the gig and who remarked upon the singing and how Dylan responded to it. According to audience members, the fans were singing along with “Just Like a Woman,” “It Aint Me Babe,” and “Like a Rolling Stone,” in particular. According to one fan, Dylan was pointing at the audience and conducting them during “Like a Rolling Stone.” Then he said something like this (there are minor variations in how four people recounted what he said): “We’ve played that thousands of times and people try to sing along, but nobody can ever do it” or “we’ve done that song a thousand times and no ones kept up like that.” Apparently, he then mimed the opening lines of “All Along the Watchtower” while the crowd sang.

Singing along symbolically and quite tangibly affirms the relationship between artist and audience. When the audience participates in singing the song, artists often stop singing and let the audience take over. Singing along with choruses is also one of the clearest examples of how the words of pop songs become detached from their semantic significance within the song’s

lyrical narrative or argument. These are quite clearly not reducible to the words read on paper. The “no, no, no, it ain’t me babe” refrain becomes a phrase in itself, appropriated and incorporated into the breath of many singers. The phrase can resonate as a defiant riposte to whomever or whatever is troubling individual audience members in their lives at that moment, and, at the same time, it is a celebration of the magic of Dylan’s song.

During live performances of “Like a Rolling Stone,” the chorus tends to elicit two types of response: some members of the audience sing the words and melody, while others cheer in response to the line “How does it feel?” Listening to different performances of “Like a Rolling Stone,” it is clear just how the sentiment of the song—the *feel*—changes according to the performance. Directed at “you,” the song can sound either like a withering put-down, a sympathetic statement of solidarity, or a melancholic lament of regret. In concert, the phrase “How does it feel?” is no longer addressed to a character embedded in a lyrical narrative. Instead, it is transformed, becoming “how does it feel?” in the here and now of the concert. The refrain becomes a multi-vocal celebration of how it feels to be part of the moment and the history of Dylan singing this song.

It is also important to acknowledge that when audience members sing, it’s quite possible for them to sing along with songs (at a concert or with a recording) and be unaware of the full lyrics, or the correct lyrics. In some cases, you can sing some words and make the most suitable noise for words that you might have forgotten or have no knowledge of. In addition, we should not underestimate how people sing along with songs without opening their mouths. The audience might also sing along—aloud or in the mind—without necessarily agreeing with the apparent sentiments. Sheila Whitley (1992) has remarked that although many men and women have gained great pleasure from Mick Jagger’s voice and Rolling Stones performances, they do not necessarily sympathize with the misogynist lyrics of some of the songs. George Lipsitz (1990) has made a similar point about the apparent conservatism of the lyrics to many country songs. Personal belief and lyrical content are in contradiction only if you assume that songs communicate via the semantic meaning of the words alone, and that participation implies agreement with a song’s semantic content.

Singing a song is one of the most embodied ways of putting ourselves into music and appropriating songs, whether chanting them when we are engaged in routines in our homes or when walking down the street. Singing while moving throughout our day is indeed how we appropriate and embody simple melodies. In these ways we tangibly enter the song and the popular

song enters our own lives. This act is continuous to this same song enactment in childhood, where we put ourselves into melody and rhythm and allow melody and rhythm to enter our lives. In Iona and Peter Opie's introduction to *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* (1997:42), we read: "It's probably a fact that every one of us could recite a string of nursery rhymes before we knew the meaning of the words which form them." It is worth remembering that most nursery rhymes were not actually written for children in the nursery. They were popular songs, slogans, satires, chants, riddles, and bits of ballads that eventually found their way into the nursery, as nursery rhymes increasingly became an institution associated with the modern notion of childhood and the child was thought of as something distinct from the adult. It can prove quite disconcerting to discover the meaning of some of those rhymes we once chanted as children.

Many of Dylan's songs utilize "the chant," to use Richard Middleton's (1990) terms, or the "incantation" in Wilfred Mellers' (1984) terminology. The chant has been an integral part of human cultures from children's games and work songs to secular festivities and sacred rituals. The chant unites us in the playground, helps our team score the winning goal, helps us get closer to our god, unites us at a political rally or demonstration, and enables us to celebrate all manner of events in our lives. Richard Middleton (1990:229) has observed that the singing of popular songs invests ordinary words that might seem banal and mundane with "affective force and kinetic grace" leading to what he calls the "magical musicalization of the everyday."

Middleton refers to Dylan's "Subterranean Homesick Blues" as a chant. It is basically sung on one pitch, the note C (a flattened/blue third in A), with occasional drops down to the note A (pitched a minor third below). This minor third interval recurs throughout Dylan's music and is a familiar melodic interval to many of us, (recognizable in the opening two notes of the vocal melody of "Hey Jude" and the Oasis song "Live Forever," for example). As Peter Van der Merwe (1989:121) has remarked,

One of the great puzzles of music is the mysteriously satisfying quality of the minor third. . . . Why should such an awkward interval like the minor third . . . come so readily to the human voice? Why should it have the air of what can only be called solidity? The primeval chant consisting . . . of nothing but a falling minor third appears in places as different as the Catholic liturgy and the school playground.

The musical influences on Bob Dylan's chants are quite easy to detect and have been acknowledged by Dylan over the years. "Subterranean Homesick Blues" owes a debt to Chuck Berry's "Too Much Monkey

Business,” with some elements from Woody Guthrie’s “Taking it Easy.” It is also possible to hear the influence of Louis Jordan, who is acknowledged as an influence by both Berry and Dylan. “Subterranean Homesick Blues” is a stream of caustic observations that draws on Chuck Berry’s stream of discontent and is influenced by the writings of Jack Kerouac and Allan Ginsberg (sometimes described as a blend of beat poetry and rhythm and blues).

There are many other Dylan songs, and popular songs in general, that make use of the chant and that use this minor third drop. Of course, there is a lot more to Dylan’s melodies than chants. Dylan’s use of the chant provides just one focus, which I have adopted here as a means of exploring the way popular melodies work at that special moment when speech turns into music and when ordinary language becomes elevated. At such moments—whether we sing the song to be transported in the midst of the daily routine, or when gathered at the concert—the song is breathed alive. The singing transforms it into a ritual embodiment of the music. This act at once creates a feeling of attachment, or belonging to, something or someone outside of ourselves. At the same time, it is a connection that doesn’t necessarily imply semiotic understanding or agreement with the semantic meaning of the song. It is, more often than not, a non-representational experience, materially felt on and within the body as the voice participates. All of these experiences are missed entirely by those who simply read Dylan’s lyrics on the page.

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