MUSIC 43812: BOB DYLAN AS MUSICIAN
Autumn 2012: Fridays, 9:30 a.m. – 12:20 p.m., JRL 264

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OVERVIEW

Bob Dylan has been the subject of vigorous academic study for over four decades. Countless seminars, books, and articles have puzzled over his words and analyzed his role as a central figure in the 1960s counterculture. But for all of the attention lavished on Dylan the literary and cultural figure, Dylan the musician has been largely ignored. This is perhaps not surprising: Dylan’s words have always seemed ripe for close reading and high-flown interpretation, while his rough-edged, often shambolic music seemingly resists such attention. His song lyrics moreover provide multiple legible connections to his role as a countercultural icon, while the music’s role in that regard, while patent, has been harder to theorize. Still, studying words at the expense of sounds is an inapt approach to an individual who once stated: “the only thing I’ve ever known how to do [is] sing and play. I’m a musician that’s all.” As Dylan enters his sixth decade of incessant performing, composing, and recording, it is high time to develop a scholarly approach to Bob Dylan as a musician.

The course will develop critical and analytical approaches to a range of issues in Dylan’s musical practice. These include matters of voice, prosody and melody, song structure, genre, repetition and variation, musical borrowing, and questions of authorship. We will also explore the ways in which these matters of musical “poetics” are heavily (and multiply) mediated by the social (for example, by the complex class and racial dynamics of the folk revival in the early 60s). In addition to reading a wide range of literature on Dylan and on the study of popular music more generally, we will undertake collective projects in transcription, spectrographic analysis, and comparative study of live and recorded performances.

Coursework includes weekly readings, analytical assignments, and a seminar paper.

TEXTS
(both available at Seminary Co-Op)

REQUIRED

OPTIONAL
SCHEDULE

This schedule lists the music and readings we will be engaging with each week. Sometimes the two are closely related—as when an article or book discusses some specific music we are studying—while at other times they are more or less independent. In general, our work this quarter will follow two parallel tracks: one dedicated to a chronological survey of much of Dylan’s music, another devoted to theoretical and methodological issues in the study of popular song. After Thanksgiving break the latter track will come to an end. From this point we will devote our attention exclusively to music, having laid the methodological and theoretical groundwork in the preceding weeks’ readings. Naturally, all of this is subject to tweaking and revision as we go along and settle into a weekly rhythm. We will not as a rule discuss all of the music on a given record; rather, the listed recordings will merely provide a basic source for some of the music we will focus on in that week, both in studio and live contexts. Readings in parentheses are optional.

OCTOBER 5

Music

“Just Like a Woman” (1966, 1974, 2008)

Readings


OCTOBER 12

Music

Bob Dylan (1962)

The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan (1963)

Readings

Negus, Bob Dylan, chapter 3.


OCTOBER 19

Music

*The Times They Are A-Changin'* (1964)

*Another Side of Bob Dylan* (1964)

Readings

Negus, Bob Dylan, chapter 4.


OCTOBER 26

Music

*Bringing It All Back Home* (1965)

*Highway 61 Revisited* (1965)

Readings


**NOVEMBER 2**

No class: AMS/SEM/SMT in NOLA

**NOVEMBER 9**

**Music**

*Highway 61 Revisited* (1965), continued

*Blonde on Blonde* (1966)

**Readings**


**NOVEMBER 16**

**Music**

*John Wesley Harding* (1967)

*The Basement Tapes / Tree with Roots* (1967/1975)

*Nashville Skyline* (1969)

**Readings**


**NOVEMBER 23**

No class—Thanksgiving break

**NOVEMBER 30**

**Music**

From *Blood on the Tracks* to the gospel records; selections from:

- *Blood on the Tracks* (1975)
- *Desire* (1976)
- *Street Legal* (1978)
- *Slow Train Coming* (1979)
- *Saved* (1980)

**DECEMBER 7**

**Music**

“Archaic music” and the return to critical favor; selections from:

- “*Love & Theft*” (2001)

**WEEK OF DECEMBER 10**

(Date TBD)

Mini-conference / analytical colloquium (one-day extravaganza, equivalent to two class meetings), including student presentations and

**Music**

Dylan today:

- *Tempest* (2012)