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The Contrarian of a Generation, Revisited

By [JON PARELES](#)

Has there ever been a rock star as contrary as Bob Dylan? When taken for a folk singer, interpreting traditional songs, he started to write his own. When taken for a topical songwriter who would dutifully put his music behind party-line messages, and praised as the spokesman for a generation, he became an ambiguous, visionary poet instead. And when taken for an acoustic-guitar troubadour who was supposed to cling to old, virtuous rural sounds, he plugged in his guitar, hired a band and sneered oracular electric blues.

That's the story told in two overlapping projects: the two-CD set "No Direction Home: The Soundtrack - The Bootleg Series Vol. 7" (Columbia/Legacy), to be released today, and "No Direction Home," a documentary directed by Martin Scorsese that will be released as two DVD's on Sept. 20 and broadcast on the PBS series "American Masters" on Sept. 26 and 27. (Despite the soundtrack designation on the CD's, versions of some songs differ between album and film.)

The CD's and the documentary both follow Mr. Dylan from his early years to his motorcycle accident in July 1966, and both focus on the two metamorphoses he made in the early 1960's: from Midwestern guitar strummer to Greenwich Village folk idol, and then, far more contentiously, from folk singer to electric rocker.

Neither the album nor the documentary significantly revises Mr. Dylan's history. The backdrop as always is the turmoil of the 60's. Here, once again, are the earnest, well-meaning and musically puritanical Greenwich Village folkies: in love with traditional songs and sounds, firmly believing that folk tunes and agitprop belong together, forever grappling with authenticity, and trying to be populist while disdaining pop music and pop culture. And there, again, is Mr. Dylan: repeatedly shedding his past, soaking up songs and styles, trading simple messages for oblique ones, pilfering and transforming.

In the film, he rightly calls himself "a musical expeditionary." Tony Glover, who recorded a young Mr. Dylan in Minnesota, is also right when he calls him "a sponge." There's ruthlessness in the way Mr. Dylan finds sources, uses them and moves on: the ruthlessness of an artist's best instincts.

The documentary uses extensive interviews with Mr. Dylan - speaking as straightforwardly and unguardedly as he ever has, with glints of humor - and with eyewitnesses from the era who don't always agree. It also digs into the outtakes of the filmmakers who were on the scene for Mr. Dylan's appearances at Newport Folk Festivals, solo and electric, and for his tours of Europe. In 1965, he was the guitar-strumming solo act (who had already recorded "Maggie's Farm" and "Subterranean Homesick Blues") documented as an arrogant young star in D. A. Pennebaker's "Don't Look Back," vehemently insisting he was not a folk singer. In 1966, he returned to Europe backed by the Hawks (who would become the Band) and was widely booed.

An arty, scattershot film, "Eat the Document," was made of the 1966 tour, edited incoherently with Mr. Dylan's participation and rejected by ABC television; it has been shown on rare occasions (and bootlegged) since 1972. But in the second half of "No Direction Home," Mr. Scorsese draws on the 1966 footage to concentrate the tension and absurdity of a tour on which Mr. Dylan faced an overheated blend of love and hatred that no other performer could have sparked.

It's a period that Mr. Dylan skips completely in his 2004 memoir, "Chronicles: Volume One," and the one that yielded, in a whirlwind of recording and touring, his three most crucial albums: "Bringing It All Back Home," "Highway 61 Revisited" and "Blonde on Blonde." Mr. Scorsese's documentary follows Dylan as a performer, meeting audiences (and dumbfounding journalists) with misunderstood greatness. The album moves inside the studio, with nine outtakes of classic songs alongside three live versions. (Mr. Dylan and the Hawks' fire-breathing 1966 performance from Manchester Town Hall was released as part of the Bootleg Series in 1998.)

There's some additional evidence that Mr. Dylan was always, for lack of a better word, an impurist. The album includes his earliest known recording: "When I Got Troubles" from 1959, with the 17-year-old Bobby Zimmerman and his guitar captured by a high-school friend's tape recorder. The song is a blues that advises, "swing your troubles away," but its folky verse leads to a stop-time section straight out of Elvis Presley. In the documentary, a glimpse of a yearbook shows his stated ambition: to join Little Richard.

Then he was swayed by the stark strangeness of folk songs, the poetry of the Beats and the plain-spoken conviction of Woody Guthrie, and he hitchhiked to New York City. In Greenwich Village, he was a quick study and, at first, everybody's protégé: Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Odetta, Dave Van Ronk, Joan Baez. The first CD, with alternate and live versions from Mr. Dylan's folky years, is full of songs about moving on: "Rambler, Gambler," "I Was Young When I Left Home" and his own "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right" (a demo version, already perfected, recorded for the song's publisher). From the folk singers' trove of songs, "This Land Is Your Land" is treated as a traveler's reflections rather than a singalong, and he growls "Dink's Song" (collected half a century earlier by the folklorist John A. Lomax) as if the narrator's heartbreak were his own. Compared to some of the outlandishly overwrought folk-revival performers shown in the documentary, he comes across as natural, even artless.

Then, suddenly, he doesn't need mentors. "What I did to break away was to take simple folk changes and put new imagery and attitude to them, use catchphrases and metaphor combined with a new set of ordinances that evolved into something different that had not been heard before," he wrote in "Chronicles."

On the album, the finger pointing and moralizing of "Blowin' in the Wind" and "Masters of War," sung with quiet righteousness in performances at Town Hall in Manhattan, give way to the cascading images of "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" and "Chimes of Freedom." Mr. Dylan was already confounding expectations: The documentary shows him at a "topical song workshop" at the Newport Folk Festival performing "Mr. Tambourine Man," while some audience members appear to wonder exactly what topic the song is supposed to be protesting. In other clips, Mr. Dylan tells interviewers he's not a topical songwriter anyway. Accepting a civil liberties award in 1963, he called politics "trivial."

There were no confrontations as long as he played acoustic guitar. But in the famous 1965 Newport Folk Festival performance, he brought the Paul Butterfield Blues Band onstage with him and caused

pandemonium. The folkies interviewed in the documentary still don't know what hit them; they complain that they couldn't understand the words, or it was just way too loud, or it was distorted, and they recall that Pete Seeger may or may not have tried to take a hatchet to the sound cable. (He says he didn't.)

Mr. Dylan must have foreseen it all: the song he chose was "Maggie's Farm": "I try my best to be just like I am/But everybody wants you to be just like them." That performance is on the album, in a soundboard mix that polishes every barb in the music and, without audience noise, probably sounds clearer than anyone could have heard it at the time.

The album's studio outtakes from "Bringing It All Back Home," "Highway 61 Revisited" and "Blonde on Blonde" are good, with the band already primed and Mr. Dylan still toying with lyrics. Good but not great: It's fascinating to hear him approaching what he wants. The final takes are better, though the alternate version of "She Belongs to Me" - gentler and more affectionate - comes close.

The takes on the original albums had more layers of irony and emotion and, especially, comedy; they also added roll to the music's rock. "It Takes a Lot to Laugh, It Takes a Train to Cry" would change from an upbeat blues (on "No Direction Home") to a droll, knowing shuffle (on "Highway 61 Revisited"). "Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again" is sturdy, presaging Band songs like "The Weight"; it would perk up with a sly lilt.

"Desolation Row" would take on more gravity and bitterness; on "Tombstone Blues" the alternate tried a countryish harmony vocal. "Visions of Johanna" would get a simpler beat that opened up room for vocal nuance, while "Leopard-Skin Pill-Box Hat" would speed up and turn into a romp. "Highway 61 Revisited" already had its electric-piano flourishes, but the final take would add the hysterical edge of a siren whistle.

The film shows what happened to the songs and the songwriter on the road. Between 1965 and 1966, Mr. Dylan's last baby fat disappeared. Partly because of amphetamines that the documentary doesn't mention, he was razor-thin, and with his wildly patterned Mod clothes and an exploding hairdo, he looked purely iconic, haloed from backlighting. The 1966 tour, as Mr. Scorsese reconstructs it, was a blur of pop-star adulation, polarized crowds and inane news conferences: "All my songs are protest songs, every single one of them," Mr. Dylan bantered.

One musician recalls that audiences would singalong with Mr. Dylan's hit single, "Like a Rolling Stone," and then go back to booing his other electric songs. Offstage, Mr. Dylan sarcastically says, "Don't boo me any more; I can't stand it!" and then wonders, "Kids, how can they buy the tickets so fast?"

The boos didn't stop him, though he grew visibly drained. On the album, Mr. Dylan and the Hawks - whose little fills between vocal lines are as savagely funny as the lyrics - give corrosive performances of "Ballad of a Thin Man" and the climactic, scathing "Like a Rolling Stone" that followed a fan's cry of "Judas!" (This was also on a previous Bootleg Series album.)

Unlike the vast majority of entertainers, Mr. Dylan wasn't devoted to pleasing an audience. He didn't give them what they wanted: He gave them something better. It would all catch up with him, and quickly, and when the motorcycle accident gave him a reason to withdraw he seized it. But "No Direction Home" stops there. Contrary as Mr. Dylan was, in those brief and remarkable years, negativity pulled him through.

