The Genius of Bob Dylan

The legend comes to grips with his iconic status; an intimate conversation prior to the release of the new "Modern Times"

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"I don't really have a herd of astrologers telling me what's going to happen. I just make one move after the other, this leads to that." Is the voice familiar? I'm sitting in a Santa Monica seaside hotel suite, ignoring a tray of sliced pineapple and sugar-dusty cookies, while Bob Dylan sits across from my tape recorder, giving his best to my questions. The man before me is fitful in his chair, not impatient, but keenly alive to the moment, and ready on a dime to make me laugh and to laugh himself. The expressions on Dylan's face, in person, seem to compress and encompass versions of his persona across time, a sixty-five-year-old with a nineteen-year-old cavorting somewhere inside. Above all, though, it is the tones of his speaking voice that seem to kaleidoscope through time: here the yelp of the folk pup or the sarcastic rimshot timing of the hounded hipster-idol, there the beguilement of the Seventies sex symbol, then again -- and always -- the gravel of the elder statesman, that antediluvian bluesman's voice the young aspirant so legendarily invoked at the very outset of his work and then ever so gradually aged into.

It's that voice, the voice of a rogue ageless in decrepitude, that grounds the paradox of the achievement of Modern Times, his thirty-first studio album. Are these our "modern times," or some ancient, silent-movie dream, a fugue in black-and-white? Modern Times, like Love and Theft and Time Out of Mind before it, seems to survey a broken world through the prism of a heart that's worn and worldly, yet decidedly unbroken itself. "I been sitting down studying the art of love/I think it will fit me like a glove," he states in "Thunder on the Mountain," the opening song, a rollicking blues you've heard a million times before and yet which magically seems to announce yet another "new" Dylan. "I feel like my soul is beginning to expand," the song declares. "Look into my heart and you will sort of understand."

What we do understand, if we're listening, is that we're three albums into a Dylan renaissance that's sounding more and more like a period to put beside any in his work. If, beginning with Bringing It All Back Home, Dylan garbed his amphetamine visions in the gloriously grungy clothes of the electric blues and early rock & roll, the musical glories of these three records are grounded in a knowledge of the blues built from the inside out -- a knowledge that includes the fact that the early blues and its players were stranger than any purist would have you know, hardly restricting themselves to twelve-bar laments but featuring narrative recitations, spirituals, X-rated ditties, popular ballads and more. Dylan offers us nourishment from the root cellar of American cultural life. For an amnesiac society, that's arguably as mind-expanding an offering as anything in his Sixties work. And with each succeeding record, Dylan's convergence with his muses grows more effortlessly natural.

How does he summon such an eternal authority? "I'd make this record no matter what was going on in the world," Dylan tells me. "I wrote these songs in not a meditative state at all, but more like in a trancelike, hypnotic state. This is how I feel? Why do I feel like that? And who's the me that feels this way? I couldn't tell you that, either. But I know that those songs are just in my genes and I couldn't stop them comin' out." This isn't to say Modern Times, or Dylan, seems oblivious to the present moment.

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The record is littered -- or should I say baited? -- with glinting references to world events like 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, though anyone seeking a moral, to paraphrase Mark Twain, should be shot. And, as if to startle the contemporary listener out of any delusion that Dylan's musical drift into pre-rock forms -- blues, ragtime, rockabilly -- is the mark of a nostalgist, "Thunder on the Mountain" also name-checks a certain contemporary singer: "I was thinking 'bout Alicia Keys, I couldn't keep from crying/While she was born in Hell's Kitchen, I was livin' down the line." When I ask Dylan what Keys did "to get into your pantheon," he only chuckles at my precious question. "I remember seeing her on the Grammys. I think I was on the show with her, I didn't meet her or anything. But I said to myself, 'There's nothing about that girl I don't like.' "

Rather than analyzing lyrics, Dylan prefers to linger over the songs as artifacts of music and describes the process of their making. As in other instances, stretching back to 1974's *Planet Waves*, 1978's *Street Legal* and 2001's *Love and Theft*, the singer and performer known for his love-hate affair with the recording studio -- "I don't like to make records," he tells me simply. "I do it reluctantly" -- has cut his new album with his touring band. And Dylan himself is the record's producer, credited under the nom-de-studio Jack Frost. "I didn't feel like I wanted to be overproduced any more," he tells me. "I felt like I've always produced my own records anyway, except I just had someone there in the way. I feel like nobody's gonna know how I should sound except me anyway, nobody knows what they want out of players except me, nobody can tell a player what he's doing wrong, nobody can find a player who can play but he's not playing, like I can. I can do that in my sleep."

As ever, Dylan is circling, defining what he is first by what he isn't, by what he doesn't want, doesn't like, doesn't need, locating meaning by a process of elimination. This rhetorical strategy goes back at least as far as "It Ain't Me, Babe" and "All I Really Want To Do" ("I ain't looking to compete with you," etc.), and it still has plenty of real juice in it. When Dylan arrives at a positive assertion out of the wilderness of so much doubt, it takes on the force of a jubilant boast. "This is the best band I've ever been in, I've ever had, man for man. When you play with guys a hundred times a year, you know what you can and can't do, what they're good at, whether you want 'em there. It takes a long time to find a band of individual players. Most bands are gangs. Whether it's a metal group or pop rock, whatever, you get that gang mentality. But for those of us who went back further, gangs were the mob. The gang was not what anybody aspired to. On this record I didn't have anybody to teach. I got guys now in my band, they can whip up anything, they surprise even me." Dylan's cadences take on the quality of an impromptu recitation, replete with internal rhyme schemes, such that when I later transcribe this tape I'll find myself tempted to set the words on the page in the form of a lyric. "I knew this time it wouldn't be futile writing something I really love and thought dearly of, and then gettin' in the studio and having it be beaten up and whacked around and come out with some kind of incoherent thing which didn't have any resonance. With that, I was awake. I felt freed up to do just about anything I pleased."

But getting the band of his dreams into the studio was only half the battle. "The records I used to listen to and still love, you can't make a record that sounds that way," he explains. It is as if having taken his new material down to the crossroads of the recording studio Dylan isn't wholly sure the deal struck with the devil there was worth it. "Brian Wilson, he made all his records with four tracks, but you couldn't make his records if you had a hundred tracks today. We all like records that are played on record players, but let's face it, those days are gon-n-n-e. You do the best you can, you fight that technology in all kinds of ways, but I don't know anybody who's made a record that sounds decent in the past twenty years, really. You listen to these modern records, they're atrocious, they have sound all over them. There's no definition of nothing, no vocal, no nothing, just like -- static. Even these songs probably sounded ten times better in the studio when we recorded 'em. CDs are small. There's no stature to it. I remember when that Napster guy came up across, it was like, 'Everybody's gettin' music for free.' I was like, 'Well, why not? It ain't worth nothing anyway.' "

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