
Sean Latham, editor. *The World of Bob Dylan*

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- 1 By 1991, so much had been written about Bob Dylan that two co-authors felt obliged to call their contribution to the canon, *Oh No, Not Another Bob Dylan Book*. In the subsequent thirty years the tide of Dylan books has not abated; indeed, one of the first contributions to the Sean-Latham-edited volume *The World of Bob Dylan* offers a survey of Dylan biographies. Its author, Andrew Muir, provides an account of the ways in which the biographers' approaches to their subject matter has changed over time: he suggests, for example, that more recent works have sometimes proven disdainful of their subject. Likewise, he notes, the authors have sometimes been disdainful of one another, such is the jealous nature of their engagement with the artist and his work. One of the great strengths, then, of *The World of Bob Dylan* is the complete absence of such proprietary behavior on the part of its contributors. Each of the 27 essays—the longest of which is 14 pages, the shortest, 6—is marked by an often-infectious enthusiasm for Dylan's work, and while not all are entirely successful, there is something to appreciate in each one.
- 2 In his editor's introduction to the book, one in which he offers a succinct and insightful meditation on the role of farewells in Dylan's work, Latham suggests that the collection is occasioned, in part, by the "extraordinary riches" of the Bob Dylan archive (2). The subject of the volume's final essay, the Bob Dylan archive is housed at the Helmerich Center for American Research at the University of Tulsa in Oklahoma. Opened in 2016, the archive contains over 100,00 items including Dylan's handwritten lyrics, poems, notebooks, and correspondence. As Muir notes, such material is likely to prove a boon

to future biographers. It is, however, somewhat disappointing, then, that only one of the contributors to the volume—Michael J. Kramer—appears to have drawn on the archive for his chapter. That he provides one of the best essays in the collection—a enlightening engagement with Dylan’s *John Wesley Harding* predicated upon a dialogue between the lyrics on the record and those sketched out in the artist’s notebooks—suggests that the failure of more authors to draw on the archive is something of a lost opportunity.

- 3 There are, nevertheless, many fine essays in the book. In her chapter on Dylan’s gospel period, for example, Gayle Wald does something that seems deceptively simple: she separates Dylan’s gospel songs from questions about his religiosity and writes about it purely as music. This opens up a new vista on Dylan’s work, an achievement in and of itself, one that highlights the importance of Black women to Dylan’s music, gospel or otherwise. By way of contrast. Andrew McCarron’s reading of Dylan’s *Modern Times* attempts to answer the question that generates the most heat—and the least light—on fan forums: is Dylan a Christian? While McCarron answers in the affirmative he nevertheless suggests Dylan is a Christian whose faith has dimmed with age. It is not immediately clear, however, what is at stake in this argument beyond the attempt to capture Dylan for a particular religion. Pinning Dylan down on anything is, as multiple authors in the volume make clear, a challenging if not entirely futile activity. That Dylan employs religious imagery on his 2006 album *Modern Times* is no surprise, he does so on almost all of his records, so perhaps the claim here is overstated.
- 4 Despite—or because of—her description of Dylan’s harmonica as “his detachable penis,” Ann Powers offers a wonderful reading of Dylan’s physicality and the role that it played not in the creation of his ever-shifting identity, but rather in his desire to escape from it (269). The later Dylan, she further suggests, has employed his seemingly frail state to reflect upon both his elder statesman status and his own mortality, imbuing his complex performances with yet another dimension. Greil Marcus, whom another contributor—Kevin Dettmar—hails as “perhaps our most astute living cultural critic” (208), offers an account of Dylan’s relationship to the blues which is insightful and confounding in equal measure. For, even as his argument skillfully recontextualizes the Dylan album *Time Out of Mind*, Marcus—surprisingly for him—seems to present the blues as cross-racial phenomenon (79). Indeed, he cites mainly white critics, and suggests that the blues are “kin to Cubism, Dada, *Finnegans Wake* (1939) or Louise Brooks in *Pandora’s Box* (1929),” as if the musical form needed to be validated by juxtaposition (80). This slight tone deafness on issues of race is also present in Will Kaufman’s otherwise excellent essay on Dylan on civil rights where he states that Dylan “articulated the concept of ‘institutional racism’ four year before Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton coined the term,” an account that ignores the history of Black articulations of structural disadvantage stretching back to at least the nineteenth century (246).
- 5 There is obviously insufficient space here to remark upon on every essay. What I have offered is just a flavor of the book. The great majority of the authors are to be congratulated for opening up Dylan’s work in order to show hitherto unforeseen aspects of, and connections in, his work, rather than simply reducing it to preexisting categories in the manner of so much Dylan criticism. Given the sheer number of essays in the volume it may seem a little rich to suggest one more, but it is an oversight that should, perhaps, be noted. For, beyond a few mentions, there is no sustained attention to Dylan’s work on film, as a documentary subject, as an actor, or even as a

screenwriter. An essay on this aspect of Dylan's work would have added much to an already engaging collection.