INTRODUCTION

For thirty years I have tried to write about American history, especially the history of American politics. It is extremely hard work, but gratifying over the long haul. Writing historical pieces about American music and about Bob Dylan wouldn't have been in the cards but for a fluke, the result of strange good fortune dating back to my childhood.

While I was growing up in Brooklyn Heights, my family ran the 8th Street Bookshop in Greenwich Village, a place that helped nurture the Beat poets of the 1950s and the folk revivalists of the early 1960s. My father, Elias Wilentz, edited *The Beat Scene*, one of the earliest anthologies of Beat poetry. Down from the shop, on MacDougal Street, was an epicenter of the folk-music explosion, the Folklore Center, run by my father's friend Israel Young, whom everyone called Izzy, an outsized enthusiast with an impish grin and a heavy Bronx-Jewish accent. Nothing in that setting was anything I had sought out, or had any idea was going to become important. As things turned out, I was just lucky.

On occasional pleasant Sundays, we'd take family strolls that almost always included a stop at the Folklore Center, which was crowded wall to wall with records and stringed instruments and had a little room in the back where musicians hung out. My first memories of Bob Dylan, or at least of hearing his name, are from there—Izzy and my dad would talk about what was happening on the street, and I (a son who wanted to look

and act like his father) would eavesdrop. Only much later did I learn that Dylan first met Allen Ginsberg, late in 1963, in my uncle's apartment above the bookshop.

A few buildings north of Izzy's store, next to the Kettle of Fish bar, a staircase led down into a basement club, where Dylan acquired what it took to make himself a star. The Gaslight Cafe, at 116 MacDougal, was the focal point of a block-long spectacle of hangouts and showcases, including the Café Wha? (where Dylan played his first shows in the winter of 1961). Down adjoining tiny Minetta Lane, around the bend on Minetta Street, there was another coffeehouse, the Commons, later known as the Fat Black Pussycat. These places, along with the Bitter End and Mills Tavern on far more touristy Bleecker Street, and Gerde's Folk City on West Fourth Street, were Bob Dylan's Yale College and his Harvard.

The neighborhood had a distinguished bohemian pedigree. A century before, over on the corner of Bleecker and Broadway, Walt Whitman loafed in a beer cellar called Pfaff's, safe from the gibing mainstream critics, whom he called "hooters." A little earlier, a few blocks up MacDougal in a long-gone house on Waverly Place, Anne Charlotte Lynch ran a literary salon that hosted Herman Melville and Margaret Fuller, and where a neighbor, Edgar Allan Poe, first read to an audience his poem "The Raven." Eugene O'Neill, Edna St. Vincent Millay, e. e. cummings, Maxwell Bodenheim, and Joe Gould, among others, were twentieth-century habitués of MacDougal Street.

When Dylan arrived in the Village, the Gaslight was the premier MacDougal Street venue for folksingers and stand-up comics. Opened at the end of the 1950s as a Beat poets' café—for which it received a curious write-up in the New York *Daily News,* then the quintessential reactionary city tabloid—the Gaslight proclaimed itself, carnival-style, as "world famous for the best entertainment in the Village." Unlike many of the other clubs, it was not a so-called basket house, where walk-on performers of widely ranging competence earned only what they managed to collect in a basket they passed around the audience. The Gaslight was an elite spot where talent certified by Dave Van Ronk and other insiders, as many as six performers a night, received regular pay.

Not that the place was fancy in any way. Pine paneled (until its owners stripped it down to its brick walls) and faintly illuminated by fake Tiffany (or, as Van Ronk called them, "Tiffanoid") lamps, the Gaslight had leaky pipes that dripped on what passed for a stage, no liquor license (that's

what brown paper bags and the Kettle of Fish were for), a tolerable sound system, and hardly any room. If one used a crowbar and a mallet, it might have been possible to jimmy a hundred people in there. The threat of a police raid—for noisiness, or overcrowding, or refusing to play along and pay off the Mob—was constant. But on MacDougal Street, playing the Gaslight was like playing Carnegie Hall.

Van Ronk was the king of the hill among the Gaslight's folksingers; the emcee was Noel Stookey (who became the Paul of Peter, Paul, and Mary); and the headliners included Tom Paxton, Len Chandler, Hugh Romney (better known as the late-1960s psychedelic prankster and communalist Wavy Gravy), and young comics like Bill Cosby and Woody Allen. When Dylan, with Van Ronk's imprimatur, cracked the Gaslight's prestigious performers' circle in 1961, he secured sixty dollars a week, which gave him enough to afford the rent on a Fourth Street apartment—and took a big step toward real fame and fortune. "It was a club I wanted to play, needed to," Dylan recalls in his memoir, *Chronicles: Volume One.*

A remarkable tape survives of what appears to have been a splicing together of two of Dylan's Gaslight performances, recorded in October 1962, in accord with what then qualified as professional recording standards. (Widely circulated for many years as a bootleg, the tape was eventually released in abbreviated form in 2005 as a limited-edition compact disc, *Live at the Gaslight 1962.*) The singer may have left his harmonica rack at home; in any case, this is one of the few early recordings where he performs for an audience without his harmonicas. But for all of its unpretentious, even impromptu qualities, the tape reveals how greatly and rapidly Dylan's creativity was growing.

A year earlier, Van Ronk's first wife, Terri Thal, had recorded Dylan, also at the Gaslight but with far inferior equipment, in an attempt to persuade club owners in nearby cities to hire the young singer. (Thal reports that someone stole the tape; it has long been available as a vinyl LP and on compact disc, known to collectors as "The First Gaslight Tape.") As a business scheme, the recording flopped, even though it included the best of Dylan's first songs, "Song to Woody." A year later, though, Dylan had jumped to the level of composing "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall"—a song the world beyond the Village and the folk revival would not hear until its release more than six months later on Dylan's second album, *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan.* It might be the ghostly singing along by the audience on "Hard Rain," or it could just be the benefits of hindsight, but this second Gaslight tape vibrates with a sensation that Bob Dylan was

turning into something very different from what anyone had ever heard, an artist whose imagination stretched far beyond those of even the most accomplished folk-song writers of the day.

I first heard Dylan perform two years after that—at Philharmonic Hall, not the Gaslight. It was another bit of luck: my father got hold of a pair of free tickets. And even though I was only thirteen, I'd been made acutely aware of Dylan's work. A slightly older friend had presented *Freewheelin'* to a little knot of kids in my (liberal, Unitarian) church group as if it were a piece of just-revealed scripture. I didn't understand half of the album; mostly, I was fixed on its sleeve cover, with its now famous photograph of Dylan, shoulders hunched against the cold, arm in arm with a gorgeous girl, walking on Jones Street—a picture that, with its hip sexiness, was more arousing than anything I'd glimpsed in furtive schoolboy copies of *Playboy.*

Some of what I did understand in the songs was funny, some of it was uplifting, and a lot of it was frightening: the line "I saw a black branch with blood that kept drippin' " from "Hard Rain" stood out as particularly chilling. But I loved the music and Dylan's sound, the guitar, the harmonica, and a voice that I never thought especially raspy or grating, just plain. Getting the chance to see him in concert was a treat, about which I have more to say below. In time, it proved to be a source of even greater luck.

The next turn in the story, almost forty years later, is more mysterious to me. After a long and deep attachment through high school, college, and after, my interest in Dylan's work began to wane about the time *Infidels* appeared in 1983. Although his religious turn was perplexing, even off-putting, the early gospel recordings at the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s had also, I thought, been gripping, taking an old American spiritual tradition, already updated by groups such as the Staple Singers, and recharging it with full-blast rock and roll. Dylan had seemed to be doing to "Precious Lord" what he once had done to "Pretty Polly" and "Penny's Farm." Now, though, except for a few cuts on *Infidels* and on *Oh Mercy* six years later, his music sounded to me tired and torn, as if mired in a set of convictions that, lacking deeper faith, were substituting for art.

I came back to Dylan's music in the early 1990s when he released a couple of solo acoustic albums of traditional ballads and folk tunes,

sung in a now-aging, melancholy voice, yet with some of the same sonic sensations I remembered from the early records. The critic Greil Marcus (who, several years later, became my friend and collaborator) has written that with these recordings, Dylan began retrieving his own artistic core—but I had more personal reasons for admiring them with a special intensity. When my father fell mortally ill in 1994, hearing Dylan's hushed, breathy rendition on the second of the albums, *World Gone Wrong,* of the 1830s-vintage hymn "Lone Pilgrim" brought me tears and consolation I wouldn't have gone looking for in any church or synagogue.

By now I was writing about the arts as well as about history. On a lark, in 1998, I wrote an article for the political magazine *Dissent* about Marcus's Dylan book, *Invisible Republic,* and Dylan's latest release, *Time Out of Mind,* all prompted by a Dylan show I attended, goaded by a clairvoyant friend, the previous summer at Wolf Trap in Virginia. In 2001 a phone call came out of the blue from Dylan's office in New York asking if I would like to write something about a forthcoming album, called *"Love and Theft,"* for Dylan's official Web site, www.bobdylan.com. Once I'd established it wasn't somebody playing a practical joke, I agreed, provided that I liked the album, which in the end I very much did. I wrote more for the Web site over the following months and invented the somewhat facetious title of the site's "historian-in-residence," a job nobody else seemed to be angling for, at a home office suspended in cyberspace.

Sometime in 2003, plans took shape for an official release, as part of a retrospective series, of the tape made on that long-ago night when I first heard Bob Dylan in concert. When called upon to write the liner notes for what would become *The Bootleg Series, Vol. 6: Bob Dylan Live 1964, Concert at Philharmonic Hall,* I found the assignment intimidating. Dylan has always managed to land truly fine writers and experts, including Johnny Cash, Allen Ginsberg, Tony Glover, Pete Hamill, Nat Hentoff, Greil Marcus, and Tom Piazza, when he hasn't written the liner notes himself. I also worried about what it would be like trying to describe a scene from so long ago without sounding either coy or pedantic. How much would I even remember?

The memory part turned out to be easy. Listening to the recording brought back in a rush the feel of the occasion—the evening's warmth; the golden glow of the still-new Philharmonic Hall in the still-under-construction Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts; the sometimes giddy rapport that Dylan had with the audience (unimaginable in today's arena rock concerts). But as a historian, I also felt a responsibility to fill

in the larger context: what the world was going through and what Dylan was up to in the autumn of 1964. The murders of three civil-rights workers in Mississippi, the first signs that America would escalate its involvement in Vietnam, the successful test of an atomic weapon by Communist China, had all marked the beginning of a scarier phase in national and world affairs. Dylan, meanwhile, had been moving away from the fixed moral position of his earlier work into a more personal and impressionistic vein, and would soon return, though in wholly new ways, to the electrified music that had been his first love as a teenager.

I tried to braid the background together with my memories, hoping to recapture the sense of what it was like to see things through thirteen-year-old eyes (and say it with a bit of a thirteen-year-old's voice) while sustaining what authority I had as a professional historian who by now was more than twice as old as Bob Dylan was that night. I tried to evoke the feeling of being a teenage cultural insider, self-consciously nestled as close to the center of hipness as possible, with an edge of callow smugness and little awareness of my own good fortune. Maybe half of us in the audience had worked an honest day in our lives, and few had come close to getting our skulls cracked defying Jim Crow. But we thought we were advanced and special, and for us the concert was partly an act of collective self-ratification. I wanted my notes to evoke the joy as well as the folly of that youthful New York moment.

The notes were eventually nominated for a Grammy Award, which was another kind of ratification, although the idea of middle-aged folly occurred to me as well. The attention that the nomination received surprised me. The recording industry's manufacture of spectacle had become so grand that even the low-priority Best Album Notes category got newspaper play. I tried not to kid myself too much about the hoopla: an Ivy League history professor getting picked to go to Los Angeles along with Usher and Green Day and Alicia Keys is an obvious "man bites dog" filler story. I did, though, take pride in how what I wrote interested people well outside my usual circles. As awards day closed in, I began to get that self-consciously hip feeling back again: going to the Grammys was pretty exciting. By the time I arrived in Los Angeles, I badly wanted to win.

I didn't. It hurt when the presenter read someone else's name, and I couldn't hide it. From the row in front of mine, an elegantly dressed woman, older than I, noticed my dejection and extended her hand.

"Don't you worry, honey, I didn't win myself, and ain't it great being here?" I kissed her hand, suddenly feeling better, grateful to be welcomed,

if only for a weekend, into the ranks of hardworking musicians and artists.

I returned to writing my history books and teaching my history classes, but also continued to write an occasional essay and deliver an occasional lecture on aspects of American music, including Dylan's work. In 2004, with Greil Marcus, I co-edited *The Rose and the Briar,* an anthology of essays, short stories, poetry, and cartoons based on various American ballads, to which I contributed an essay on the old blues song "Delia," performed by Dylan on *World Gone Wrong.* Then, three years after losing the Grammy, with another history book done, I began thinking about attempting a more ambitious piece of music writing, a coherent commentary on Dylan's development as well as his achievements, and on his connections to enduring currents in American history and culture.

To be sure, my essays had skipped over a lot, ignoring almost completely the years from 1966 to 1992—a quarter century in which, according to the not entirely ironic announcement by Al Santos, Dylan's stage manager, that precedes every live show, Dylan "disappeared into a haze of substance abuse [and] emerged to find Jesus" before he "suddenly shifted gears, releasing some of the strongest music of his career beginning in the late nineties." All that made sense to me, and I thought that the years I had covered in my essays coincidentally had brought Dylan's most concentrated periods of powerful creativity, including the most powerful of all, between 1964 and 1966. Without quite realizing it, I had written about some of the high points of two of the major phases in Dylan's career—reason enough, I told myself, to see what they might look like assembled between two covers, revised as the chapters of a much longer book. I had also written about certain musical genres and figures to whom Dylan himself had alluded, if only tacitly, as personal influences, ranging from the shape-note choral music in the nineteenth-century Sacred Harp tradition to the leftist-influenced orchestral Americana of Aaron Copland. These pieces were no more comprehensive in their coverage than my essays on Dylan were. But they hinted at some connections I wanted to make between Dylan's work and American history and culture.

There is plenty of fascinating commentary on Dylan's songs, and there are several informative biographies. But even the best of these books do not contain all of what I have wanted to know about Dylan's music and

the strains in American life that have provoked and informed it. I have never been interested in simply tracking down, listing, and analyzing the songs and recordings that influenced Dylan, important though this task is to understanding his work. I have instead been curious about when, how, and why Dylan picked up on certain forerunners, as well as certain of his own contemporaries; about the milieu in which those influences lived and labored and how they had evolved; and about how Dylan, ever evolving himself, finally combined and transformed their work. What do those tangled influences tell us about America? What do they tell us about Bob Dylan? What does *America* tell us about Bob Dylan—and what does Dylan's work tell us about America? These are the questions that finally pushed me to write this book.

While I was preparing to write about *"Love and Theft"* in late summer 2001, I thought I perceived (and it turned out to be a pretty obvious observation) that the album was a kind of minstrel show, in which Dylan had assembled bits and pieces of older American music and literature (and not just American music and literature) and recombined them in his own way. The musical reconstructions appeared to be rooted in what Pete Seeger has called "the folk process," and in Dylan's lifelong practice of transforming words and melodies for his own use. But they also now appeared to be more sophisticated, self-conscious, and elusive as well as allusive, drawing upon sources from well outside the folk mainstream (ranging from Virgil's *Aeneid* to mainstream pop tunes from the 1920s and 1930s), as well as from classic blues recordings by Charley Patton and the Mississippi Sheiks. I came to see it as an urbane if, to some, problematic twist in Dylan's art, the latest of his reshapings of old American musical traditions shared by the minstrels, songsters, and vaudevillians, as well as the folk and blues singers. I called his reshapings of those traditions modern minstrelsy.

I originally imagined writing a book that would build on my essay about *"Love and Theft"* and examine how older forms of adaptation prepared the way for Dylan the modern minstrel—but I quickly scrapped that idea. For one thing, as interesting as his later endeavors have been, I think that Dylan completed by far his strongest work, mixing tradition and utter originality, in the mid-1960s and mid-1970s, a judgment

he himself appears to share.* A narrative that even appeared to climb ever upward toward Dylan's fully mature output would be nonsense. For another thing, Dylan's career has been an unsteady pilgrimage, passing through deep troughs as well as high points, including a prolonged period in the 1980s when, again by his own admission, his work seemed to be spinning in circles. Any account of Dylan's cultural importance must be built out of his ups and downs, zigs and zags, and relate how he has carried his art from one phase to another. Finally, although Dylan has long been a constant innovator—or, as the Irish troubadour Liam Clancy once called him, a "shape-changer"—his work has also exhibited strong continuities. Dylan has never stuck to one style for too long, but neither has he forgotten or forsaken or wasted anything he has ever learned. Anyone interested in appreciating Dylan's body of work must face the challenge of owning its paradoxical and unstable combination of tradition and defiance.

I decided instead to examine some of the more important early influences on Dylan and then focus on Dylan's work from the 1960s to the present at certain important junctures. The opening chapters might seem to have little to do with Dylan, especially in their early sections, as they trace the origins and cultural importance of influential people or currents, but they do in time bring Dylan into the story, and show how he connected with the forerunners, sometimes directly, sometimes not. A chapter about Dylan's song "Blind Willie McTell," as well as chapters about "Delia" and another song from *World Gone Wrong,* "Lone Pilgrim," also require extended passages explaining important background material. I ask for the reader's indulgence to hang on during all of these chapters, assured that the connections to Bob Dylan will be revealed soon enough. The remaining chapters deal more directly with Dylan from the start.

Accounts of Dylan's music normally begin with his immersion in the songs and style of Woody Guthrie, his first musical idol (and, he has said, his last), and with the folk revival that grew out of the left-wing hootenannies of the 1940s. This approach makes sense, but it has become overly familiar, and it slights the influence of the much larger cultural

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* In a television interview with Ed Bradley, broadcast by CBS late in 2004, Dylan marveled at the lyrics of old songs such as "It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)" and mused: "I don't do that anymore. I don't know how I got to write those songs. Those early songs were almost magically written."

and political spirit, initially associated with the Communist Party and its so-called Popular Front efforts to broaden its political appeal in the mid-1930s, which pervaded American life during the 1940s—Bob Dylan's formative boyhood years.

In order to take a fuller and fresher look at this important part of Dylan's cultural background, I decided to focus on Popular Front music seemingly very different from Guthrie's ballads and talking blues—the orchestral compositions of Aaron Copland. The choice may seem extremely odd. Yet even though the connections are now largely forgotten, Copland belonged to leftist musical circles in New York in the mid-1930s that also included some of the major figures in what was becoming the world of folk-music collecting. Copland's beloved compositions of the late 1930s and the 1940s, including *Billy the Kid* and *Rodeo,* may sound today like pleasant, panoramic Americana, but they in fact contained some of the same leftist political impulses that drove the forerunners of the folk-music revival of the 1950s and '60s. Dylan, meanwhile, grew up in a 1940s America where Copland was becoming the living embodiment of serious American music. Copland's music and persona had no obvious or direct effect on the kinds of music Dylan performed and wrote as a young man, but the broader cultural mood that Copland represented certainly did. And insofar as Dylan's career has in part involved translating the materials of American popular song into a new kind of high popular art—challenging yet accessible to ordinary listeners—his artistic aspirations and achievements are not dissimilar to Copland's.

The second chapter concerns the Beat generation writers, in particular Allen Ginsberg. Not only did Dylan eagerly read the Beats before he arrived in Greenwich Village; he and Ginsberg befriended each other at what was, fortuitously, a critical moment in both of their careers. Once again, though, much as with the folk revival, understanding the Beats and their influence on Dylan requires moving back before the 1950s, to battles over literature and aesthetics fought out during World War II on and around the campus of Columbia University. The echoes of those battles—and the spirit of the so-called New Vision that the young Ginsberg and his odd friends promulgated—reappeared later in Dylan's music, most emphatically in the songs on his two great albums completed in 1965, *Bringing It All Back Home* and *Highway 61 Revisited.* Dylan's influence on Ginsberg, at several levels, in turn helped the poet write his great work of 1966, "Wichita Vortex Sutra." And Ginsberg and Dylan's

personal and artistic connections, begun at the end of 1963, would last until Ginsberg's death in 1997.

The remainder of *Bob Dylan in America* takes up Dylan's career at selected and arbitrary but far from random moments: his concert at Philharmonic Hall at the end of October 1964, in which he tried out startling new songs such as "Gates of Eden" and "It's Alright, Ma" (and which I happened to attend); the making of Dylan's landmark album *Blonde on Blonde* in New York and Nashville in 1965–66; the Rolling Thunder Revue tour of 1975; and the birth of one of Dylan's greatest songs, "Blind Willie McTell," recorded (but not released) in 1983. The book then takes a long jump to 1992–93, when Dylan, his career out of joint for a decade, reached back for inspiration in traditional folk music and the early blues. The book covers this pivotal moment in Dylan's career by examining two very different songs that Dylan recorded in 1993: "Delia," one of the first blues songs ever written; and "Lone Pilgrim," an old Sacred Harp hymn. The final chapters consider Dylan's work from *"Love and Theft"* in 2001 through his album of Christmas music, *Christmas in the Heart,* released late in 2009. Although each chapter after Chapter Two takes a particular composition or event as its initial focus, none confines itself strictly to that subject. By roaming through other related material, sometimes leaping back and forth in time, I hope to discuss most of Dylan's greatest work, including albums such as *Blood on the Tracks,* without losing sight of the other great work, in and out of the recording studio, on which I concentrate. I also hope to present some reevaluations of material I heard very differently when first released.

Approaching my subject this way means that people, places, and things sometimes appear and vanish, only to reappear later under somewhat different circumstances. The folklorist John Lomax, for example, turns up in the very first chapter as the head of the Archive of American Folk Song, in connection with the invention of a folksy, Popular Front aesthetic; then he turns up again, five chapters later, in connection with the blues singer Blind Willie McTell. Or to take a smaller but still important example: in Chapter One, the writers in and around the influential periodical *Partisan Review* turn up as anti-Stalinist leftist critics of Aaron Copland; in Chapter Two, the *Partisan Review* intellectual, critic, and Columbia English professor Lionel Trilling appears, at roughly the same time, the mid-1940s, as the ambivalent antagonist of Allen Ginsberg and the incipient Beat generation. Where absolutely necessary to keeping the

story line clear, I have alluded to earlier appearances by various figures or groups. But to pause and point out all of these recurrences, and the cultural circuits they represent, would interrupt the flow of the narrative and turn the book into an overlong encyclopedia of music and literary history. Readers should thus be prepared to encounter characters or institutions already discussed earlier in the book, but in very different contexts—and, much as when these kinds of things happen in the rest of life, make the necessary adjustments of perception and understanding.

Although it traces the jagged arc of a mercurial artist, through thrilling highs and (more cursorily) crushing lows, *Bob Dylan in America* is chiefly concerned with placing Dylan's work in its wider historical and artistic contexts. This has required recognizing Dylan as an artist who is deeply attuned to American history as well as American culture, and to the connections between the past and the present. Reflecting on *"Love and Theft"* before its release, I was impressed all over again by Dylan's immersion in literature and popular music, especially American literature and music—something he would discuss at length a few years later in the first volume of *Chronicles.* But I was also impressed by his ability to crisscross through time and space. It could be 1927 or 1840 or biblical time in a Bob Dylan song, and it is always right now too. Dylan's genius rests not simply on his knowledge of all of these eras and their sounds and images but also on his ability to write and sing in more than one era at once. Partly, this skill bespeaks the magpie quality that is the essence of Dylan's modern minstrelsy—what many friends and critics early in his career called his sponge-like thirst for material that he might appropriate and make his own. Partly, it stems from some very specific innovations that Dylan undertook in the mid-1970s. But every artist is, to some extent, a thief; the trick is to get away with it by making of it something new. Dylan at his best has the singular ability not only to do this superbly but also to make the present and the past feel like each other.

Dylan has never limited himself to loving and stealing things from other Americans. But his historical as well as melodic themes have constantly recurred to the American past and the American present, and are built mainly out of American tropes and chords. There are many ways to understand him and his work; the efforts presented here describe him not simply as someone who comes out of the United States, or whose art does, but also as someone who has dug inside America as deeply as any artist ever has. He belongs to an American entertainment tradition that

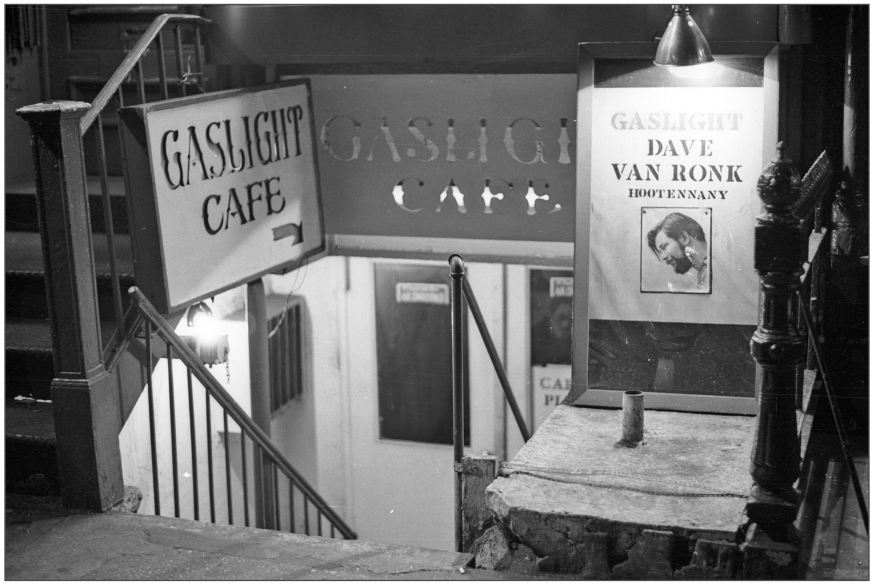
runs back at least as far as Daniel Decatur Emmett (the Ohio-born, anti-slavery minstrel who wrote "Dixie") and that Dylan helped reinvent in the subterranean Gaslight Cafe in the 1960s. But he belongs to another tradition as well, that of Whitman, Melville, and Poe, which sees the everyday in American symbols and the symbolic in the everyday, and then tells stories about it. Some of those stories can be taken to be, literally, about America, but they are all constructed in America, out of all of its bafflements and mysticism, hopes and hurts.

One of the trickier difficulties in appreciating Dylan's art involves distinguishing it, as far as is possible, from his carefully crafted, continually changing public image. To be sure, his image and his art are closely related, and each affects the other. The same could be said for any performing artist and for any number of literary figures, not just in our own time, but going back at least as far as that of Jenny Lind and Walt Whitman. But Dylan has been particularly skilled at manufacturing and handling his persona and then hiding behind it, and this can mislead any writer. In good times, as in recent years—when he has presented himself as the living embodiment of all the previous Bob Dylans wrapped into one, as well as of almost every variety of traditional and commercial American popular music—the image is powerful enough to transfix his admirers and deflect criticism of his music. (It can also invite contrarian debunking.) In bad times, as in much of the 1980s, Dylan's unfocused image can prompt either unduly harsh criticism of everything he produces or loyalist efforts to praise it all, or at least some of it, beyond its worth.

Although I have backed away from focusing too much on Dylan's image in American culture, an interesting topic in itself, I have tried to check my own evolving enthusiasms for and disappointments in Dylan as a public figure in considering his art—or at least, as in the chapter on the Philharmonic Hall concert in 1964, I have tried to acknowledge those feelings and incorporate them into my analysis. More an exercise in the historical appreciation of an artist's work than a piece of conventional cultural criticism, the book dwells on some of the more interesting phases of Dylan's career, and spends far less time on the less interesting ones. In order not simply to rehash familiar material, I have also devoted less space than I might have to the years from 1962 to 1966, which have attracted the most attention until now, while devoting more to Dylan's work in recent years, on which historical writing has just begun to appear. Throughout, though, the book takes account of where and when I think

Dylan has succeeded and where and when he has stumbled, even in his most fruitful periods.

Here, then, are a series of takes on Dylan in America. Read them as hints and provocations, written in the spirit that holds hints, diffused clues, and indirections as the most we can look forward to before returning to the work itself—to Dylan's work and to each of our own.



The stairway down to the Gaslight Cafe, New York.