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## Politics, Modernism, and Bob Dylan's Search for a "Usable Past" in the Rolling Thunder Revue

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Two truisms dominate critical responses to Bob Dylan in the twenty first century. One sees in Dylan's live performances a dedication to the perpetual reinvention of his own songs, an "injunction to make it new," as Sean Wilentz describes it, in his account of a show he attended on Dylan's "Rolling Thunder Revue" in New England, in 1975 (Wilentz 2010: 150). The playing out of this modernist injunction in live performance has been widely seen as evidence of Dylan's enduring iconoclasm, a smashing of statues that extends, across his career as a whole, to recurring cycles of creative-destruction in the songs and personae of "Bob Dylan" himself. A second orthodoxy sees in the arc of Dylan's career a shifting away from "politics"—narrowly defined as the New Left activism of some of Dylan's songs in the early 1960s—towards forms of socially-disengaged individualism (see Hagstrom-Miller 2011). These truisms come together in the presumption that Dylan's modernism has led, in effect, to a triumph of style over substance, the injunction to make it new leading to the further evisceration of his old "political" back catalogue in live performance, so that Dylan's aesthetic individualism on stage comes to reflect and reinforce his shift away from "politics" in the studio.

This essay explores some of the limitations in these positions, testing them against the Rolling Thunder Revue—a fluid collective of musicians, writers and filmmakers who toured with Dylan in towns and cities across New England and Canada between October and December 1975, finishing in New York with the "Night of the Hurricane," a concert at Madison Square Garden in aid of Rubin "Hurricane" Carter, a black boxer falsely imprisoned, his supporters claimed, for a murder he did not commit. Rolling Thunder's "political intervention" (Denning 31) on behalf of Rubin Carter, who Dylan had visited in prison the previous spring, allied itself with the organised campaign to free Carter led by screenwriter, Richard Solomon, and adman, George Lois. The centrepiece of each night's show was an angry new Dylan song about Carter's case, "Hurricane", a cinematic tour de force displaying Brechtian tendencies and, in the contexts in which it was performed by the Rolling Thunder Revue, a powerful intertextuality with Dylan's older work. Late in the tour, the day before the show at the Garden, Revue members played a private, seven-song set for an audience of inmates, including Rubin Carter, at Trenton Jail in Clinton, New Jersey.

The assumption that Dylan began drifting away from "politics" in the middle-1960s, and that, appearances at benefit concerts aside, his career has maintained this broad trajectory, is grounded in a very narrow definition of political activity and art. This is surprising, given the serious critical attention Dylan's work has always received, and the intellectual influence of Cultural Studies on criticism. In Cultural Studies, "politics" inheres in a multitude of things

other than the overtly or intentionally political: in the forms and styles that narratives take, just as much as their content; in the historical and social contexts in which writers, texts and audiences are conditioned or “constructed”; in the institutions through which narratives are processed, delivered and received; in the traditions within which individual texts are embedded; in the meanings generated by audiences, whatever the aims or intentions of “authors.” In critical approaches synonymous with Cultural Studies, culture is always political because the world we live in is a product of power, privilege, hierarchy, conflict, division, exclusion and exploitation. The world is the embodiment of these things, and culture is part of that world: it represents that world to us, and is produced and received within it. From this perspective the stories that culture tells, and the forms in which it tells them, are always, necessarily and unavoidably, “political.”

The narrowing of critical attention to politics in Dylan to the brief period in the early 1960s, when Dylan wrote songs about black civil rights and the Bomb, and performed at voter registration drives in Mississippi and at the March on Washington with Martin Luther King, is also surprising because Dylan himself has regularly positioned his own work in explicit tension with what we might call the dominant values, or ideologies, of mainstream American life. Recalling his immersion in traditional folk music and ‘Beat’ culture during his late teens and early twenties in the first volume of his autobiography, *Chronicles* (2004), Dylan described “the devil” confronting the young artist as “bourgeois conventionality, social artificiality and the man in the gray flannel suit”. The folk traditions he had discovered in the coffee houses and clubs of Dinkytown, Minneapolis and Greenwich Village, New York, Dylan suggested, “automatically went up against the grain of all these things” (Dylan 2004: 247-8). In *Chronicles*, Dylan repeatedly describes folk music as forms of expression that “transcended the immediate culture” (27). “Folk songs,” he says, “were the underground story” (103), his entry point to “a parallel universe” (235), “a more brilliant dimension” (236), “my preceptor and guide into some altered consciousness of reality, some different republic, some liberated republic” (34). The material the young Dylan was singing was “anti-big mainstream” (228–29). Where the three minute popular song “had deadly intentions and was destroying the minds and imaginations of the young” (55), “What I was into was the traditional stuff with a capital T and it was as far away from the mondo teeno scene as you could get” (228).

This essay suggests that truisms about Dylan’s modernism have obscured deeper-lying continuities in his work: not least a career-shaping search in the songs and their live performance for positions, or spaces, that would allow Dylan to speak coherently against “official” centres of power and the “big mainstream”; a search in which the aesthetic injunction to make it new has often played an instrumental part. In the Rolling Thunder Revue, Dylan’s modernism can be traced not only in his confrontational stagecraft, and in the creative-destruction of his own back catalogue, but also in the clear influence of specific figures and traditions: notably cubism, the teaching of Norman Raeban—an affiliate of the Ashcan School (Robert Henri, John Sloan, George Luks, George Bellows) and an acquaintance of Picasso, Chagall and Chaim Soutine—and the “epic theatre” of Bertolt Brecht. The rest of this essay characterises Rolling Thunder’s modernism as a primary lever

in its politics and in the engineering of new countercultural space around the figure of Rubin “Hurricane” Carter out of which these politics were built.

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Comprising at its most expansive a cast and crew of around one hundred people, the Rolling Thunder Revue was avowedly populist, a tribute to old-time carnivals and medicine shows, “more like a pageant or a fete” (Wilentz 2010: 134) than a conventional rock concert. For Dylan it was a “circus” (142, 168–70) which drew directly on the *commedia dell’arte*, a tradition of Italian street theatre dating from the Middle Ages.<sup>1</sup> As its size and its antecedents suggest, the Rolling Thunder Revue was a single entity made up of many different parts. As well as two sets by Dylan, each concert included sets by the Revue’s house band, Guam, and a multitude of established and emerging solo performers including Joan Baez, Joni Mitchell, Ronnee Blakely, Ramblin’ Jack Elliott, Mick Ronson and Roger McGuinn. The Rolling Thunder Revue was also a film—*Renaldo & Clara* (1978) as it would later be known, a largely improvised psychodrama with cubist leanings, a tendency to mysticism, and little in the way of discernible narrative—built around a love triangle among characters played by Dylan, his wife Sara, and Baez. Making the film, on the road, was one of Dylan’s key objectives with the tour, and to this end he also employed a film crew and a writer, the dramatist Sam Shepard, whose brief was to help write and direct scenes. It was a brief that Shepard found hard to fulfil amid the chaos he found in the daily life of such a huge and fluid touring organisation as the Rolling Thunder Revue. But the book Shepard wrote instead, *Rolling Thunder Logbook* (1977)—part diary, part memoir, a stream of moments from the tour rendered in highly subjective fragments—knits itself so closely into the broader political and aesthetic logic of the Revue that it becomes hard to differentiate Sam Shepard’s version of Rolling Thunder from the objectives and effects of the enterprise as a whole.

The same might be said of Larry Sloman’s *On the Road with Bob Dylan* (1978). Sloman, a journalist influenced by the “gonzo” and “new journalism” styles of the ‘60s and ‘70s, was also invited on the tour by Dylan, personally, where he wrote dispatches for *Rolling Stone* magazine and received daily expenses on the Revue payroll. Unlike *Renaldo & Clara*, which has always been seen as core to Rolling Thunder’s aesthetic, *Rolling Thunder Logbook* and *On the Road with Bob Dylan* have always been marginal in critical and fan accounts, usually mentioned in passing or in footnotes and treated more as “secondary” sources than as integral parts of the Revue. As writers who were invited and recompensed members of the tour, Sloman’s and Shepard’s contributions to the “primary text” of Rolling Thunder, particularly its diffuse structure and the modernist effects this generates, have been underestimated—where they have figured at all—in existing accounts. One thing this essay will hope to do is build Sloman and Shepard back into the political and artistic centre of the Rolling Thunder Revue, according *Rolling Thunder Logbook* and *On the Road with Bob Dylan* the same privileged significance in the broader text of Rolling Thunder as is conventionally given to *Renaldo & Clara*.

It is useful to begin a discussion of the Rolling Thunder Revue with Sloman and Shepard because they help clarify at the outset the determinedly countercultural nature of the

Revue's "political intervention." In the gonzo style favoured by Sloman, Rolling Thunder was "a guerrilla attack on the hamlets of Middle America" (Sloman 2002: 1). In every place they visit, Sloman goes out looking for extras for the film, digging up a steady stream of alienated teenagers, street-people, transvestites, prostitutes and freaks from bars and clubs on the seedier side of town. In Newport, he gleefully tells the story of a guided tour around the Vanderbilt mansion—a shrine to bourgeois wealth and restraint built by a family synonymous with scandal and the excesses of the Gilded Age—where the "saccharine" "monotone" tour-guide turns "green" as Rob Stoner, Roger McGuinn and Peter Orlovsky unleash an increasingly lewd counter-commentary of their own on the bedrooms and bathrooms of the super-rich (Sloman 2002: 115–16). "I'd hate to be straight in this house," Ramblin' Jack observes, to a library wall carved to look like books (116).

This self-conscious positioning of the Revue in conflict with bourgeois privilege and "middle-class" (Shepard 1978: 31) respectability becomes a major theme in Shepard's book too, forced to the forefront of the narrative in fragments like "'Kaddish' on the Mah-Jongg Circuit," where Shepard describes an audience of "over-the-top Jewish ladies" (28) wincing their way through an energetic Allen Ginsberg reading of "Kaddish" in the dining room of the Seacrest Hotel in Falmouth, where the Revue conducted final rehearsals for the opening night in Plymouth. In Shepard's account, Ginsberg's audience moves "from patient acquiescence to giggled embarrassment to downright disgust," as the long, painful poem to Ginsberg's mother slides into his characteristic blend of "Eastern mysticism, Hell's Angel meditation, acid, politics, and the music of words" (28). "The ladies sit through it," Shepard observes, "Captured in their own seaside resort" (28).

Rolling Thunder's self-conscious positioning of itself as a countercultural enterprise also extended to its "somewhat Utopian" (Sloman 2002: 21) logistical and commercial organisation, which was avowedly non- or anti-corporate in design. Sloman's notion of the "utopian" remains grounded, rather disappointingly, in a conservative model of small-scale capitalism, "that spark of individual entrepreneurship," as he calls it, "in a mass society fragmented by big business and big government" (21). But within these limitations the Revue saw itself as an entirely countercultural entity. With no new album to promote—*Desire* had been recorded but not released—the commercially unviable troupe, seventy to a hundred strong at different stages of the trip, arrived in towns virtually unannounced, usually playing small, intimate venues booked at the last minute, with all the arrangements for transport, accommodation, bookings and ticketing overseen by hand-picked friends and associates.

When an early pitch for financial backing to Dylan's label, CBS, was returned with a one-word response—"Bullshit!"—pencilled on the first page (Sloman 2002: 21), Dylan, who was without a manager at the time, and who was able to direct his own affairs to a greater extent than at any time in his career (Griffin 2010: 25), made the most of the free hand he had been given. Recruiting Lou Kemp, his boyhood friend from Duluth, as tour manager, Dylan spent several weeks wandering the streets, bars and clubs of Greenwich Village, issuing invitations to join the tour. While Dylan seems to have had a clear sense of the kind of people he wanted, the process by which they were recruited was haphazard. Scarlet

Rivera, a complete unknown to Dylan whose violin would become integral to the otherworldly textures of *Desire* and Rolling Thunder, was approached when Dylan spotted her walking to a rehearsal on Second Avenue. Even Joan Baez, whose solo-performances and duets with Dylan made her a defining presence throughout the tour, only received the call at very short notice and had to cancel a tour of her own (which was already scheduled and sold) in order to make the trip.

The lack of commercial logic and the haphazard “do it yourself” administration of the tour caused problems, forcing the Revue into larger venues in some towns, sometimes doubling up with matinee and evening shows in the same hall in order to meet costs. Even Sloman, a quintessential countercultural voice of the mid-1970s, expresses irritation at times with the Revue’s slapdash approach to publicity and marketing (tour members stood on street-corners and college campuses distributing leaflets, days before the tour hit town). “Is this a way to run a tour?,” Sloman asks at one point. “Run around like meshuganas a week before the concert, passing out handbills as if for the hottest massage parlor in town? Wake up kids, stick a leaflet in their hands, and film it?” (Sloman 2002: 83).

The Revue’s countercultural politics also show themselves in the collectivist ethic underpinning Rolling Thunder’s assumptions about authorship and performance; assumptions Dylan had begun exploring in the songs he had just recorded for *Desire*, most of which were co-written by the theatrical director and songwriter, Jacques Levy, who would accompany Dylan on the road as stage director for the Rolling Thunder Revue. “It’s impossible to remember now who did what,” Levy told Sloman, as he recalled writing *Desire*. “It’s like we’d push each other in the sense that he’ll have an idea, then I’ll have an idea, then he’ll have an idea until finally we get to a point where we both recognize what the right idea is and what the right words are and whether it comes from him or from me it doesn’t make a difference” (Sloman 2002: 12). It was, Levy says, “a totally co-operative venture” (12). Six of the songs from *Desire* would be fixtures in every performance Dylan gave for the Rolling Thunder Revue.

As Wilentz notes, there was never any doubt about who the star was (Wilentz 2010: 148), but the willingness with which Dylan yielded major parts of the Revue to others—to the myriad of musicians who performed on the tour, for example, and to the film-makers and writers who were integral to its artistic logic and vision—tells us a lot, not just about Rolling Thunder’s countercultural collectivism, but also about the dispersed and heterogeneous aesthetic Dylan was trying to create. Rolling Thunder’s collective approach to performance and “the road” is the most critically celebrated aspect of the tour, and Michael Denning’s description of its “utopian promise of a new artistic community” (Denning 2009: 29) is indicative of a broad critical consensus on this.<sup>2</sup> Equally important, however, but barely elaborated in the standard critical accounts, are the decentred and fragmented notions of art and performance which this collectivism enables—in the Revue’s privileging of the multiple, and formally distinct, inputs of musicians, film-makers and writers.

Here, it may be possible to trace in new ways the influence of Norman Raeban, the painter and intellectual with whom Dylan studied visual composition for two months in the spring and summer of 1974. Raeban has been widely discussed as a key influence on Dylan’s

writing for *Blood on the Tracks* (1974) (see Carvill 2010; Griffin 2010: 123–24; Heylin 1991: 243–45; Wilentz 2010: 137–40), songs from which—notably “Tangled Up in Blue”—featured regularly in Rolling Thunder set-lists. One thing Dylan learned from Raeban’s painting classes was how to engineer multiple perspectives on an object, experience or memory within the same song, the creation of diverse, simultaneous viewpoints in the narrative “permitting a clearer, more concentrated focus on the objects or object at hand” (Wilentz 2010: 140). In the songs on *Blood on the Tracks*, most evidently in “Tangled Up In Blue,” this happens both spatially—so that objects, scenes or characters are viewed, as Wilentz puts it, from “straight on and from above, simultaneously” (139)—and temporally, so that instead of linear stories with a beginning, a middle and an end, the writing collapses past, present and future into a single frame, successive verses or lines switching the temporal setting of events. “I wanted to defy time,” Dylan observed, in a much quoted observation about “Tangled Up in Blue,” “so that the story took place in the present and the past at the same time. When you look at a painting, you can see any part of it or see all of it together. I wanted that song to be like a painting” (Heylin 1991: 245).

The Raebian methods Dylan employed on *Blood on the Tracks* to create multiple simultaneous perspectives in the songs have been compared to cubism, particularly so in critical discussion of “Tangled Up in Blue” (see Carvill 2010) where the synchronic narrative is underpinned by shifting personal pronouns which confuse, merge and overlap the identities of the song’s protagonists and its narrator. Dylan has referred on several occasions to his experimentation with cubist technique, and to the influence of Picasso on his work (see Dylan 2004: 55, 269). Significantly, one of these references came in an interview with *Rolling Stone* in 1977 (Cott 1977), when Dylan cited Cezanne as an influence on *Renaldo & Clara*, the film at the artistic centre of the Rolling Thunder Revue.

That cubism was on Dylan’s mind in the mid-1970s allows us to qualify the conventional critical focus on Rolling Thunder’s collectivism, by dwelling instead on the essential differences between the music(s), the books and the film constituting the Revue as an aesthetic “whole”; on the alternative, synchronic perspectives opened by each and on the creative and personal differences that broke out among the film crew, writers and musicians, as the tour wound its way north through New England. As well as a countercultural stab at utopian community through art, Rolling Thunder’s collectivism might also be seen less as a unity and more as an assemblage of autonomous parts and perspectives, a heightened Raebian-cubist form whose provision of multiple simultaneous viewpoints, in music/s, film and words, opens multiple synchronic perspectives on a multiplicity of things—on Rubin Carter, on New England, on the state of the Union, on a cultural climate “festering with Bicentennial madness” (Shepard 1978: 45), on the folk and popular traditions in which Rolling Thunder locates itself, and on several “Bob Dylans” at once.

If Dylan’s amalgam of cubism and Raebian modernism sheds light on the formal and artistic logic of the Revue, the show’s confrontational stagecraft may also owe something to another key figure in the twentieth century avant-garde, Bertolt Brecht, whose “Epic Theatre” put the alienation of audiences at the centre of dramatic technique. Most striking

in Wilentz's account of the Rolling Thunder show he attended in New Haven is the "truly weird" (Wilentz 2010: 143) nature of the experience. To Wilentz, the Revue was "utterly different" (150). New and unfamiliar songs were given their first outing. Songs from Dylan's past were played live for the very first time. There were cover versions of old forgotten folk and pop songs. More familiar songs were given radical new arrangements, while material from the previous year's *Blood on the Tracks* also had different lyrics. Of the fifteen songs Dylan performed on the opening night in Plymouth, no fewer than eight had never been played in public, while a ninth—"When I Paint My Masterpiece" (a key song, as set opener)—had only been played once before and was now drastically re-arranged. Bafflingly, throughout each show Dylan also performed in a white greasepaint mask, beginning some performances wearing a second, transparent mask over the top of the greasepaint, then vanishing for entire segments of the show as a revolving door of performers came and went. "Musicians strayed all over the stage," Wilentz recalls, "none of them recognizable to me" (142).

The mark Brecht left on Dylan in New York during the early '60s has often been noted in Dylan criticism, but usually in discussion of his songwriting, not his stagecraft, and generally in connection with songs Dylan wrote a decade or more before Rolling Thunder (indicatively, see Jacobi 2009: 75; Wilentz 2010: 42–3; Heylin 1991: 76). In *Chronicles*, Dylan talks about a performance of Brecht's songs he attended at the Theatre de Lys on Christopher Street in Greenwich Village, and his fascination with one song in particular, "Pirate Jenny", a song he compares to Picasso's *Guernica* (Dylan 2004: 275). He also identifies a number of songs written between 1962 and 1964, including "It's Alright Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)" and "Mr. Tambourine Man" (both of which were performed by the Rolling Thunder Revue), citing Brecht as their main creative influence. Were it not for Brecht, Dylan concedes, "it might not have dawned on me to write them, that songs like these could be written" (Dylan 2004: 287).

The disorientation felt by Wilentz in New Haven, and his difficulty in identifying with the "Bob Dylan" who appeared on stage, are characteristic Brechtian effects.<sup>3</sup> Brecht's "Epic Theatre" reacted against dominant forms of dramatic naturalism, which Brecht felt immersed audiences in falsified versions of reality that purged the emotions (including potentially dangerous or dissenting emotions such as anger or despair, or elation at transgressive ideas and behaviour) through the experience of empathy or identification with actors. Brecht's Marxism led him to view naturalist drama as an ideological tool that pacified audiences through their experience of emotional catharsis. Positioned against this, Brecht built Epic Theatre around the notion of *verfremdungseffekt*, the deliberate alienating of audiences from the people and events on stage, a manoeuvre he felt was essential to counter the hypnotic functioning of orthodox naturalism. Brechtian *verfremdungseffekt* disturbs, unsettles and draws attention to the falsified experience of theatrical performance, displacing the possibility of emotional identification with the individuals on stage by fostering, instead, a critical distance between the audience and the play—"breaking the magic spell," as Brecht's translator John Willett puts it, "jerking the spectator out of his torpor and making him use his critical sense" (Willett 1977: 172)—an exemplary aim in a countercultural "political intervention" like the Rolling Thunder Revue.

In a famous essay, “Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting” (1936), Brecht wrote admiringly of traditions in Chinese theatre which he felt were analogous to *verfremdungseffekt*. At times he sounds like Sean Wilentz talking about the Rolling Thunder Revue. In China, Brecht wrote, “The artist’s object is to appear strange and even surprising to the audience. He achieves this by looking strangely at himself and his work” (Brecht 1978: 92). In a performance Brecht witnessed by the Mei Lan-fang theatre company in Moscow in 1935, he described how “The performer’s self-observation, an artful and artistic act of self-alienation, stopped the spectator from losing himself in the character completely, i.e. to the point of giving up his own identity, and lent a splendid remoteness to the events” (92–93).

Clinton Heylin links the white greasepaint mask Dylan wore during the Rolling Thunder Revue to traditions of Italian street-theatre—the *commedia dell’arte*, cited by Dylan as an influence on the tour—where the players often wore masks. Another likely source for Dylan’s use of the white mask might be Brecht. One way Chinese theatre limits the possibility for emotional identification between actors and audience is through the use of masks, which are worn, partly, to create a disjunction between the emotion the actor portrays and the emotion his face reveals. “If the actor at a particular point unexpectedly shows a completely white face,” Brecht writes, “which he has produced mechanically by holding his face in his hands with some white make-up on them,” the *verfremdungseffekt* intervenes “in the form of emotions which need not correspond to those of the character portrayed” (Brecht 1978: 94–5). The effect of this, very much in the manner of Wilentz responding to Dylan’s white mask in New Haven, is to scramble an audience’s ability to sustain an emotional connection with the actor or the character portrayed, while alienating the actor himself, momentarily, from a role he no longer inhabits.

Just as cubism and Raebian modernism flow out of *Blood on the Tracks* and into the Rolling Thunder Revue, it is also possible to trace the influence of Brecht on the material for *Desire*, which Dylan had recorded immediately prior to the tour, versions of which would feature prominently in Rolling Thunder sets. The opening verse of “Hurricane,” for example, was self-consciously stylised as what Jacques Levy called “stage directions” (Heylin 1991: 264) describing the *mise en scène* and the entrance of a main protagonist, Patty Valentine, to the scene of the crime; an introduction that, in more or less orthodox Brechtian terms, undercuts the potential for any easy, naturalistic relationship with the narrative that follows by first drawing attention to its (literally) scripted and staged nature. Rolling Thunder set lists also featured regular performances of three songs in which Dylan immolated his own public status as artist and figurehead: “When I Paint My Masterpiece”, an “ironic song about the limitations on artistic achievement” (Sloman 2002: 70); and “It Ain’t Me, Babe,” and “It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue,” both of which feature speakers who refuse the identities and roles invested in them, vicariously, as acts of wish-fulfilment by others. Scattered throughout Dylan’s sets for the Rolling Thunder Revue—and, in the case of “Masterpiece,” opening his first set of the night with a real statement of intent—these songs’ subversions of the expectations and emotional requirements placed upon “Bob Dylan” by audiences were as Brechtian in their *verfremdungseffekts* as Dylan’s greasepaint mask.

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At first sight, Rolling Thunder's leanings on avant-garde aesthetics like Brechtian theatre and cubism sit a little uneasily alongside its simultaneous reaching for the old, the rooted and the traditional; that is until we recall that the search for a "usable past" is an entirely conventional modernist trope, the shock of the new, or exhaustion with it, generating agonised reflections on rootlessness and the recovery of roots in, for example, a raft of modernist literature from Hemingway, Faulkner and Fitzgerald, to Joyce and T.S. Eliot. The search for a usable countercultural past—a past that might help explain "our present state of madness," as Shepard puts it (Shepard 1978: 45), and map a route beyond it—is of paramount concern to the Rolling Thunder Revue in its mining of popular, folk and avant-garde traditions all the way back to medieval street-theatre and Ancient Egyptian myth.<sup>4</sup> "Rolling Thunder is searching for something," Shepard writes in *Rolling Thunder Logbook*, "Trying to make connections. To find some kind of landmarks along the way" (45), "sniffing through the past for pieces of evidence that could lead us to a truer picture of the present. How did we arrive where we are now? What series of events actually went down to cause us to be at this point in time? Where exactly are we?" (157).

For Bob Dylan personally, in the Rolling Thunder Revue, this quest entailed a rummaging through his own countercultural pasts—as folk troubadour, "protest" singer, rock star and urban hipster—for material that would allow him to reposition his work, once again, in an explicitly antagonistic relationship with official centres of culture and power. As the title of Sloman's *On the Road with Bob Dylan* suggests in its wilful echoing of Kerouac, part of the usable content that Dylan finds in his own past is provided by Beat culture, particularly the influence of Kerouac and Ginsberg. Dylan's relationship with the Beats has become more ambiguous as he has aged (see Dylan 2004: 57–8), but in *Chronicles* he describes Kerouac and Ginsberg as magnetic influences on his youth. "What I was looking for," he writes of his arrival in Minneapolis in 1959, "was what I had read about in *On the Road* ... the great city ... the speed, the sound of it ... what Allen Ginsberg had called 'the hydrogen jukebox world'" (Dylan 2004: 235). The legacies of Beat, including Beat's own countercultural antecedents (notably Emersonian Transcendentalism), were built into Rolling Thunder most visibly in the presence on tour of Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky (Ginsberg in an official capacity as "Tour Bard"), and in the pilgrimage that Revue members made to Kerouac's grave in Lowell, Massachusetts; an episode that was filmed for *Renaldo & Clara* and which features prominently in both Shepard's and Sloman's accounts. Some of the music the Revue performed also wore Beat influences quite openly. Shepard's description of Guam member, Howie Wyeth's, "Holy ancient American piano" (Shepard 1978: 17) could be lifted straight from "Howl" or *Dharma Bums*, as could much of the lyrical content of a Rolling Thunder song such as "Mr Tambourine Man."

The sets Dylan played throughout the tour also drew directly on his own famous countercultural pasts, contextualising the cause of Hurricane Carter in songs about racial injustice (notably, "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll"), emotional and physical incarceration ("I Shall Be Released," "The Water is Wide"), the inevitability of social change ("Blowin' In the Wind," "The Times They are a-Changin'") and imminent apocalypse ("A Hard Rain's a-Gonna fall," "With God On Our Side", "It's Alright Ma (I'm only Bleeding)"). Traditional songs, "The Water Is Wide" and "Wild Mountain Thyme," and Dylan's reworking

of “Dark as a Dungeon”—a Merle Travis song about life and death in the Appalachian coalmines—helped underpin and infuse these pasts with the folk traditions Dylan had embraced in his youth because they “transcended the immediate culture.” In the sections of the show performed by Guam and the raft of guest musicians, the retrieval of usable countercultural pasts was again at the core of Rolling Thunder’s political intervention. “History’s ancient footprints,” as Denning puts it, “were everywhere: the show opened with a half dozen songs by band members without Dylan, which not only sampled the musics he inherited, but conjured up the ghosts of that music, ranging from Bob Neuwirth’s song about Hank Williams to Ramblin’ Jack Elliott’s channelling of Woody Guthrie” (Denning 2009: 36).

At the centre of it all was the new song, “Hurricane,” which Dylan played quite late in the show having already performed both “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll” (drastically rearranged and played early in Dylan’s first set) and “I Shall Be Released,” each of which echoed loudly, and presumably intentionally, in “Hurricane.” The clearest examples in the set of Dylan’s mining and reinvention of his own past, the new arrangements of “Hattie Carroll” and “I Shall Be Released” brought additional depth and meaning to the performance of “Hurricane” with “Hurricane” itself reviving, elaborating and enriching, in turn, the resonance and range of these older songs. For Sloman, writing from the front lines, “Hurricane” was “just like the old protest songs, simple street language, accessible to the masses, no mystification about it, just a clear journalistic account” (Sloman 2002: 123). For Wilentz in New Haven, it was “another odd refraction—and updating—of old times” (Wilentz 2010: 148). In both responses, the overall effect of the evening, as Michael Denning puts it, “was to place Hurricane Carter in a long line of political prisoners and social outlaws, and to give new life and meaning to older, half forgotten songs” (Denning 2009: 36).

The centrality of Rubin Carter to the Rolling Thunder Revue points again to the Revue’s rootedness in a range of traditions and “usable pasts” that flow through the mainsprings of modern American culture. The Revue’s pragmatism—its understanding that culture should be useful, that it should achieve social ends, and that it should be woven for this purpose into the fabric of everyday lives—was identified as a main current of post-revolutionary American culture by de Tocqueville as early as 1840.<sup>5</sup> The populism of the travelling Revue format, and Rolling Thunder’s understanding that culture constitutes forms of civic engagement, are in a direct line from Whitman, as are its emphases on diffusion and multiplicity in a common artistic and political cause.

This pre-modernist sense that culture should knit itself into everyday lives and experience as a “useful” progressive energy and force shows up most clearly in Rolling Thunder’s echoing of the traditional American jeremiad, a highly rhetorical form of social-criticism which remains in widespread use today (one recent study identified Michael Moore and Bill O’Reilly as contemporary “Jeremiahs” [Jendrysik 2008]), and whose roots go all the way back to puritan New England.

In its traditional form the jeremiad has a three-part structure, working first through the denunciation of a “fallen” present, then through the recollection of purer archetypes or traditions against which the present might be measured (sometimes presented as origins or

foundations). Traditionally, the jeremiad ends with a rhetorical promise of redemption, and a renewed commitment to the purity of foundational/original values.

Fittingly, for a Raebian-cubist form like Rolling Thunder, the Revue's jeremiad is multiple and diffuse. Centred around the theme of racial injustice and Hurricane Carter, its parallel dissection of what Shepard calls "Bicentennial madness" and the versions of national memory institutionalised in popular New England iconography give Rolling Thunder's jeremiad a countercultural twist, denouncing "official" archetypes and foundations as part of what needs purging. Some of *Rolling Thunder Logbook's* most memorable moments are the ones in which Shepard paints the New England tourist trail as a reactionary theme park recycling counterfeit versions of American history, while he positions Revue members and the traditions they embody as antithetical, and more meaningful, articulations of national memory. At Plymouth Rock, "The crowds don't seem to recognize Dylan at all," Shepard writes, as the crew film Dylan, Bob Neuwirth, Peter Orlovsky and Jack Elliott staging their own, alternative, landing of the Pilgrims in a dinghy on Plymouth beach. "The whole thing looks," Shepard feels, mixing up his American foundations, "like it's jumped right out of that painting of Washington Crossing the Delaware" (Shepard 1978: 37).<sup>6</sup>

In the National Wax Museum at Plymouth, Revue members come across "a full-scale setting of the landing of the Mayflower, complete with rocking boat, computerized rainfall, and a tape-recorded narration that responds the second you push a black button on the wall" (40). While Ginsberg sits among the exhibit's waxwork Indians in "full-lotus meditative pose," Elliot jumps into the boat and regales a visiting party of schoolchildren with a sea shanty. "This," Shepard notes, "is truly American history" (40, emphasis added). On the facing page, in a fragment titled "Triangle Trade," Shepard sketches the role played by transatlantic slavery in New England's colonial economy (41).<sup>7</sup>

Just as the jeremiads read aloud on civic occasions in puritan New England resolved their writers' anxieties about "backsliding" and the imminent disintegration of the commonwealth in triumphant reassertions of founding values and "mission," so the Rolling Thunder Revue concludes on a more affirmative note. As a conventional, redemptive finale to the Revue's jeremiad, the mass rendition of Woody Guthrie's "This Land is Your Land" — "the counterculture's national anthem", as Wilentz puts it (Wilentz 2010: 166)—with as many of the company as could fit on the stage crowding together to conclude every show, could hardly be bettered.

The connection Shepard makes with colonial-era slavery gives added symbolic weight to the setting of a campaign to free Rubin Carter in New England. But Rolling Thunder's use of jeremiad also alerts us to the Revue's more ambiguous relationships with the mainstream American iconography and narratives of national belonging against which the tour positions itself. Jeremiad can function as a powerful tool of social criticism, but in its traditional form it is often also cathartic, the re-dedicating of author and audience to the purity of a founding value or cause displacing social ills from view while reaffirming, rather than subverting, dominant ideologies or histories. The purpose of puritan jeremiads was to renew their society's existing commitment to a contract with God. The concluding Act of a contemporary jeremiad like Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* derives much of its power

from its repeated appeals to patriotic Americanism. “This Land is Your Land” was written by Woody Guthrie as a rejoinder, and offered as an alternative to, Irving Berlin’s “God Bless America,” but its poetic assertions that America belongs to the people can be read in exactly the same continuum as Berlin, particularly when, as was the case in versions performed by the Rolling Thunder Revue, Guthrie’s verse denouncing private property is left out.

Rolling Thunder’s countercultural influences, particularly its incorporating of Beat culture’s stress on permissive liberty and the sovereign self, further complicates the Revue’s relationship with what Robert Bellah once famously described as “an elaborate and well-institutionalized civil religion” in the U.S. (Bellah 2006: 207)—by which Bellah meant networks of collective belonging and identity “expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols and rituals” (210) that provided “powerful symbols of national solidarity” (221). One implication of Bellah’s argument was that the sheer pervasiveness of core values in the U.S. made a truly oppositional politics difficult to achieve. Where dominant ideologies are embraced to such an extent that they are akin to a national civil religion, even positions that are highly critical of society —particularly these positions, perhaps, given the national pull of homogenising rhetorics about “freedom,” democracy, pluralism and difference— can find themselves easily assimilated. Rolling Thunder’s populist libertarianism, its iconography of cowboys and outlaws, and the small-scale capitalism which keeps the tour on the road, are all drawn from the same deep wells of American civil religion as the mainstream against which the Revue attempts to pit itself.

Considered within the parameters of Bellah’s civil religion, the politics of the Rolling Thunder Revue become harder to read. In the end, part of what saves the show from simple appropriation by what Dylan called “the big mainstream” might be its use of the jeremiad form, whose countercultural reworking finds rotteness in official Americanism and crisis in contemporary social life. Performed alongside the dramatic apocalyptic visions of songs like “A Hard Rain’s a-Gonna Fall” and “It’s Alright Ma (I’m Only Bleeding)”, “Hurricane”’s denunciations of racial injustice sketch a society teetering on the brink of self-destruction, imploding under the weight of its own contradictions, doomed to collapse and dissolution. It is an ineffably modernist vision, a vision that is hard to co-opt, and a sensibility whose politics place the Rolling Thunder Revue at some internal distance from the affirmative values of American civil religion.

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## NOTES

1. “You ever see those Italian troupes that go around in Italy?”, Dylan asks Larry Sloman, in *On the Road with Bob Dylan*. “Those Italian street theaters? Commedia dell’arte. Well, this [the Rolling Thunder Revue] is just an extension of that, only musically” (Sloman 2002: 200).
2. Denning’s points about the racial make-up and sexual politics of the Revue qualify this consensus somewhat (Denning 2009: 39–41).

3. Rolling Thunder's Brechtian qualities have been alluded to in passing, but not elaborated. See, indicatively, Denning's description of the Revue as "a travelling Brechtian circus" (Denning 2009: 29), and his reference to stage-manager, Jaques Levy, as a "Brechtian theatre director" (32).

4. On the myth of Isis in Dylan's "Isis"—performed in Dylan's opening set during every show of the tour—and in *Desire* more widely, see Shelton 1986: 463–68.

5. For Tocqueville, Americans tend to "cultivate those arts which help to make life comfortable rather than those which adorn it. They habitually put use before beauty, and they want beauty itself to be useful". Under conditions of republican democracy, Tocqueville observed, "imagination is not dead, but its chief function is to conceive what may be useful and to portray what is actual" (Tocqueville 1988: 485, 483). The cycles of creative-destruction and perpetual reinvention of Dylan's own personal pasts which are so pronounced in the Rolling Thunder Revue may also be seen in a traditional American idiom about self-reinvention whose canonical articulations would include The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin, Emerson's writings about self-reliance, Melville's *The Confidence Man*, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, a broad spectrum of immigration narratives, genre fiction (particularly the Western) and Hollywood genre film, and pop culture characters from Marvel comics to Donald Draper in *Mad Men*.

6. *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1851) is an iconic oil painting by Emanuel Leutze, depicting George Washington leading the Continental Army across the Delaware River on Christmas night, 1776, at the start of the Battle of Trenton.

7. Goods from New England were traded in the Indies for sugar and molasses, which were turned into rum and traded in Africa for slaves, who were then sold back to the Indies. "That's how we did it," Shepard concludes the fragment, "way back in those days" (41, emphasis added).

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