

This is what salvation must be like after a while

Lifelong Dylan-freak Mike Manson on what the *Seven Ages of Dylan* was all about

Bob Dylan played at the Colston Hall, Bristol on May 10 1966. During the second half of the concert, when he was joined by the Band, members of the audience walked out in protest. From Bristol, Dylan headed for Cardiff. It was during the wait for the Aust Ferry that Barry Feinstein took his photograph of Dylan standing by a Rolls Royce looking inscrutable behind shades. You can see the not-yet-opened Severn Bridge behind. Then, in 1987, Colston Hall was used as a backdrop for the film *Hearts of Fire* – starring Dylan, Fiona Flanagan and Rupert Everett. There were two days of filming in Bristol when Dylan hung around and sang a couple of songs to camera.

Twenty-five years later and we have Bristol University's Dylan symposium, organised by Professor Danny Karlin to celebrate Dylan's 70th birthday. Attendees included Baby boomers, literary academics, 'pretentious dons' keen to contextualise the words (there was hardly a mention of the music) and youngsters interested to see what the fuss was about.

For me, Dylan has always been there. I've grown up with him, I've walked away and come back. He's been a constant in all my adult life. I've loved him, I've hated him, at the Isle of Wight festival I slept in a ditch for him. Always enigmatic, always different. As soon as you think you've got him, he changes track. Totally his own man, restless, wandering, pushing the boundaries. These days, when the PM chooses a Smiths' song for his desert island, it's difficult to realise how radical and anti-establishment pop music used to be.

Dylan's done some daft things – hijacking Live Aid for the Mid West farmers, a Christmas record so unbelievably bad it's good. Even now, when I listen to Bob Dylan's *Theme Time Radio Hour*, I'm amazed at the poetry of his speech, his voice and the breadth of his knowledge. How does he know that? Is it true? Bob's voice – sweet, whiney, crooney,

gravelly – subject of a million piss takes – but always, unique.

It was a strangely wonderful and surreal experience to sit in a University lecture theatre and talk about the man behind the mask, the cultural phenomenon of the last half century. Has there ever been so much love in the air of a lecture theatre? We had questions and we wanted answers – but do the answers exist? Does Dylan know what he's doing? He's a chameleon poet, a shape-shifter, a grab-bag of modern culture. You can never tie him down; he makes it up as he goes along. It was all so deliciously Dylanesque. Yet, at times, I felt I was at an autopsy looking at bones and ignoring the flesh. The academics were subsumed in words; the spirit of the work, got lost. There was little discussion as to whether Dylan is a poet. These days, ignoring Geoffrey Hill, Oxford Professor of Poetry, that's a given.

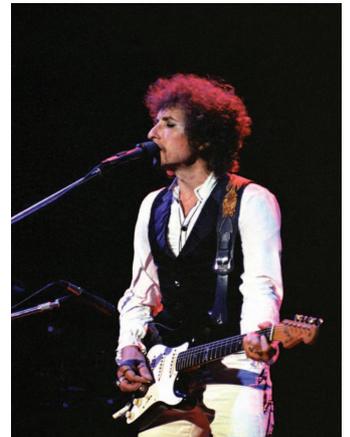
Dylan's lyrics were compared with William Blake, Robert Lowell, Arthur Rimbaud and the Beats. There were papers on some of the recurring themes in his work – 'pity' and 'flood'. There was a talk on how, and why, he changed his name from Zimmerman to Dylan.

Some of the discussion verged on the absurd. One member of the audience asked about Dylan's use of 'pavement' instead of 'sidewalk'. The obvious answer: he used it because it rhymes.

Top of the bill was Michael Grey. Grey first published *Song and Dance Man* in 1972 and has been writing about Dylan ever since. He spoke engagingly about the first time he heard Dylan live in 1965. And apart from Professor Neil Corcoran, he was one of the few people at the conference to have shaken Dylan's notoriously limp hand. In a hushed voice he said he didn't usually tell people about that. We believe you, Michael.

In the end all I wanted to do was go home and listen to the music. That evening I played *Blonde on Blonde*, the best record Dylan ever made – the best record ever made. Happy birthday, Bob.

'we wanted answers, but do answers exist?'



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Dylan's Back Pages

There's a whole shelf-load of books about Dylan, several of which have been re-released to tie in with the birthday celebrations. Perhaps it is best to start with Dylan's lyrics. There are several collections, the most recent being *Bob Dylan 1962-2001* (Simon & Schuster). The transcriptions are sometimes inaccurate. In the mid 1960s Dylan was commissioned to write a novel. *Tarantula* was a long time coming and the expectation was great. It was eventually, like so much of Dylan's output, bootlegged. The copy I bought under the counter in Kensington Market seemed to have the pages in the wrong order. With its demented babble of free association it was heavily influenced by the Beats, and by Allan Ginsberg in particular. When the official version of *Tarantula* was published it was no better. For Dylan aficionados only. While being a fascinating read, Dylan's 2004 autobiography *Chronicles Volume One* is infuriatingly unrevealing. It's one of the few autobiographies that deepens the mystique. Dylan concentrates on the less interesting periods of his life, and on the recordings of his lesser albums. When you want to know about the high energy times of *Highway 61 Revisited* and *Blonde on Blonde* he writes about the pedestrian *New Morning* and *Oh Mercy*. He's also guarded about his relationships – the enigmatic Sara hardly gets a mention. It's a great read nevertheless, and does contain what sounds like Dylan's voice. Hopefully, Volume Two will be more revealing.