

It's 30 Years Later! Bob Dylan's Tracks Gloriously Bloody

by Ron Rosenbaum

What could be better? A major Dylan moment in the culture. And a new Dylan mystery to obsess over.

The moment: Christopher Ricks' book (Dylan's *Visions of Sin*), hailed by Jonathan Lethem in a dazzling Sunday Times Book Review cover story, gives Dylan's literary stature the imprimatur of the Oxford Professor of Poetry, for those who still had their doubts. (And helps put last year's profound embarrassment—that Seinfeld alum's dimwit Dylan film, *Masked and Anonymous*—deeper into the oblivion it so richly deserves.)

I tend to agree with Tim Riley (in Slate) that great songs are a different (not lesser) sort of art than poems; like theater, they are meant to be heard as well as read, heard as music, and it can be reductive to think of them only as poetry. But Mr. Ricks' work is filled with offhand Empsonian brilliance, uncanny erudition and a belief in literary value that will, hopefully, finally shut up the poorly read types who waste time questioning whether Dylan's works have earned the "right" to be called poetry. What a useless argument: Of course they have earned the right, but we have the right to think to them as songs as well.

Other aspects of this particular Dylan Moment: the apotheosis of *Blood on the Tracks* as THE quintessential Dylan album. A consecration signaled by an entire book devoted to the making of the album (*A Simple Twist of Fate*), told mostly from the point of view of the session players who backed up Bob on *Blood*. An apotheosis paradoxically re-enforced by the selection of *Blood on the Tracks* as the one Dylan album to be attacked in an entertaining new anthology, *Kill Your Idols*, in which younger rock critics seek to slaughter the sacred cows of older rock critics.

And then there was the "Blood on the Tracks Project," a concert celebrating the 30th anniversary of the album by a group of younger musicians who admired the tracks on *Blood*. (One of them, Mary Lee Kortès, had a surprise success with a track-for-track cover of the entire album

that she recorded at the downtown club Arlene's Grocery. Ms. Kortès' cover is a fascinating effort. I'd always thought of *Blood* as the ultimate Sad Guy album, but hearing the whole thing sung by a woman made it suddenly seem a less parochial document.)

It was the concert that triggered my obsession with the lingering mystery of *Blood on the Tracks*: the "lost" song left off the album, to my mind one of the greatest Dylan songs, the missing link, the skeleton key to *Blood on the Tracks*: "Up to Me."

"Up to Me" is back—well, back on my mind, at least. I've written about my obsession with the song in these pages before: It's a thrilling, exhilarating epic that (uncharacteristically for Dylan) ruefully—but joyfully—celebrates taking responsibility rather than placing blame. But I've discovered a new mystery involving the song. O.K., he left it off *Blood on the Tracks*—but why, for 30 years, according to all available evidence, has Dylan refused to sing this song in public? What has made it the redheaded stepchild of the Dylan repertoire?

Needless to say, being redheaded myself, I have a theory. But first let me talk about the restoration of "Up to Me" in the context of the coronation, you might say, of *Blood on the Tracks*. When I learned a couple months ago (from Dylan aficionado Robert Levin) that there was going to be a 30th-anniversary concert for *Blood on the Tracks*, I had this idea: I would write a column pleading with the concert organizers to include "Up to Me," the orphaned masterpiece left off the album, in the program. This was, it seemed to me, a make-or-break moment for "Up to Me": Would its greatness be recognized, and would it be reunited with the rest of *Blood on the Tracks*? Or would it continue to wander in the limbo of the lost, apocryphal Dylan songs, an anomaly included only on his Biograph compilation, with no connection to its origin on *Blood on the Tracks*?

But then I found out that they were a step ahead of me. David Spelman, the producer and artistic director of the

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concert, I learned, had already made a decision to include “Up to Me.” Later, after the concert—a memorable evening at Merkin Concert Hall on June 29—Spelman e-mailed me to say he’d never heard “Up to Me” until very recently, when someone sent him outtakes of the song from the Blood on the Tracks sessions, and he realized it was “a masterpiece.”

Mr. Spelman also disclosed that there was some backstage drama over “Up to Me” the night of the concert—it almost didn’t make it onto the program after all. Mary Lou Lord was supposed to sing it, but lost her voice the day of the concert and, at the last minute, they called upon Marc Anthony Thompson (a.k.a. the “Chocolate Genius”), who was already on the program, to do a song he’d never sung before. A major challenge, since “Up to Me” consists of some dozen complicated verses. Watching the concert, not knowing it was the first time that Mr. Thompson had performed the song, I would never have guessed it—his slow, jazzy take on it was that good.

Anyway, it was after I learned that “Up to Me” was going to be included that the mystery crystallized for me. Surfing Dylan sites, I came upon a list of songs that Dylan had never done live in concert, a list that included “Up to Me.” So there wasn’t even a live bootleg—the song was beyond bootlegging. There were just the outtakes from the Blood on the Tracks recording-session tapes, one of which surfaced on Biograph. What’s up with that?

Before I get to my Wild Conjecture about “Up to Me,” let me step back and examine the Blood on the Tracks moment.

Is the consensus that has crystallized (congealed?) about Blood—that it is THE Dylan album, the very peak of his art, against which all the rest must be measured—justified? I’m not sure I completely agree. I’m more a Highway 61 Revisited, Blonde on Blonde, Live 1966, Hard Rain, Robbie Robertson and Rolling Thunder searing-electric-guitar-period Dylan fan. Sometimes I wonder whether Blood on the Tracks is a bit like “Lay, Lady, Lay” and “Born in the U.S.A.”—the favorite Dylan and Springsteen songs for people who don’t really get Dylan and Springsteen.

Sometimes I think Blood on the Tracks is E-Z-listening Dylan. I mean, there are clunkers on Blood: I just refuse to concede that “Lily, Rosemary and the Jack of Hearts” is much more than an overextended pastiche, or that “Buckets of Rain” isn’t just leaden whimsy.

I know it’s a risk saying this. You risk the wrath of the “Bob-olaters,” a term I coined in my critique of Masked and Anonymous (see “Bob Dylan Undone” in The Observer, July 28, 2003)—an analogy to those indiscriminate Shakespeareans, the “bard-olaters.” The Bob-olaters have reached the point where they can’t bring themselves to say that Bob has ever done anything less than sublimely perfect, and it’s our job to point out just how perfect everything he’s done is. That is, if you want access to the Dylan organization’s resources—maybe even a nod from Bob—and want to avoid becoming, as I have, a leper in Bob-land.

That’s why it was refreshing to see someone try to debunk Blood in Kill Your Idols. It’s just unfortunate that the chosen debunker took such a limited, literal-minded point of view in his critique: The words don’t always make sense! They’re ambiguous! Dylan contradicts himself! He doesn’t even tell us what finally happens to the relationship! (The fallacy that sees everything through the lens of rumors about Dylan’s marriage and assumes that all the songs are “about” the same people or the same relationship.) Perhaps it’s because the writer works in an ad agency, where he must have learned to prefer the absence of ambiguity in simple-minded jingles.

Still, cult-like worship of every word Dylan wrote or sung may be worse: It does a disservice to the many genuinely astonishing peaks of his achievement. It can’t all be peaks, guys—not without some valleys in between.

But then there are times I realize how wrong this caviling is, times when nothing but Blood on the Tracks—Blood on the Tracks played repeatedly, obsessively—will do. It’s like Gatsby in that respect: an American classic, a romantic icon which—every time you think you must have overrated it in retrospect—you experience it again and realize there’s even more to it than you realized.

And then there’s “Up to Me,” the unheard music, the missing track from Blood on the Tracks. The mystery of “Up to Me” begins here in New York City in September 1974, when Dylan recorded 12 songs for Blood on the Tracks. Only 10 made it onto the “test-pressing” that Columbia was about to mass-produce and release. “Up to Me” was dropped from the test-pressing. And then, just before its scheduled release, Dylan decided to re-record much of the album in his native Minnesota. It was this version that was eventually

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released and almost immediately hailed as a unique, self-lacerating, heartbreaking, remorse-inducing, anger 'n' agony-venting classic.

“Up to Me” was omitted from that one, too. A whole mythology has grown up about the unreleased New York versions of some of the Blood on the Tracks songs (such as “You’re a Big Girl Now,” “Tangled up in Blue” and “Idiot Wind”), how they supposedly cut even deeper than their counterparts on the Minnesota release. One of the great disappointments of my life was to finally hear the New York “test-pressing” and find myself underwhelmed by the hype, under-impressed by the differences.

In fact, a far more important distinction is the absence from both versions of “Up to Me.” Why was a song so great omitted? Why has it survived despite that? Sure, it survived on the margins, but some people just knew.

Roger McGuinn, the founder of the Byrds and a great Dylan interpreter and friend, knew. I’ll never forget the first time I heard “Up to Me,” when somebody played me a tape of Mr. McGuinn’s ecstatic electric version of the song on Cardiff Rose, one of his solo albums.

I remember thinking, “What the ... ?! This may be the greatest Dylan song I’ve never heard, maybe the greatest Dylan song I’ve ever heard.” Or something like that. Standing alone, without any reference to Blood on the Tracks, it had that casual, tossed-off, bitter and joyful anthemic genius that make “Positively 4th Street” and “Like a Rolling Stone” such pleasures.

I know this will really outrage the Bob-olaters, but I still like Roger McGuinn’s version even better than Dylan’s own version—at least the one with his Blood on the Tracks backup band. Maybe because Mr. McGuinn does it as an electric rave-up, while the Blood backup band—though capable of beautiful melancholy—can sound too mopey at times for material like this. McGuinn’s exhilarating rock sensibility makes it an ecstatic anthem about the sometimes romantic, sometimes tragic sense of possibility. It makes you wish Dylan would re-record it himself with McGuinn or Robbie Robertson. But that’s the mystery: Why won’t he give “Up to Me” the glorious multiple afterlives that his live performances give his other great songs?

I hope he hasn’t listened to the rock-critic consensus. With

a few exceptions, most Dylan writer types have ignored or marginalized “Up to Me.” I attribute it, again, to Bob-olatry: the inability to believe the Master is capable of making anything but absolutely perfect choices, and that our job is to explain why they are so perfect. So any decision Dylan makes—such as leaving “Up to Me” off Blood on the Tracks—must have been prompted by his impeccably sublime wisdom.

You can see this reasoning in its most misguided form in *A Simple Twist of Fate*, that book on the making of Blood on the Tracks. It’s a strange hybrid of a book by two authors that combines the recollections of the session musicians from the New York and Minnesota Blood recording sessions (such as Buddy Cage, who was there to play pedal steel guitar at the June 29 concert), interlarded with the exegesis of a British rock critic. The latter fellow goes out of his way to slag off “Up to Me” to prove that the All Wise and Powerful Bob always made the right choice.

The first time it’s mentioned, we’re told that “Up to Me” is “effectively the same tune as ‘Shelter From the Storm,’ with a different lyric.”

In fact, it’s the brilliant mirror image of that song. “Shelter” is all about desperate dependence on a woman or women: “I came in from the wilderness, a creature void of form / ‘Come in,’ she said / ‘I’ll give you, shelter from the storm.’”

Set next to “Up to Me,” “Shelter from the Storm” might be called “Up to Her.” Big diff.

Then we’re told that “Shelter from the Storm” was “chosen instead of ‘Up to Me,’ whose tune was strikingly similar. It’s not hard to see why: With its references to blame, betrayal, and regret, ‘Up to Me’ would just have prolonged the reproachful mood of the album, whereas ‘Shelter from the Storm’ brings a more considered, reflective quality to the song cycle’s concluding stages, leading smoothly into the sense of closure imparted by the recently written ‘Buckets of Rain.’”

Um, excuse me—it’s hard to imagine anything so wrongheaded about everything. Don’t you love the phony gentility of the “considered, reflective quality” attributed to “Shelter”? Especially when it’s off by about 180 degrees: dazzling, puzzling, jagged disjunctions are the burden of that song. And then there’s the praise for the tediously

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casual “Buckets of Rain,” with its “sense of closure”: Come on! “Closure,” that tired grief counselor’s cliché, is the last thing you get or want from *Blood on the Tracks*. Then we’re informed that “Up to Me” “confuses matters, leaving the narrator’s attitude toward what are clearly life-shattering events far too coded and unresolved.” Can’t have that! Death to all unresolvedness! (Of course, that would mean the death of most great literature). Give us certainty instead, however false to life and art.

Sorry for the vituperation, but I feel strongly about this question—I feel that this sort of misconception about “Up to Me” must be countered if the orphaned song is to be restored to its proper place in the Dylan realm.

What is that place? Well, for one thing, I think it is one of those songs that marked an important stylistic shift in Dylan’s songwriting, from the psychedelic surrealism of *Highway 61* and *Blonde on Blonde*. From the feverish and glittering “wild mercury sound” (as Dylan once described it to me in an interview) to something less hectic and at once more grave and comic. (The comedy of gravity? Somewhere over gravity’s rainbow?)

A shift from a surrealism of image (“Now the bricks lay on Grand Street / Where the neon madmen climb ... “ from “Stuck Inside of Mobile,” for instance) to the casual narrative surrealism of *Blood on the Tracks* and thereafter. In “Up to Me,” you get the Raymond Chandleresque (“Oh, the Union Central is pullin’ out and the orchids are in bloom / I’ve only got me one good shirt left and it smells of stale perfume. / In fourteen months I’ve only smiled once and I didn’t do it consciously, / Somebody’s got to find your trail / I guess it must be up to me”) juxtaposed with the Raymond Carveresque (“Well, Dupree came in pimpin’ tonight to the Thunderbird Café / Crystal wanted to talk to him, I had to look the other way ... “) to the comical/metaphysical (“We heard the Sermon on the Mount and I knew it was too complex ... “). By the way: “In fourteen months I’ve only smiled once and I didn’t do it consciously”: Is that great or what?

Each compressed five-line vignette in the song is called to order by the concluding rueful, joyful line, “I guess it must be up to me” or some variation. It’s Dylan’s way of returning to the pleasures of narrative. It’s his way of transcending complicatedness for complexity. Going from the gloriously messy absurdity of *Blonde on Blonde* to a different kind

of absurdity, the absurdity embedded in ordinary language and cliché—one that is conveyed not with linguistic pyrotechnics but with parable-like narrative purity.

I know I’m not going to succeed in doing justice to the beautiful, liberating spirit of this song; you’ll have to hear it yourself. That’s all I’m asking, that’s all I really want to do: return it to the repertoire, get more people to cover it if Dylan won’t do it again himself (which is what I’d really love to see happen).

And why won’t Dylan do it? Here’s where my Wild Conjecture comes in. What if “Up to Me” had something to do with the tragic death of his friend and rival, Richard Fariña? Many of you may be familiar with the Dylan/Fariña relationship from David Hajdu’s lovely study, *Positively 4th Street*. A book about the exhilarating period in the 60’s when Dylan was seeing Joan Baez, while Joan’s sister Mimi Baez married the musician and novelist Richard Fariña. A tale which makes Fariña something like a Marlowe figure to Dylan’s Shakespeare—the wild, doomed genius that Dylan was both inspired by and threatened by. (I’m comparing the relationships—not saying that Dylan is an equal of Shakespeare.) Hajdu’s story, you’ll recall, comes to a close when Fariña dies young in a motorcycle accident just two months before Dylan survives his notorious, life-changing motorcycle-accident brush with death. Survivor guilt, envy that Fariña made the bolder (if less successful) challenge to death—who knows what mixture of emotions such a fate might have evoked. “If we never meet again,” he begins the last verse of “Up to Me.” He knew they never would.

Far-fetched? Some will recall the title of Richard Fariña’s only published novel: *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up to Me*. “Up to me”! Dylan’s song captures the spirit of Fariña’s novel perhaps all too well.

Like I said, it’s a wild conjecture, but perhaps the song was a kind of posthumous tribute that still brings up unbearably complicated feelings for Dylan, and that’s why he dropped it from *Blood on the Tracks* (perhaps the title evokes the blood on the tracks of Fariña’s motorcycle). And perhaps that’s why he won’t sing it again.

I could be wrong, but I figure no one else is likely to make such a connection. So I guess it must be up to me.