

Spring 2012

Between Artifice & Authenticity: A Study of Postmodern Song Lyrics

Mark Fletcher
Bard College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2012



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).

Recommended Citation

Fletcher, Mark, "Between Artifice & Authenticity: A Study of Postmodern Song Lyrics" (2012). *Senior Projects Spring 2012*. 312.

https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2012/312

This Open Access work is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been provided to you by Bard College's Stevenson Library with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this work in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@bard.edu.

Between Artifice and Authenticity:
A Study of Postmodern American Song Lyrics

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by

Mark Fletcher
Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2012

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to thank my mother for being the most incredible, selfless person I have ever met. You are the greatest, most supportive, loving mother a boy could ever ask for, and not a day goes by where I am not thankful for all you have done for me. I would also like to thank my adviser, Prof. Elizabeth Frank, for her incredible guidance throughout my time at Bard as well as for my Senior Project this year. Thank you to Tom Wolf for being a great mentor throughout these four years. Thank you to my friends for your inspiration, support, and funny jokes. In alphabetical order they are, Asher Bodie, Sarah Dupuis, Matthew Elmquist, Andrew P. Fanelli, Alex “Freedom” Friedman, Greg(or) Giovine, Michael Kulukundis, Michael A. LaChance, Robert Levites, Hank May, Stephen Martin, Rosie Motley, Ned Moshay, Adam Reich, Enrique Umberto Bordoni Urrutia, Eamon Wagner, Jonah Wolf, and Riley Zimmer. I hope I haven’t forgotten anybody. And last but most certainly not least I would like to dedicate this project to the people I have lost:

My father, Mark Fletcher Sr.

My uncle Bill Goodger

My grandmother Annette Fletcher

My aunt Karen Fletcher Zacharis

And my grandparents Inez and Raul Cifuentes

Contents

i. Preface

I. It's Alright Ma, I'm Only Bleeding

II. Shiny, Shiny, Shiny Boots of Leather

III. I Belong to the Blank Generation

Rock & roll, as I see it, is the ultimate populist art form, democracy in action, because its true: anybody can do it. Learn three chords on a guitar and you've got it. Don't worry whether you can 'sing' or not. Can Neil Young 'sing'? Lou Reed? Bob Dylan?...For performing rock & roll, or punk rock, or call it any damn thing you please, there's only one thing you need: NERVE. Rock & roll is an attitude, and if you've got the attitude you can do it, no matter what anybody says. Believing that is one of the things that punk rock is about. Rock is for everybody, it should be so implicitly anti-elitist that the question of whether somebody's qualified to perform it should never arise. But it did. In the Sixties, of course. And maybe this was one reason why the Sixties may have not been so all-fired great as we gave them credit for. Because in the Sixties rock & roll began to think of itself as an 'artform'. Rock & roll is not an 'artform'; rock & roll is a raw wall from the bottom of the guts. And like I said, whatever anybody ever called it, punk rock has been around from the beginning—its just rock honed down to its rawest elements, simple playing with a lot of power and vocalists who may not have much range but have so much conviction and passion it makes up for it ten times over. Because PASSION IS WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT—what all music is about. -Lester Bangs

It is difficult for many to place song form within the evolution and tradition of the American idiom, mostly due to the melodic and musical elements which separate it from other kinds of literature. This paper seeks to provide an accurate understanding, as well as placement, of the song and its lyrics, within the literary tradition from which it was derived. Understood mainly through the work of two songwriters, Lou Reed and Bob Dylan, this paper will trace the evolution of both careers, paying particular attention to lyrics as well as the contextual and cultural background under which such lyrics were written. Rock critic Lester Bangs was right when he said that “modern music starts with the Velvet,” but in order for that to happen, Bob Dylan had to first re-appropriate the

originally Appalachian folk form for his own rock and pop purposes, providing a set of rules for Reed to follow, only so that he could break them later. I decided to write about Lou Reed and Bob Dylan because they most accurately represent the incredible sea change of attitude among young people that went on in the sixties, whether in protest or in art. Additionally, these two songwriters pushed the boundaries of folk and rock, elevating the song form to the level of being considered “poetry.” Walt Whitman first gave Americans our “voice,” and I would like to place the work of Dylan and Reed as directly descendant from his tradition, laid out for us in the form of an enormous mirror held up to mid-nineteenth century America, with “Song of Myself.” This is about getting at the true nature of things, especially the way that people interact, when at work, or otherwise—bathing, doing heroin—and finding the truth within that experience by writing it down, “Hoping to cease not till death” (Whitman, 1).

I first heard Lou Reed's voice on a Sunday morning. I was either eleven or twelve, and had borrowed the first Velvet Underground album from my friend Jonah the previous night because he told me that, according to some book he had read, these guys (and girls) were responsible for the invention of punk. At that time, as one might expect, my knowledge of punk music was relatively superficial, as I had only recently become aware of bands like the Ramones and the Sex Pistols. Looking back, I wonder whether the music would have felt less powerful had the circumstances been any different. At the age of twelve, as the Sunday sun came through the windows in my Upper West Side apartment, there could have been no explanation other than fate for why the first track of the Velvets' first album was aptly titled, "Sunday Morning."

When I first heard this bizarre music, which was filled with sounds I had never heard before (or at least had not been aware of), I was transformed by every passing screech and drone, paired so perfectly with the frantic guitar work of Reed and second guitarist Sterling Morrison. Over time I would realize that the Velvet Underground's influence—both lyrical and musical—was integral to the creative context of nearly every artist I came to love during my adolescence. Yet, I discovered as I took a step back that their tradition was, in many ways, a response to the one started by Bob Dylan. Nearly every songwriter whom I respect is a lyrical grandchild of this subversive style created and pioneered by Reed and Dylan, a style specific to them and built upon by those who followed them. There exists a distinct difference between an artist who is self-conscious—acutely aware of his own feelings or desires—and one whose self-consciousness is based in how his art will be received. The self-consciousness of Bob Dylan and Lou Reed was such in the purest sense of the word, initially concerned only with the scrutiny of the work itself, and breaking down the barriers of what was then—in the sixties—considered rational. Within their method, as well as their results lies the profundity; these two men inspired thousands, if not millions of artists to take provocativeness to the next level by assuming a certain role, as a songwriter, singer, and rule-breaking poet with no regard for authority.

The 1960s saw a sea change in the nature of celebrity, especially within the context of popular music. The songwriter's role in the realization and distribution of his art became larger, in addition to the fact that he was no longer writing for others, and as a result, songs became more interesting and lyrics less superficial. While Dylan wrote some of the most progressive protest music ever made, Reed, only a couple of years later,

began making music of a sort that had never been heard before, so bizarre that at first audiences did not know what to make of it (Unterberger, 31). An important distinction to make between the Velvet Underground and Bob Dylan is that the Velvets were never very commercially successful until after their breakup in 1970, and even then, they were revered only by the punk and proto punk bands who found their sound to be so appealing. It was not really until the 1972 release of his first solo album, *Transformer*, that Reed or the Velvet Underground gained any significant widespread attention aside from the modest press in response to their work with Andy Warhol and the Exploding Plastic Inevitable.

Most of their fans consider the work these men did to be poetry, which raises the question of whether or not song lyrics can stand alone on the page at all. In addition, can they still qualify as poetry even if they are ineffective without musical backing? I believe that they can. Iggy Pop snarling “Now I wanna be your dog” over and over again would seem stupid—or maybe not—written down, without Pop’s delivery and his band’s nearly trancelike back beat. Within different contexts, Dylan and Reed created the archetype for a rock and roll performer, while also raising the standard for songwriting. Through the study of lyrics paired with a discussion of the context(s) under which they were written, a certain common progression of the singer songwriter’s persona emerges, one which was not present prior to the sixties. All of a sudden, lyrics were considered poetry, and the stakes were raised higher both for and by Reed and Dylan. The myriad of changes that they both went through as their careers progressed was directly informed by the songs they were writing, which, in turn, were slowly morphing into Rock and Roll Animals, to use the title of Reed’s 1974 live album, which took brilliant Velvet Underground songs

and turned them into generic trash. Nonetheless, the undeniable influence Dylan and Reed's early work had upon their musical and lyrical offspring exemplifies the importance, as well as downfall, of persona in the cultivation and eventual success of their art forms. In the mid 1960s, song lyrics became their own form of poetry, separate from that of Keats and Yeats, yet also similar, blurring the line between academia and the outright rejection of it, finding truth through paradox, and bringing new meaning to artifice and authenticity within the song form.

The fact that Dylan and Reed, along with the vast majority of important American songwriters, were Jews will also be explored as one lens through which their careers could be viewed. Both American middle class Jews, born a year apart, Dylan and Reed were both drawn to the same things, just in different contexts. When it comes to his upbringing, Dylan has had very little to say, most likely because he had loving parents and a relatively boring childhood. Reed, on the other hand, though his family was well off, underwent "a course of electroshock treatment three times a week for eight weeks at Creedmore State Psychiatric Hospital, on Long Island" because his parents were concerned about their son's "homosexual tendencies and generally unconventional behavior" (Unterberger 14). This is a very important detail concerning Reed's early life which, of course, greatly impacted his songwriting. He also spent time, right after college, working as a sort of hack songwriter for Pickwick Records, one of many labels in the sixties that would produce Beatles and Rolling Stone imitation records and sell them for less money. Dylan never worked behind the scenes in the music industry, yet he became a part of it a mere two years after hitting the scene. Reed on the other hand, worked for the industry then went completely underground, absorbing the avant-garde

and combining it with the popular tradition of which Dylan was a part. Very few successful singer-songwriters will admit that their process is extremely calculated, a fact which, though it does not take away from the importance of their art, is integral to understanding their art form. I do not mean to suggest that such artists, who make art “instinctively,” do not exist, only that they very rarely seem to become famous during their lifetime. Dylan and Reed specialized in a unique type of phoniness, one that was based in reality and then exaggerated or embellished, thus making it all the easier to believe.

I

In many cases, artists begin their careers impersonating a hero, as Bob Dylan did with Woody Guthrie, while others simply begin because it seems right at the time, or have nothing better to do. During the earlier part of his career as a protest singer, Dylan responded to questions regarding the meaning of his most famous protest song, "Blowin' in the Wind:"

There aint too much I can say about this song except that the answer is blowing in the wind. It aint in no book or movie or T.V. show or discussion group. Man, it's in the wind—and it's glowing in the wind. Too many of these hip people are telling me where the answer is but oh I won't believe that. I still say it's in the wind and just like a restless piece of paper it's got to come down sometime...But the only trouble is that no one picks up the answer when it comes down so not too many people get to see and know it...and then it flies away again (Hampton, 161).

The language Dylan uses here is specific, it is vernacular, and of the people. He consciously chooses "aint" both to mirror the voice of the working class, distancing himself from the college educated reporters asking the questions, most likely to hide the fact that, he too, was an educated intellectual. The use of "Man," too, as a colloquialism, solidifies his connection to the youth counterculture, leading fans to think "he must be one of us." Not only does Dylan affirm his own membership to the counterculture but he also proclaims that "no one picks up the answer when it comes down so not too many people get to see and know it," making the club exclusive—only to those who are "in tune." Of course Dylan frustrated critics by providing them with such lofty answers to their mostly specific questions. But that's just it: his every move here is calculated.

Dylan grew up in a stable, middle class Jewish household; one in which “aint” was most likely not a part of his everyday vocabulary. Assuming the role of his heroes, men “of the people” such as Woody Guthrie or Pete Seeger, Dylan plays the part perfectly, poking fun at the interviewers by making it seem as though they are the ones missing something, that maybe they are too old to understand. Taken without sarcasm, his answer seems useless, in fact, and one realizes that it is Dylan’s own intellectual prowess which is responsible for his choice not to give reporters even the time of day. Were he to have given an informed, intellectual response, his public image would be ruined. His status as an anti-establishment, anti-capitalist figure was integral to his early success, using the American vernacular as a central building block in the creation of his persona. Placing the answer “in the wind,” or rather “blowing in the wind,” the songwriter implies its supposed omnipresence, yet like “a restless piece of paper,” we just seem unable to grasp it.

Artists like Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, who dominated the folk scene up until the late 1950s and early sixties were concerned with the plight of the working class, paired with a certain appreciation for the American landscape itself. During a short time in the 1940s, it “seemed as if the quintessential folk-song leftists of the 1940s [such as Seeger and Guthrie] might make a successful commercial transition into the postwar era” (Wilentz, 40). This was until, of course, Pete Seeger was named a subversive for having defied the House Un-American Activities Committee by “standing on the first Amendment,” and Guthrie became sick with Huntington’s disease (Wilentz, 40).

After moving to Minneapolis in 1959 and then attending one year of college, Robert Zimmerman knew exactly what he wanted to do, and at the end of January in

1961 he went to New York to meet his hero, Woody Guthrie. About five days after having gotten there, he did, at the home of Bob and Sid Gleason in East Orange, NJ, where Guthrie was allowed to stay on weekends so that he could be visited by friends and admirers (Wilentz 41). During the time Dylan visited him, Guthrie was seriously ill with Huntington's disease and the young aspiring folkie would commute between Greystone Park Hospital in Morris Plains, NJ or the Gleason's and New York. Of course, Dylan's plan was to eventually base his own style—both musically and fashionably—upon Guthrie's folk model. Dressing in workman's clothes like Jack Kerouac—flannel with rolled up sleeves and slacks—Dylan attempted to immerse himself in what remained of the leftist movement in New York (Hampton 154). When comparing the two artist's styles it is important to consider not only the contexts under which they were working, but the ways in which each one chose to express himself. Guthrie's model exists mostly within the realm of what is tangible, writing about the American landscape and the people he found within it. Dylan eventually changed what it meant to be a folk singer, and he began doing so as soon as he arrived in New York City during early 1961 with a song about the man who brought him there (Hampton, 160).

"So long New York, howdy East Orange," Dylan tells us in the first song—and only song—he composed for his first self titled album, "Song To Woody." Having arrived in New York from the Midwest, Dylan's only goal was to meet Guthrie, which explains his frequent, sometimes, weekly visits either to the hospital or to the Gleason's. Before his Huntington's Disease had become too debilitating, Guthrie traveled from coast to coast performing his original music, and New York was the last stop on his seemingly never ending tour of the country and its people. Of course Dylan must have

felt he belonged there too, if that was where Guthrie had decided to stay before having gotten sick (Hampton 137). When Dylan would visit his bedridden hero, he usually would play Guthrie's own songs for him, because by that point he had mostly forgotten them. These hospital visits, over time, encouraged the young aspiring folkie to finally compose his own songs and find a more unique voice. Such a voice could only be found by first mastering Guthrie's tradition and, in doing so, understanding the ways in which that tradition could be expanded upon and eventually subverted. Many music historians, including Wayne Hampton, speculate on what exactly causes these "guerrilla minstrels" as he calls them, to begin expressing themselves and reaching others, whether or not that was their intention. In his discussion on Guthrie, Hampton writes,

Huntington's disease slowly began to consume Guthrie's mind and body...he slowly went insane, turning into an erratic, unpredictable, often bizarre, and even sex-crazed imbecile...but there is another side to his illness, for the disease also appears to have affected Guthrie's creative powers. Under its influence, he became more childlike, uninhibited, and freely associating, until he was filled with fantasies and visions and overflowing with poetic ramblings that expressed his innermost psychic feelings (Hampton, 142).

Such a description of an "often bizarre, and even sex-crazed imbecile," seems to relate more to the lyrics depicted in Lou Reed's songs, but is obviously worth mentioning because such a state must exist, even if it is self-imposed. The means by which it is achieved, of course, is specific to the individual. What Hampton describes here is the manner in which Dylan let his words pour out, as they do in "It's Alright Ma, I'm Only Bleeding." Perhaps one could argue that what Huntington's disease did for Woody

Guthrie, drugs, poverty, and a rejection of social norms did for Bob Dylan and Lou Reed—giving them that "uninhibited" and "overflowing" output of "poetic ramblings that expressed [their] innermost psychic feelings," which of course were shared by angst-ridden adolescents and intellectuals alike. When one looks beyond the high regard in which these men are held, they are "just regular guys," though, as Robert Christgau points out in an essay on Reed. Even though the drugs, poverty, and rejection of norms were real experiences and feelings, they were also brought upon the artists by the artists themselves. What, then, separates them from the rest of us? Moreover, what happens when the artist, who is supposedly the voice of the people, then ceases to be one of the people after he has become financially successful? How can he continue to be the voice of the counterculture when he has essentially become, the culture? Many self-righteous youngsters would quickly write off this disconnection as "selling out," claiming that the artist's work is not valid after the artist has become successful, which is not necessarily true, but in many cases does occur. In order to fully understand the development and maturation of these songwriters we must first look at their early work, as well as the contexts under which they were working, which, in the case of Dylan and Reed, was during the first half of the 1960s in downtown Manhattan.

Bob Dylan traveled from a Midwestern Jewish upbringing to New York City, determined to follow in the footsteps of his hero, Woody Guthrie. His religious history is complicated; though he had bar mitzvah in 1954, his 1961 relocation to New York combined with his name change suggest perhaps a slight sense of either self-loathing, or fear of prejudice despite the large Jewish presence in the city (Oseary, 16). Dylan also, according to Oseary in his book, *Jews Who Rock*, studied with a rabbi during the early

seventies. He was obviously unconcerned, perhaps even ashamed of his religious background during the sixties, then apparently changing his mind in the seventies. Interestingly enough, though, when asked about his connection to Judaism in 1983 by *City Pages*, his response, of course is eclectic and questionable, in true Dylan character:

My so-called Jewish roots are in Egypt. They went down there with Joseph, and they came back with Moses, you know, the guy that killed the Egyptian, married an Ethiopian girl, and brought the law down from the mountain (Oseary, 16).

In his response, which, as with most of his interviews, should be taken with a grain of salt, he seems to be concerned with travel, romanticizing the struggle of the Jews in Egypt as Guthrie did the migrant workers in the Great Plains. Naming them his “so-called” roots is questionable though; Dylan acts as though his heritage was something of which he was wrongfully accused. He answers the question reluctantly, yet in manner that makes his upbringing clear, he chooses his words carefully in his description of Moses bringing “the law down from the mountain.” Both Jews and evangelical Christians refer to the Old Testament as the “law” which was brought down Mt. Sinai by Moses from God, a fact that seems to almost legitimize Dylan’s surprising move to evangelical Christianity in the 1980s. Still throwing little tropes of the American vernacular into his speech he uses phrases such as “you know”—even though we obviously do—to try and maintain his status as a sort of everyman, despite the fame and fortune he had acquired by 1983.

Travel as a means of escape from hardship is a common theme throughout the folk tradition, most specifically in the case of the workers Guthrie played for and sympathized with through his travels during the tail end of the depression up until the

1950s (Hampton, 47). Dylan made himself into an outsider during a time when everyone wanted to be an outsider. In order to fill that role, he had to be an ambiguous outsider—an outsider playing the insider from the outside, essentially drawing a circle around himself and his persona, much to the dismay and confusion of the “writers and critics who prophesize with their pen” (Dylan, “The Times They-Are-A-Changin’”). Even in the early sixties, the young songwriter had no trouble preparing his audience to believe the vision he had for his character.

Persona aside, the subject matter of Dylan’s early music was not typical of pop songs from that era, the lyrics of which seemed to be lacking in depth or literary merit. For instance, three number one hits from 1962, the year *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan* came out, were “The Lion Sleeps Tonight,” Gene Chandler’s “Duke of Earl” (which is one of my favorite doo-wop songs, but none the less proves my point despite its infectious melody), and a song I have never heard of, called “Sherry,” performed by The Four Seasons. Not to digress too far from the topic at hand, but I simply must supply the first verse:

she-e-e-e-e-e-ry ba-a-by (sherry baby)

she-er-rry, can you come out tonight (come come, come out toni-i-ight)

she-e-e-e-e-e-ry ba-a-by (sherry baby)

she-er-rry, can you come out tonight

The text quoted provides a relatively accurate representation of the type of music being heard by most people who turned on the radio during the fifties and early sixties. Sure, there were things going on all over New York City and in underground communities all over the country at the time—and there always are—but it is important to remember what

it was that the masses were listening to at the time, and it consisted mostly of cheesy love songs that used endless repetition as a means for achieving popularity—not unlike the repetition used in pop and certain hip hop songs today. Dylan, whether or not he was actually frustrated with what was on the radio, forever changed the popular song format. His music uses images, elusive snatches of stories, verbal ambiguities, metaphor, paradox, and delivers every word with a certain sense of conviction that could only be his own. This was no longer rock and roll, it was poetry set to rock and roll, forever skewing the specificity of what defines a pop musician.

The problem with early rock and roll, at least as far as certain intellectual folk purists were concerned, was that it lacked any real substance, lyrically or musically, which informs their response to Dylan's eventual adoption of that model in his having gone electric. Ironically, Dylan revolutionized a genre he had helped create by adopting a format (the classic rock and roll band structure—two guitars, drums, bass, and electric piano or organ), which his fans thought he was initially trying to reject. During the end of the fifties and going into the sixties, the college educated showed their refined taste by listening to jazz or classical music, most likely for its superior complexity (Oseary, 23). By the mid sixties, though, the cultural climate had changed. Thanks in part to Dylan, there emerged a collective desire to dissent on college campuses as well as cities across the country, whether against the Vietnam War, for the Civil Rights movement, or simply through the act of openly taking drugs. Dylan's fans at this point were divided, as Sean Wilentz points out in his *Bob Dylan In America*,

He was no longer standing alone with his guitar and harmonica. The once pleasant joker now wore menacing black leather boots and a shiny matching jacket. No more Joan

Baez...Dylan was coaxed back onstage [at the 1964 Newport Folk Festival where he infamously 'went electric'] to play some of his acoustic material. "Does anybody have an E harmonica, an E harmonica, anybody?" he asked—and E harmonicas came raining out from the crowd and thumped onstage...the envoi was unmistakable as Dylan serenaded the folkies with "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue," as well as "Mr. Tambourine Man." (Wilentz, 104).

These intellectual "folkies" Wilentz mentions are an important factor in understanding Dylan's second transformation. He rejected his working-class wardrobe for that of a rock star in "menacing black leather boots and a shiny matching jacket" while also doing away with the tradition that gave him his start. The very festival at which he debuted his electric lineup was called the Newport *Folk* Festival, at which he had played acoustically the previous two years. As soon as the public had gotten used to his work, he decided to change it, and very calculatedly adopted a tradition against which he himself had never been outspoken, yet it was obvious that his fans were. Dylan was obviously a clever man, and he knew exactly what he was doing when he alienated so many of his fans. Perhaps it was a way of weeding out those who were not open-minded, even to a pre-established tradition. The aforementioned folkies felt as though they were rejecting an entire culture, and this rebellion was fueled by music, which came to be known, of course, as protest music, a term which, by 1965, Dylan could not have cared less about, which is why he moved on.

It is important still to look back at his early career, for it was before his electric period that many of his most groundbreaking songs were written, ones which paved the way for Lou Reed to then turn Dylan's tradition upside-down. More specifically, the

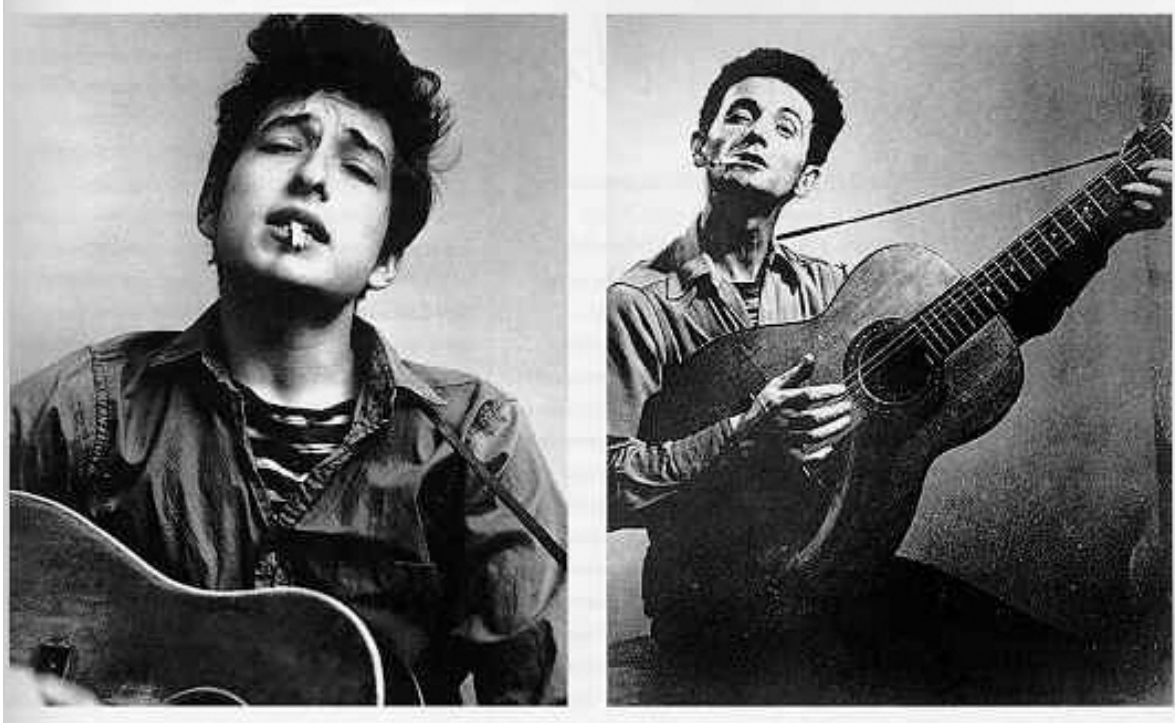
early sixties mark the point at which, as Michael Billing points out in *Rock n Roll Jews*, “Jews were to make a significant contribution to this intellectual development of rock,” naming Dylan, Reed, Leonard Cohen, and Paul Simon, but we need not bother with that last one. When he hit the scene, Dylan helped define and refine the mood of the protest song—Elvis was no longer considered cool or relevant, nor were any of the pop hit makers of the late fifties—at a time when such heavy sentiments of rebellion and unrest were in the air, the bubblegum could no longer be taken seriously. Bob Dylan’s form of rock and roll, if anything, existed as a reaction against the seemingly trivial nature of rock’s first era, in the same way that Reed’s did. And it was the folkies, the supposed underground and open-minded ones, who were very quick to dismiss Dylan’s having gone electric a few years later as a regression back to the pop music of the late fifties and early sixties. Moreover, this seems to have been the case with the punk movement as well, having been created as a reaction to the tedious progressive rock which dominated the airwaves during the early seventies. Dylan and Reed’s era seems to have craved some sense of authenticity, after having endured the boringly conformist fifties. These artists helped bring the songwriter out from behind the curtain; he was no longer a backstage figure, but the very opposite—a bandleader.

Initially known strictly as a folk singer, Dylan wanted to join the American folk tradition which he felt was perfected by Guthrie, hoping to identify with him through his own journey from Minnesota to Manhattan. Like many members of the folk movement, certain songwriters presented themselves as Americans, praising the land and its people while subtly criticizing the government in their concise verses. Take Woody Guthrie, for instance, who spends many verses praising “the redwood forests” and “the gulf stream

waters,” while also questioning the capitalist system for the “big high wall there that tried to stop me” and the “sign [that] was painted private property.” This verse, of course, would be removed from the radio edited version of the song, but recordings of it were not banned. As Guthrie’s primary musical offspring, Dylan displays in his music a extremely ambiguous, yet highly charged identification with American folk traditions. His application of the musical form is obvious—he used popular folk and rock chord structures to form his melodies, which, in many ways, is very American. Conversely, he used this supposedly American (specifically Appalachian) song form to openly criticize values which many Americans held, and still hold dear, thereby endorsing, and simultaneously criticizing, a culture which was essentially Christian. Dylan’s career is littered with examples such as these where he contradicts himself, or rather does something purposefully unexpected to gain attention and help cultivate the mysterious persona he was attempting to put on.

Songwriters within the 1960s Greenwich Village folk scene for the most part did not come from poorer parts of cities like New York—which is important to remember, especially in Dylan’s case—lessening their opportunities for exposure to any kind of black musical traditions, which were flourishing at the time, just in a different part of town (Billig, 118). This new generation, then, of the “rock era” as Billig calls it—perhaps unfortunately—drew more upon white American musical traditions. These were folk singers, not “soul men” (Ward, 308). Ironically enough, though, many of these Jewish protest singers were singing about and supporting the civil rights movement and backing that support with the whitest song form in existence.

Folk, for young Bobby Zimmerman was a slightly more underground alternative to the type of rock and roll typical of the late fifties and early sixties, and he became able to understand it more specifically through the music and experience of Woody Guthrie. Just as any fan would, Dylan sought sympathy in response to Guthrie's travels: "I'm out here a thousand miles from my home/Walkin' a road other men have gone down/I'm seein' your world of people and things/Your paupers and peasants and princes and kings" (Dylan, "Song To Woody"). Even in their simplicity, Dylan's words seem honest at this point, seeking compassion in a man who was no longer able to understand it due to his illness, and it is within Guthrie's tradition that Dylan found solace at the start of his career. At this point, Guthrie is his vantage point, the only thing upon which he can base his own art form, therefore he responds, and attempts to emulate it. During the first phase of his career, which we can call his acoustic period, Dylan dressed and acted according to how he saw Guthrie, which was in typical workman's attire, and always with an acoustic guitar and a cigarette:



Woody Guthrie wrote "This Land Is Your Land," which depicts a utopian fantasy of a socialist America where "this land is made for you and me." Echoing Whitman's speaker from the opening stanza of "Song of Myself," Guthrie romanticises the American landscape from the memory of his travels. The most controversial, and perhaps most revolutionary verse was the one that questioned private property, which was, as previously mentioned, removed from radio edited versions of the song because of its communist undertones:

There was a big high wall there
That tried to stop me
Sign was painted, said "Private Property"
But on the back-side it didn't say nothin'
This land was made for you and me

Including a verse with such an overt opposition to an integral pillar of the capitalist system would never be allowed by the US government when it was right on the brink of the cold war. And, with the knowledge we now have about the way the H.U.A.C. treated communist suspects, one might wonder why the song was even permissible for radio at all. Guthrie's optimistic cry for solidarity among the American working class was a result of his travels, and he felt as though some sense of unity was possible. It seems unnecessary to quote the remaining verses of "This Land Is Your Land," which, even in the twenty first century, are familiar to most Americans, the point being that the rest of the song depicts an oasis of "red wood forests and gulf stream waters," which, in a certain sense, provided Americans of the post World War II era with their own voice. Advantageously making use of rhyme and wit, Guthrie sneaks his politics into this semi-unknown verse, the unknown verse of a song that became another form of national anthem for many, a folksy "America The Beautiful," in some ways. Somehow, Guthrie's appreciation for the land becomes a hit, unifying everyone "from the redwood forest to the Gulf stream waters," while "this land is made for you and me," becomes some sort of nationalist rally cry. It is unclear whether or not Guthrie was aware of how the popularity of his song was being used against the ideals he held dear, but what what ensued was the birth of the suburbs, the end of Woody Guthrie, and the birth of Bob Dylan.

In 1962, the cold war reached its most terrifying peak with the Cuban missile crisis, the civil rights movement was thrust into the spotlight with protests all over the American south, and the first troops were being sent off to Vietnam (Hampton, 158). Surrounded by such turmoil, Dylan wrote some of the most influential protest songs ever

made, forever shattering the mold of Guthrie's idealistic sentimentality with a never before seen sense of anger and youthful vengeance. Dark visions of armageddon decorate his songs about war, truly looking at nuclear oblivion in the face. Between 1962 and 1964, *Broadside*—the publication run by members of the Almanac Singers and other Old Left activists—published more Bob Dylan songs than they did by any other protest poet at the time, aside from the enigmatic and much less popular, Phil Ochs (Hampton, 159).

Also during the span of these two years, Dylan released two of his most influential albums, packed tight with unprecedented subversions of the protest song form: *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* and *The Times They Are-A-Changin'.* Included on these LPs is some of his most important work, including, but not limited to, "Blowin' In The Wind," which became a civil rights anthem; "The Times They Are-A-Changin'," a poignant rejection of his parents' world, foreseeing the coming youth revolution; "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall," a mysterious and phantasmagorical vision inspired by (what then seemed like) the eminent nuclear holocaust; and "With God on Our Side," which cleverly exposes the hypocrisy of those who, for thousands of years, have used religion to justify violence.

Songwriters such as Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger who preceded Dylan, whether in protest or not, seemed to write only about what they knew, or what was tangible, and the public liked it that way. Many early folk singers and songwriters were actually of the land and had worked on it, while Dylan "faked his whole career; the only difference was that he used to be good at it and now he sucks," according to rock critic Lester Bangs in 1977 (Bangs, 227). Bangs says the same of Lou Reed, who grew up in a middle class environment in Freeport, Long Island before hitting the streets of New York to begin writing music.

Despite having some college education—Dylan at Minnesota and Reed at Syracuse—both chose to live in poverty while perfecting their art form, and both in downtown Manhattan. What’s important here is not the songwriter’s background but the environment under which he develops his story telling, and his ability to do so as a storyteller. Neither man claimed outright to be from the streets, though they were also never quick to talk about their upbringings, relating to Bangs’ point that they are both “fakes,” Dylan first playing poor folkie from the country, then aloof New York rock star, and Reed playing downtown avant-garde drug addict. Both men came from a middle class Jewish upbringing, one in the Midwest and the other on suburban Long Island, and while Dylan only spent one year at college in the twin cities, Reed graduated from Syracuse University in 1964, four years after Dylan had arrived in New York. They spent the sixties in poverty—Reed more so than Dylan, whose success began as early as 1962 when he released his first album of original material, *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan*. This record included some of his most important work, such as “A Hard Rain’s-A-Gonna Fall,” “Blowin’ in the Wind,” and “With God on Our Side,” all of which somehow attempt to subvert the lack of authenticity within the popular music of the time. Dylan quickly became successful with tons of other artists like Peter Paul and Mary and The Byrds covering his songs and making them, as well as their author famous. He was praised and endorsed by the critics who were tired of what the radio had been playing—music which was mostly ghost written and then sung by a predetermined group of pretty-faced boys. One of the toughest critics to please, Robert Christgau, even admitted that “Dylan is such an idiosyncratic genius that it is perilous to imitate him” in an essay titled “Rock Lyrics Are Poetry (Maybe).”

Then, with the 1965 release of *Bringing It All Back Home* and the subsequent concerts to support it, Dylan shocked the folk purists in his audience, hurting their ears with his five-piece band, turning what these intellectuals thought was a unique, semi-underground art form into what they thought was just another pop/rock band. Still, some of his best lyrical work exists on his acoustic tracks, which does not mean to suggest that his electric work is not noteworthy, only that more risks seem to be taken when there is less sound to fill the given space within a song.

Having a similar relationship with Woody Guthrie that Walt Whitman had with Ralph Waldo Emerson, Bob Dylan took his mentor's model and ran with it, so to speak. Using a Whitman-esque method, Dylan imposed sophisticated verse techniques upon folk language and folk style. What separates Dylan from Guthrie is his ability to expose the alienation and absurdity of modern civilization and society, perhaps suggesting similar things to Whitman regarding American identity. With a public persona so inconsistent and in many cases fabricated, we must look to his lyrics for some sense of truth, whether or not that means the truth behind his phony persona. In "A Hard Rain's-A-Gonna Fall," Dylan provides his listener with beautifully constructed apocalyptic images:

Oh, where have you been, my blue-eyed son?

Oh, where have you been, my darling young one?

I've stumbled on the side of twelve misty mountains

I've walked and I've crawled on six crooked highways

I've stepped in the middle of seven sad forests

I've been out in front of a dozen dead oceans

I've been ten thousand miles in the mouth of a graveyard

And it's a hard, and it's a hard, it's a hard, and it's a hard

And it's a hard rain's a-gonna fall

It was not common before the 1960s to write lyrics that could be left up to so much interpretation. This bleak, yet theoretical landscape laid out in Dylan's verses echoes even Whitman by taking a given question or idea, examining it from every angle, then arriving at some sort of usually ambiguous answer. In such reexamination of society and the government's influence upon it, the songwriter finds paradox and disagreement. Somehow, for Dylan, that disagreement manifests itself in a vision of America destroyed. Evoking such images of destruction and desolation, the songwriter juxtaposes and compares his apocalyptic vision of the 1960s literal landscape seen through a hypothetical world with that of the real world. The depiction of an otherwise fantastical landscape, where Dylan hears "ten thousand whisperin' and nobody listenin'" and "one person starv[ing]" with "many people laughing," seems intended to mirror the environment he was living in at the time. Perhaps he had already "been ten thousand miles in the mouth of a [contemporary] graveyard," suggesting that it might be too late—with all the "crooked highways," "sad forests," and "dead oceans" the speaker of the song has seen, the future looks bleak, "and it's a hard rain's a-gonna fall."

Within "Hard Rain," the artist articulates what it feels like to be threatened with total annihilation, as people were in the wake of the Cuban Missile Crisis, determined to find his "blue-eyed son," and his "darling young one," "darlin'" using language that references the folk songs of his past. The title too, is very telling of what, by 1965, was left over of his previously adopted folk character—"a hard rain's a-gonna fall" sounds like something someone with little to no formal education would say, and Dylan uses it

here as the unifier for his sprawling depictions of a society gone wrong. He creates a completely theoretical landscape for his reader here, also evoking T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland," in the way that he uses paradox to represent truth. When Dylan goes "where hunger is ugly" and "black is color" and "none is the number," Eliot calls April "the cruelest month," juxtaposing "dull roots with spring rain," and later stating that "winter kept us warm."

The connection here is displayed by the manner in which these poets use paradoxical juxtaposition to evoke truth. In the following verse, which follows the format of its predecessor, Dylan continues the realization of his vision:

Oh, what did you see, my blue-eyed son?

Oh, what did you see, my darling young one?

I saw a newborn baby with wild wolves all around it

I saw a highway of diamonds with nobody on it

I saw a black branch with blood that kept dripping'

I saw a room full of men with their hammers a-bleedin'

I saw a white ladder all covered with water

I saw ten thousand talkers whose tongues were all broken

I saw guns and sharp swords in the hands of young children

And it's a hard, and it's a hard it's a hard, it's a hard

And it's a hard rain's a-gonna fall

Dylan puts a "newborn baby" where there are "wild wolves all around it," and sees "ten thousand talkers whose tongues were all broken," using alliteration to paint his picture of a broken society. Such images, of "wild wolves," "a black branch with blood," "sharp

swords," and of course the "ten thousand talkers...tongues," all make use of alliteration and fantastical vision to clarify and specify their listener's perception. Images such as the "room full of men with their hammers a-bleedin'" conjure up uncomfortable feelings of man with no work, a situation with which most can be familiar, yet a situation with which Dylan was familiar for only a short time—less than three years. He creates a theoretical world in which everything seems broken, casting down his former mentor's romanticized landscape and providing for his listeners a darker portrait of the land and the people's chance of survival within it.

Suddenly, the metaphorical becomes literal and the lyrical turns physical as Dylan guides his listener deeper into his vision. The last verse, which essentially summarizes and restates what came before it, takes the listener further into this nightmarish version of modern American society and responds to the visions depicted in the prior verses:

I'm a-goin' back out 'fore the rain starts a-fallin'
 I'll walk to the depths of the deepest black forest
 Where the people are a many and their hands are all empty
 Where the pellets of poison are flooding their waters
 Where the home in the valley meets the damp dirty prison
 Where the executioner's face is always well hidden
 Where hunger is ugly, where souls are forgotten
 Where black is the color Where none is the number
 And I'll tell and think it and speak it and breathe it
 And reflect it from the mountain so all souls can see it
 Then I'll stand on the ocean until I start sinkin'

But I'll know my songs well before I start singin'

And it's a hard, it's a hard, and it's a hard

It's a hard rain's a-gonna fall

His lyrical prowess paired with his folk sensibility helped bring him to the forefront of American songwriting, because these songs were exactly what America needed at that time, when (especially young) Americans needed a voice under which they could unite against what they found to be unjust in their world. Dylan, in many ways, put the words in their mouths, taking part in the cultivation of their voice by giving them songs to sing en masse during their protests, and most importantly providing his audience with a unique understanding of what was going on right at the time the songs were written. Dylan also made sure that his lyrics were ambiguous enough to remain relevant after ceasing to be topical. Racism, war, and religion are obviously still extremely problematic issues, just as much if not more so than they were then, only because it has been fifty years and little has changed. Still making use of paradox, Dylan introduces the "home in the valley" to the "damp and dirty prison" and depicts hunger, something essential to life, as "ugly." Part of what is so striking about this song in particular is that although he is still telling a story, the songwriter makes assertions at the end, as opposed to his usual method of leaving questions unanswered. Dylan takes responsibility for his words, nominating himself not necessarily as the voice of his generation, but as the storyteller, whose job it is to "tell it and think it and speak it and breathe it/And reflect it from the mountain so all souls can see it," which is quite the responsibility for a supposedly modest self proclaimed folkie to give himself.

The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan was only his second album, released the year following his first, which was not very successful, begging the question of how he was able to foresee the success he ended up having. Confident enough to try until he fails, Dylan claims that he will “stand on the ocean until I start sinkin’”, then clarifying that he will “know my songs well before I start singin,’” which may provide us with a clue regarding his true character. No other lyric on this record contains such grandiose visions of stardom, nor does he really ever mention his own career. Here he tells his listeners that he is going to keep “stand[ing] on the ocean” until he “start[s] sinkin,’” or in other words, keep playing, singing, and writing until he fails. Dylan directly diverges from his character here and essentially says outright that he is a hard worker, because on some level he wants those who would respect him for it to know that,—other musicians, mainly. Then, right after his honest admission of actually putting effort into his craft, he claims to somehow know that this first group of self-composed songs would have some sort of cultural relevance once they were released, which they did of course. In saying “I’ll know my songs before I start singin’,” he is boasting both that he will succeed and that these songs come naturally to him, in some ways contradicting the implications of the previous line. Dylan, in his best songs, makes sure to cover all ground with his use of paradoxical juxtaposition, and rarely claiming anything without suggesting the contrary.

Many songs were used in protests throughout the sixties, but one could argue that, perhaps aside from “We Shall Overcome,” “Blowin’ In The Wind” was the most popular. Its superior popularity to a song like “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall,” for instance, can be attributed to its use of a classic folk and rock song chord structure originally based in the blues, called the 1-4-5, which is partially responsible for its catchy melody. The numbers

are intended to represent notes in an eight (or twelve, but for our purposes eight) note scale, as well as the chords for which those notes are the tonic (or one) chord/note. For instance, in the key of A major, the 1-4-5 would be A major, D major, and E major. Many, if not most, of his songs employ this classic structure—or some form of it, thus serving as a familiar vessel (for his audience) in which he can package his not-as-familiar ideas. Perhaps part of what made Dylan easier to swallow for so many Americans was the way he used or even exploited the folk song form, singing whatever he felt over it. Had he put revolutionary lyrics over revolutionary music, he would almost undoubtedly not have been as immediately successful as he was.

Dylan intentionally employs this classic melodic structure for his song about civil inequality among blacks and whites not only in the South, but throughout the country. The lyrics find Dylan asking tough questions; questions that had undoubtedly come up before, but never really been heard on the radio:

How many roads must a man walk down

Before you call him a man?

How many seas must a white dove sail

Before she sleeps in the sand?

Yes, how many times must the cannon balls fly

Before they are forever banned?

The answer my friend is blown' in the wind

The answer is blown' in the wind.

Obviously moved by what ended up becoming the civil rights movement in the American south, and appalled both by the missile crisis and the new Vietnam War, Dylan questions

it all in the first verse. Taking the last lines of “Hard Rain” into consideration, the songwriter’s true intentions become rather questionable; one wonders who he had in mind when writing the song, and whether that had anything to do with how he felt the music would be received. Was Bob Dylan trying to reappropriate the meaning of Billie Holiday’s “Strange Fruit” for the purposes of his own success? Or did he truly believe in the cause, feeling the need to “tell it and think it and speak it and breathe it” for himself and the masses? Rather some combination of the two seems most likely when taking into account how much trouble he went through to create a persona for himself early on, along with how many different times he changed his identity throughout his career. Bob Dylan’s catchy melody paired with simple, yet mildly revolutionary lyrics made “Blowin’ In The Wind” the perfect candidate to represent a generation of fed up youths, and solidified his seat at the throne of early sixties protest-oriented folk music, with his elders even bowing down to him.

In what I feel to be his magnum opus, Dylan juxtaposes differing ideas and connects them with rhyme, but in a more all-compassing manner than he did in “Hard Rain.” It is in this song, titled “It’s Alright Ma, I’m Only Bleeding”—one of his longest—that he seems to include all that he can fit, it is he and his followers’ identity all wrapped up into one surreal mixture, echoing both Allen Ginsberg and Walt Whitman:

Darkness at the break of noon

Shadows even the silver spoon

The handmade blade, the child’s balloon

Eclipses both the sun and moon

To understand you know too soon

There is no sense in trying
 Pointed threats, they bluff with scorn
 Suicide remarks are torn
 From the fool's gold mouthpiece the hollow horn
 Plays wasted words, proves to warn
 That he not busy being born is busy dying

The song title, first of all, refers to references "It's Alright Mama," the song written by Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup and popularized by Elvis Presley as one of the first songs he ever recorded in Memphis, informing Dylan's use of the phrase as his refrain. In addition, the first line was lifted from the title of Hungarian-British author Arthur Koestler's novel, *Darkness at Noon*, about the cruelty of communism, except that the darkness arrives not simply at noon, but at the break of noon, making the fact that there is darkness at noon all the spookier (Wilentz 99). Not having much at all to do with Koestler's book, the song's opening verses are confusing, making "it difficult to understand what the song actually had to do with," Wilentz recalls, having been one of the first to see it performed live. Rhyming "trying" with "dying," Dylan once again uses contradiction to question, as well as to seek to understand, postmodern existence. On the one hand "There is no sense in trying," while on the other, "He not busy being born/Is busy dying," which questions both a defeatist attitude and an overly optimistic one in the context of Dylan's escape from what Wilentz calls "folk revival pieties." Yet when digging deeper we find that perhaps the former assertion more accurately represents how he feels because the latter came from "the fool's gold mouthpiece." Again, the listener finds himself confused, because although the fool "plays wasted words," they "prove to

warn/that he not busy being born is busy dying,” and thus propose that the wasted words are important somehow. During the refrain, each line remains the same save for one word: "It's alright ma, I'm only____," and in each verse it is different, but always lending to the possibility that “It” may not be “Alright.” Dylan goes from "It's alright ma, I can make it" to "I've got nothing ma, nothing to live up to," ending with "But it's alright ma, it's life and life only." Just like Whitman, Dylan seeks to understand more than he does to answer life’s never-ending questions, to sing them, to perhaps even educate people, but what's most relevant is his solution: "it's life and life only."

Dylan is not searching for the answer, but rather a greater understanding through questions, just as Ginsberg had with “Howl” and Whitman before him with “Song of Myself.” He echos the sentiments found in lines such as “the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness starving hysterical naked dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix,” which, for Whitman, translates into “The pleasures of heaven are with me and the pains of hell are with me.”

Keeping in check with the character he has created for himself by 1964/5, Dylan adopts a certain playfulness when discussing what would not usually be considered comical topics. As soon as his convictions seem clearly stated, he will turn around and question them, making sure that no assertion goes uncontradicted. In later verses of “It’s Alright Ma,” the singing "I" of the song discusses the “honesties, blasphemies, and hypocrisy in American life” in a manner very similar to Ginsberg’s in “Howl” (Wilentz, 99). Dylan covers modern advertising, fake morals, sex, money, and the “rat race society” that encourages both competition and conformity. He re-appropriates Ginsberg’s Moloch by exposing the corruption and self-delusion that had driven “the best

minds of [Ginsberg's] generation" mad (Ginsberg, "Howl"). As Wilentz aptly puts it, "the subversive singer is tolerated only because he keeps his truly 'dangerous thought-dreams' under wraps. Otherwise, he'd probably get his head cut off," referring to the last line of the epic song where Dylan wonders "If my thought-dreams could be seen/They'd probably put my head in a guillotine/But It's alright Ma, it's life and life only."

In one of the less confusing verses of the second to last track on *Bringing It All Back Home*, Dylan seems to directly address certain old societal conventions, as well as some contemporary ones, which he felt were, as he puts it, "phony:"

Old lady judges watch people in pairs

Limited in sex, they dare

To push fake morals, insult and stare

While money doesn't talk, it swears

Obscenity, who really cares

Propaganda, all is phony

So similar to the way in which Whitman portrays his own mid-nineteenth century social climate in his epic, "Song of Myself," Dylan, though more specifically, picks apart societal conventions, and in this case dismisses them as useless— "who really cares." When Whitman proclaims, "I have heard what the talkers were talking, the talk of the/beginning and the end,/But I do not talk of the beginning or the end," Dylan responds with a portrayal of his talkers: the "old lady judges" who do not approve of the sexual revolution, as well as those who choose to bother worrying about "obscenity," dismissing all the fuss as either a result of, or due to "propaganda all [of which] is phony." Dylan is hyper-aware of his surroundings, like Whitman, able to pinpoint that which he feels is

worth singing about—his “poet[ry] of the Body and poet[ry] of the Soul”—without necessarily revealing a specific, arguable opinion in the process.

The creative process for Bob Dylan was wildly self-conscious, yet uninhibited in the beginning, until he enjoyed some level of success, at which point he became not only self-conscious, but hyper-conscious of how his work would be received and interpreted by the masses. In order for him to continue making music that people enjoy, it was necessary for him to acknowledge and understand the way his audience responded to his work, and act accordingly. Dylan was extremely aware of the way that the subject matter of his songs essentially forced his audience to put him into some sort of leadership role, “the voice of a generation,” as Dylan said facetiously once in an interview. When he debuted “It’s Alright Ma” in 1964, the line that stood out to most members of the audience, according to Wilentz, was the one where Dylan resolves that “even the president of the United States sometimes must have to stand naked,” and “nobody cheered...nobody knew it was coming—the line was actually perplexing given our assumption that the incumbent was the only good guy in the upcoming presidential election” (Wilentz, 101). Throughout this song, suggestions of all sorts are made, about repression, about the worship of fake idols, the problems caused by religion or any sort of extremism, yet they remain as such—suggestions. The final lines of the song indicate that he may never reveal how he truly feels:

And if my thought-dreams could be seen
They’d probably put my head in a guillotine
But it’s alright, Ma, it’s life, and life only

Unconcerned with the morality of the issues he has discussed, he sarcastically suggests that if he were to actually reveal his “thought-dreams,” that “they’d probably put [his] head in a guillotine,” for this is not Robert Zimmerman you are hearing, it is Bob Dylan, who assumed the role as “the voice of his generation,” as a representative figure for liberal youths who felt betrayed by their government.

During a section of *Bob Dylan in America* in which Wilentz remembers that concert at the Philharmonic Hall where “Gates of Eden,” “It’s Alright Ma, I’m Only Bleeding” and other songs were debuted, he remembers a comical admission of guilt in playing the role of folk and soon-to-be rock star. After finishing “Gates of Eden,” the singer jokes about how the song should not scare anybody, for it was only Halloween:

“I’m masquerading!” he joked, elongating the second word into a smoke-ringed laugh. The joke was serious. Bob Dylan, ne Zimmerman, brilliantly cultivated his celebrity, but he was really an artist and singer, a man behind a mask, a great entertainer, maybe, but basically just that—someone who threw words together, astounding as they were. The burden of being something else—a guru, a political theorist...was too much to ask of anyone. Indeed, it missed the whole point as he was laying it out in his songs, which was that the songs themselves were what mattered, their words and images alone. We in the audience were asking him to be a leader and more, but Dylan was slipping the yoke. He certainly enjoyed the fame and fortune that had headed his way. But beyond a certain level of acceptance, all he really wanted to do was to be a friend, if possible, and an artist writing and singing his songs. He was telling us so, but we didn’t want to believe it, and wouldn’t let him leave it at that. We wanted more. (Wilentz, 103)

This “burden of being something else,” as Wilentz puts it, is the fault of the audience, who “were asking him to be a leader and more,” which “was too much to ask of anyone,” but he may be giving Dylan slightly more credit than he actually deserves. Sure to point out that Dylan’s celebrity persona was “brilliantly crafted,” Wilentz turns to praise, seeming almost as though he feels sorry for Dylan, reminding us that he was “an artist and a singer...but basically just that,” which, despite his having acknowledged the cultivation of his persona, puts the singer right back into the role of accidental or reluctant prophet. With such a preemptive, self-conscious, yet topical songwriting style, how could he be seen as “just someone who threw words together, astounding as they were?” Had they just been “thrown together,” the words most assuredly would not have been considered astounding, nor would they have had such a long-lasting effect. Indeed, Dylan knew he was no “guru” or “political theorist,” but where Wilentz goes wrong is in his contention that “Dylan was slipping the yoke,” that all he wanted to be was “a friend, if possible.” From the moment he wrote “Hard Rain” along with the rest of the songs on *Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan*, he knew his music would have some sort of impact upon society, which is why he was “masquerading,” as “the man behind the mask,” Bob Dylan, not Zimmerman. It is doubtful that Dylan actually wanted to exist as “a friend, if possible” to his fans, yet undeniable that they “wouldn’t let him leave it at that,” and always “wanted more.” The problem of insatiability among fans comes up in every successful songwriter’s or composer’s career, and, most of the time, is largely responsible for an artist’s decline, whether it be commercial or otherwise. But, in 1964, Bob Dylan was a poet, capable of holding a mirror up to his surroundings as well as the people

within them, whether he wanted to admit it or not. It is almost as though he used artifice as a means of promoting his own authenticity as a lyricist.

The work of Dylan and Reed comes from a cultural context perfected by Walt Whitman and pioneered by the antinomians during the early American settlements. Focusing on experience as filtered through the eye of the individual, Whitman shows his reader what it means to “reckon the earth much.” In this poem, Whitman is sure to include all of that which makes us American, asking early on,

Have you reckon'd a thousand acres much? have you reckon'd the earth much?

Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?

Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems,

You shall possess the good of the earth and sun...

You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed of the specters in books,

You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,

You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self...

But I do not talk of the beginning or end

There was never any more inception than there is now,

Nor any more youth or age than there is now,

And will never be any more perfection than there is now

Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now (Whitman, "Song of Myself,"

Sections 2-3).

The pseudo-sarcastic tone indicates his disdain for those who insist on getting “at the meaning of poems,” when we can “possess the origin of all poems” if we only “stop this

day and night." What emerges here is a sense that truth cannot be extrapolated from any experience other than that of the reader himself, not taking any "things from me," nor "second or third hand" sources. There is a direct connection here to Dylan's conclusion that "it's alright Ma, it's life and life only," both with respect to his use of the vernacular and the idea that the truth, or answer, cannot be discovered so easily, without looking inward. Whitman, like Dylan, forces his listener to join him, in song, experience and existence. I feel free when I read Whitman for the same reason that I do when I listen to Dylan and Reed, because he encourages his listener to have faith in his own identity, partially because that identity is somewhat universal. When Whitman instructs us to "listen to all sides and filter them from your self," he gets at why I, a twenty-one year old, can identify with a sixty year old, because of the fact that we felt the same way when we first heard "It's Alright Ma, I'm only Bleeding" or "Sister Ray" for the first time, despite having done so in different eras.

Whitman instructs us to "listen to all sides and filter them from yourself," which is inspiring because it forces us to take in the world around us, forgetting about any experience aside from our own, letting others "discuss while I am silent, and go bathe and admire myself." The creative process is observed here by Whitman as well as through him, as an act in which constricting conventional convictions are broken apart in order to release the intensity of a particular artist. Dylan takes Whitman's advice, "listen[ing] to all sides" when cultivating his art; he is hyper-aware of his surroundings, of the "paupers and peasants and princes and kings," who have now become his subjects. In many ways Dylan's sarcastic refrain, "It's alright ma, I'm only dying," mirrors Whitman's proclamation that there "will never be any more perfection than there is now" in its

ambivalence towards the petty issues Americans seem to waste their time obsessing over. Whitman argues for an end to unnecessary anxiety through a mass understanding, as well as appreciation of all aspects of life, good or bad, while Dylan, who is more cynical, declares his complacent acceptance of all that which is good or evil—“It’s life and life only.” Independence, revolution, and the acceptance of chaos as the world order are all integral pieces of Whitman's jigsaw puzzle of experience, upon which Dylan and Reed are able to build their own.

In Dylan’s case, the act of recording, at least during his early career (roughly 1962-69), represents a snapshot of a particular idea: many of his best songs were recorded in a single take, with little to no post production. Seemingly unconcerned with how the public would receive him, he simply recorded in the most simple, pragmatic way he knew how, so as to appear even more unconcerned. It was important for him to make himself seem nonchalant and like some kind of reluctant hero—the reluctance being the key to it all. His process was, in reality, by no means reluctant, just simple, yet calculated. The more effortless the art seemed, the better off he was in the eyes of the public. When he acts as if he doesn’t care what happens with his career, he becomes more mysterious and thus sought after by his audience and the media. The evidence lies within the text as well as the song—Dylan is able to satisfy both—humbling the art of the text with the music and melody he chooses to back that text up. When comparing him to, say, the Beatles, we find that what becomes obvious are the different levels of lyrical complexity, the Beatles having got away with mediocre lyrics by dressing them up with at first just catchy, and eventually interesting music.

I do not mean to suggest that all of the Beatles' music was this way, simply that their music, as well as their lyrics, did not really become interesting until the latter part of the sixties, which is the opposite in Dylan's case. His best work came out on his first four albums, after which a certain unprecedented sense of self-consciousness seemed to come over him, and his work began to suffer, a fact quite evident in what many consider his first terrible album, *Self Portrait*, which was released in 1970. Robert Christgau's review for his own Consumer Guide seems to be the most clear headed:

Jon Landau wrote to suggest I give this a D, but that's pique. Conceptually, this is a brilliant album which is organized, I think, by two central ideas. First that "self" is most accurately defined (and depicted) in terms of the artifacts—in this case pop tunes and folk songs claimed as personal property and semispontaneous (sic) renderings of past creations frozen for posterity on a piece of tape and (perhaps) even a couple of songs one has written oneself—to which one responds. Second, that the people's music is the music people like, Mantovani strings and all. But in order for a concept to work it has to be supported musically—that is, you have to listen. I don't know anyone, even vociferous supporters of this album, who plays more than one side at a time. I don't listen to it at all. The singing is not consistently good, though it has its moments, and the production—for which I blame Bob Johnston, though Dylan has to be listed as a coconspirator—ranges from indifferent to awful. It is possible to use strings and soprano choruses well, but Johnston has never demonstrated the knack. Other points: it's overpriced, the cover art is lousy, and it sounds good on WMCA. C+

Self Portrait came out just one year after *Nashville Skyline*, one of Dylan's most revered albums, which included "Lay Lady Lay," still one of his most popular songs. One wonders how he was able to follow something so good with something so poor, especially when his work had been consistently great up until that point. After *Self Portrait*, Dylan would release only three more worthwhile albums, *Blood on the Tracks*, *The Basement Tapes*, and *Desire*, all between 1975 and 1976, after which his work went so far downhill that it is nearly not worth discussing. There comes a time in every artist's career when they simply run out of gas, and it comes in different forms. In many cases this means a sudden inability to write or release songs anymore, while other instances find an artist releasing mediocre album after mediocre album until he either dies or finally decides to quit. Dylan, of course, falls in the second category, and is still releasing mediocre music.

Resisting my inclination to begin discussing the honor in knowing when to quit, I must admit that while there is nothing necessarily wrong with being so prolific, it raises the question of the artist's intentions as far as his public reception goes. As respected as he may be now, Dylan would undoubtedly be hailed as "the father of modern music" or something preposterous had he either died or stopped making music. After 1976, Dylan's music did not become unlistenable, or suddenly atrocious; it simply became forgettable, because in many ways he had run out of new ideas. Having undergone so many transformations, musically and personally, he just settled into whatever he is now, "seasoned old rock star," for lack of a better title. Though there is such a thing as oversaturation, and Dylan is certainly guilty of it to some extent (especially with how often he tours), how can I, a twenty-one year old at the beginning of his own career,

criticize this man for wanting to continue his, which has been undoubtedly so much more significant? Perhaps there is honor in knowing when to stop, but Dylan's and Reed's refusal to quit is admirable, despite how much awful music they have made —Reed just (in 2011) released an album with seminal metal band Metallica and it very well may be the worst music either artist has ever made.

There is a direct correlation between Dylan's sort of instinctive, seemingly spontaneous songwriting and the sense of honesty evoked from the music that he wrote during his early career. His great empathy for the human condition is omnipresent in songs such as "It's Alright Ma, I'm Only Bleeding," "With God On Our Side," and "Desolation Row," where his abstract take on American existence is on display in the form of a broken, desolate landscape where all people suffer. Even when coming up with his moniker, Dylan did something similar to what he ended up doing with his music, at first imitating an admirable figure, then taking whatever inspiration he could draw from the act of imitation, and making it his own. He harnessed a pre-established genre, folk, and sent it in a new direction, one more willing to experiment with the limits of harmony and volume, as well as lyrical content.

Before leaving home, the young guitar player was determined to change his name from Robert Allen Zimmerman to simply Robert Allen, figuring

...that's what my parents named me. It sounded like the name of a Scottish king and I liked it. There was little of my identity that wasn't in it. What kind of confused me later was seeing an article in a *Downbeat* magazine with a story—about a West Coast saxophone player named David Allyn. I had suspected that the musician had changed the spelling of Allen to Allyn. I could see why. It

looked more exotic, more inscrutable. I was going to do this, too. Instead of Robert Allen it would be Robert Allyn. Then sometime later, unexpectedly, I'd seen some poems by Dylan Thomas. Dylan and Allyn sounded similar. Robert Dylan. Robert Allyn. I couldn't decide—the letter *D* came on stronger. But Robert Dylan didn't look or sound as good as Robert Allyn. People had always called me either Robert or Bobby, but Bobby Dylan sounded too skittish to me and besides, there already was a Bobby Darin...and a lot of other Bobbys. Bob Dylan looked and sounded better than Bob Allyn. The first time I was asked my name in the Twin Cities, I instinctively and automatically without thinking simply said, "Bob Dylan" (Dylan, 78-9).

Notice the manner—"instinctively and automatically without thinking"—in which he first uttered the words which then became not only his moniker, but the name most used to identify him. This comes from the first volume of his autobiography, *Chronicles*, which was published in 2004, but its authenticity is relatively questionable. So many years later Dylan is still in some ways covering for his younger self and playing along with the persona that younger self created, which was based on being "instinctive" and nonchalant about nearly everything. Indeed, it is quite doubtful that he came up with such a catchy stage name "instinctively and automatically without thinking" the first time somebody asked his name in Minnesota, but his persona would like you to believe that, and in fact, most do. His persona would also like you to believe that he came up with his greatest songs in that same way, just "instinctively...without thinking." It is hard not to believe him too, because as Bangs said, he was "good at faking it during the first part of his career" and just "sucks at it now." But his status as a sort of fake when it comes to

really revealing his so-called true self does not discredit the undeniable influence certain songs of his have had upon popular music up until the present day.

An important thing to remember is that Dylan was only one year older than Lou Reed, but he got a four-year head start in New York City after having chosen to only spend a year (or less) at University of Minnesota. Reed graduated from Syracuse University in June of 1964, the year that Dylan released two of his biggest albums, *The Times They Are-A-Changin'* and *Another Side of Bob Dylan*, so it is unlikely that Dylan was not on his mind at all when he graduated and moved to the city. There is an important distinction to be made here between these two men who eventually were thought of as heroes. While at Syracuse, Reed studied privately with the poet Delmore Schwartz, after which he spent his time running in circles with people who were at the forefront of New York's avant-garde: John Cale (who studied with John Cage), La Monte Young, and, perhaps most importantly Andy Warhol and his entourage at The Factory. Dylan was never part of any specific milieu, aside from his initial association with folk. In 1965, Bob Dylan became and remained a sort of solitary figure, with no scene to claim as his own.

The second half of the sixties saw Dylan's fame continuing to rise as well as the beginnings of the Velvet Underground, as well as the lack of fame that came with their inception. In the wake of the Cuban Missile crisis and at the start of the useless Vietnam conflict, young people were significantly affected by the "Battles, the horrors of fratricidal war,/the fever of doubtful news,/the fitful events," and accompanied that sense of fear with a guitar (Whitman, 4).

II

Having studied poetry at Syracuse University, Lou Reed was well equipped to write some of his greatest lyrics before the end of 1964, which included what would become “Heroin” and “I’m Waiting For the Man.” By 1965, Reed had already gotten the first incarnation of his band, The Velvet Underground, together, which consisted of John Cale on viola and bass, Sterling Morrison on guitar, Angus MacLise on drums, and Reed on vocals and guitar. By the time they had been offered their first paying gig, \$75 at a suburban high school in northern New Jersey, MacLise had quit, deciding that he did not want to be told when to show up or how long to play (Unterberger, 59). According to Richie Unterberger in his *White Light/White Heat: The Velvet Underground Day by Day*, MacLise did not even want to get paid, although \$75 was modest “even by 1965 standards” (Unterberger, 60). MacLise was a part of the early sixties avant-garde and minimalist scene in downtown Manhattan, which included, but was not limited to La Monte Young, Tony Conrad, John Cale, Philip Glass, and Terry Reilly. At 275 Church St., where Young and his wife Marina Zazeela still live today, Cale, MacLise, and Tony Conrad would perform with them for hours, using drones, Young’s peculiar form of throat singing, and amplified viola. The amplification of drums and viola was not very common in the early sixties, so they had to come up with ways of figuring out how to do it on their own, resulting in huge volume and distortion, to the point of sensory deprivation, which would go on for hours (Unterberger, 24). In order to fully understand how the quartet who recorded the first Velvet Underground album in 1967 became who they are—because at the time it seemed as though they came out of nowhere—we must

first examine the scene out of which John Cale emerged and decided to quit in favor of playing this never-before-seen brand of rock and roll with Reed.

In September of 1963, Reed is starting his senior year at Syracuse University, still playing with his college rock and roll band, LA & The Eldorados in Syracuse and the surrounding areas of upstate New York, while Cale is studying and performing with John Cage in New York City. Cale, just out of college himself, participated in “one of the most celebrated performances of John Cage’s career—at least in terms of the media coverage it generates,” which was Cage’s rendering of Erik Satie’s “Vexations” played 840 times over (Unterberger, 24). The performance lasted an astonishing 18 hours and 40 minutes, from 6pm on September 9th until 12:40pm the following day, and was played by a rotating cast of a dozen pianists, which included both Cage and Cale. In true John Cage spirit, the event cost \$5, with a five-cent refund for every twenty minutes of attendance (Unterberger, 25). It is important to keep in mind all the work Cale did in the avant-garde before ever joining the Velvet Underground, because much of their early experimental sound was indebted to him and what he did with La Monte Young, Angus MacLise, Tony Conrad and Marina Zazeela, in a group called the dream syndicate. Over the course of 1963, the group, which consisted of Young, Zazeela, Tony Conrad, and sometimes MacLise, would begin to play more regularly, developing their sound with Cale on amplified viola, Conrad on amplified violin, Young and Zazeela on amplified voice, and if he decided to show up, Angus MacLise on amplified percussion. “The concept of the group was to sustain notes for two hours at a time,” Cale explains, “La Monte would hold the lowest notes, I would hold the next three on my viola, his wife Marian would hold the next note, and Tony Conrad would hold the top note...It was so

different. The tapes of it are art objects” which Young has to this day refused to release (Unterberger, 24). For the next eighteen months Cale rehearses rigorously with Young, until the “pull of [playing] rock and roll” with Reed becomes “too strong for him to resist” (Unterberger 24).

Of course, these incredibly loud amplified drones, which he practiced so devoutly, would become a major influence upon the music of the Velvet Underground as well as a major part of the formation of the group, mostly because of John Cale’s friendship with their first drummer, Angus MacLise. The only missing piece was Sterling Morrison, an old college buddy who Reed just happened to run into on the subway in 1964-5 (Unterberger, 23). When asked about the role of amplification in Young’s group, The Dream Syndicate, Tony Conrad, who played violin, explains that when he joined,

everybody was acoustic, of course...the whole idea of being amplified was a little goofy...in order to compete [with Zazeela’s “powerful drone” and Young’s saxophone], the violin certainly needed a little more oomph. And of course, we didn’t have rock amps lying around. You needed to play through a hi-fi if you were gonna play amplified, which is the way we did it...The other part of it was that I had been largely responsible for introducing the idea for harmonic relationships into the practices of the group. My whole awareness of the relevance of harmonic relationships came out of the experience of listening very carefully to the violin when I would play double stops—that is, two notes at a time—and hear the beats, interactions, and difference tones that were produced by the non-linear qualities of the ear and the instrument. You only hear those things adequately when the music is loud, which kind of overdrives your ear. In fact, I’m kind of

deaf in one ear!...of course nobody could hear any of this...so by amplifying the instrument, especially with these contact pickups that were cheesy and quite non-linear in their response so that they somewhat distorted the sound, it became really possible to make out the difference tones and the other inner sonorities and timbral events that occurred within the sound envelope. (Unterberger, 30).

These “harmonic relationships” that Conrad seems so concerned with were an integral part of John Cale’s amplified viola playing in the Velvet Underground. Cale even filed down the wooden bridge of his viola so that he could play all four strings at once, as opposed to the classic double stop, which added more to the “difference tones” between his viola and the bass guitar, both of which were overdriven, and distorted. Playing music at such a high volume was totally unprecedented, especially when the music being played was so experimental. Despite nobody really ever having been aware of it, members of the Velvet Underground were playing electric, at incredibly high volumes two years before Dylan ever did. Instead of just adhering to the classic rock and roll format as Dylan did, these folks did not have the means to buy expensive amplifiers and electric instruments at first, so instead they used contact mics and pickups bought cheaply and installed themselves. Conrad says that he got the idea partially from John Cage after having performed in “Atlas Eclipticalis” and “Cage’s use of Slinkys and so forth used the pickups and these contact mics. They were cheap and effective, and not very good. They had a lot of resonances and they were shrill, but...very interesting.” Overloading the output of sound using these “effective,” yet “not very good” pickups and contact mics, all kinds of overtones could be heard, and a new sound was formed. It was a louder, unprecedented, distorted sound, which was adopted by the Velvet Underground and then

the proto punk bands The Stooges and The MC5, only to form what would become the backbone of “alternative rock”—or rather any sort of guitar based music that is loud, distorted, and not based in the blues—another appropriate term could be “indie rock,” despite its misleading nature.

As Lester Bangs said, “modern music starts with the Velvet,” and most critics would agree with him. The progression from the Velvet in the sixties, to The Stooges in late sixties/early seventies, the Ramones in the mid to late seventies, then the explosion of hardcore punk and indie rock in the eighties, to the endless variety of genres in existence today seems obvious, though I am talking about a specific type of music. After the seventies were over, New York ceased to be the only hub of excitement for punk music—punk had already spread to England and all over the United States to inspire the teenagers who would become Minor Threat, Black Flag, The Replacements, Husker Du, The Descendents, and so many more. Once you reach the dawn of the eighties though, there are too many artists to mention, because of the rate at which they began popping up all over the globe. Yet, as I see it, the lineage of defiant, literary, loud, distorted, experimental, honest guitar music begins in New York city with The Velvet Underground.

By 1965, the Velvet Underground were recording demos, venturing into performance art, and most importantly using their real life experiences on the then dangerous, now chic, Lower East Side of Manhattan to write songs that sounded unlike any ever written before in America or anywhere else as far as I am aware. By December they would have a new drummer, Maureen Tucker, and would play their first paying gig at the aforementioned high school in New Jersey (Unterberger, 39). 1965 also saw the

release of *Bringing It All Back Home* and *Highway 61 Revisited*, two of Bob Dylan's most successful albums, which is important to remember when we examine the connection between him and Reed, because, despite how different their songs ended up sounding, Reed was simply taking Dylan's model and running with it, so to speak. When Lou Reed first wrote "I'm Waiting for the Man," it was a folk song played on an acoustic guitar, and was initially rejected by John Cale because of what he then thought was its derivative sound. In an interview quoted in Nigel Trevena's 1973 book *Lou Reed & The Velvets*, Cale goes so far as to say that the songs, which also included "Heroin," "seemed sorry for themselves," but Reed is persistent, "and once Cale reads the lyrics he realizes that these aren't just folk homilies but works with a genuine literary quality" (Unterberger, 41). According to Unterberger, "the two men have other things in common...including drugs. The subject is of course dealt with explicitly in "I'm Waiting for the Man" and "Heroin"—a substance with which Cale, who has already tried an assortment of drugs during his time with La Monte Young, begins to experiment after meeting Reed" (Unterberger, 41). When asked about the time period during which he met John Cale and subsequently moved in with him on Ludlow street, Reed remembers that he "was interested in subject matter that hadn't been covered in pop and rock...I had dreams of writing certain kinds of things. But I was influenced by [William S.] Burroughs and [Allen] Ginsberg, Raymond Chandler and Hubert Selby [Jr.]. I thought, that's what I want to do—except with a drum and guitar" (from documentary, *Lou Reed: Rock and Roll Heart*).

As Cale later explains in the BBC documentary *John Cale*, Reed was "very concerned with being paid \$25 a week to write songs in the style of anybody [Pickwick

Records] decided were fine at the time...the songs he really wanted to record would never get recorded. And in a very heroic mode I said, 'Hell with them. Lets go do it anyway.'

Before getting the Velvet Underground together, Reed worked as a hack songwriter for a small record label, the aforementioned Pickwick Records, doing exactly what Cale said he was, simply writing songs based upon what his superiors thought would make them money, which at the time was, cheap Beatles or Rolling Stones-esque knock offs, which could be found for cheaper than the originals in stores. Reed worked within the industry before choosing to go out and turn that very same tradition upside down, similarly to what Dylan did with the folk tradition, except to a much greater extent. While at Syracuse, Reed saw Dylan in concert, and according to a former bandmate from The Eldorados, Reed at that point "has become a big admirer of Dylan, even going so far as to get a harmonica and work out an arrangement of "Baby Let Me Follow You Down" one of the traditional songs from Dylan's from Dylan's first LP, to play with the El Dorados" (Unterberger, 26). Dylan's influence upon Reed becomes most obvious on "Prominent Men," an early Reed-Cale demo, featuring the bleating harmonica which was so essential to Dylan's early protest songs, but it was not released until the 1995 box set *Peel Slowly And See*. Nonetheless, Dylan's songwriting is echoed throughout the personal, uncompromising approach to lyric-writing that Reed has begun to develop, and one can't help but wonder whether seeing a successful performer succeed with such a rough, unconventional voice gave Reed the courage to assert his own idiosyncratic vocal persona (Unterberger 26). These two men had very different styles—when Dylan was first going electric the Velvet Underground were already hurting audiences ears—but their personas were similar, in that they were cultivated as their careers progressed,

integral to their development as artists and lyricists. On the one hand, we know that Lou Reed “is just a regular guy,” but when we hear his music we immediately give in to his persona, believing that the characters he creates and he are one and the same, in a similar way that we do with Dylan.

In the book of Reed’s selected lyrics *Between Thought and Expression*, he states in the introduction that,

The heart of a lyric for me has always been anchored in an experienced reality, whether it be Avedon’s photo of Warhol’s bullet-scarred chest or the sociopathic attitudes recorded in “Kicks” or “Street Hassle.” So in answer to the question I am most often asked, “Are these incidents real?” Yes, he said, Yes Yes Yes (Reed, i)

What is interesting about this as a preface to a book of his “selected lyrics” is the fact that he calls his reaction to art “an experienced reality,” which some would say is merely an imitation, or mirror held up to reality, a secondary source. Taking Whitman’s advice, Reed “listen[s] to all sides and filter them from [him]self” (Whitman, 2). His art seems to be based in a mixture of his experience in enjoying art as well as in real encounters or reactions to events, such as the assassination of John F. Kennedy, about which he wrote a song in college and later released on *The Blue Mask*. In certain ways, Reed exists as an anomaly within the 1960s college scene, as a nonconformist, artistic rebel, experimenting with drugs and making other edgy lifestyle choices several years before the explosion of youth counterculture would make such behavior more common. On the other hand however, his mindset is similar to that of many other liberal arts students, being a keen admirer of Bob Dylan, and being shocked by the assassination of the former president in Dallas. What separates Reed from Dylan, though, is the formers lack of idealism, instead

he “[does not] have any real feelings about politics one way or another, you know, except I felt bad here, and I wrote a song about it” (Unterberger, 27).

Reed gets to the heart of the issue in the defence of his own authenticity by claiming that art can provide us with what he calls “experienced reality,” then giving his own work as the evidence of such, and, rather appropriately, choosing a song titled “I’ll Be Your Mirror” as the first of this “collection of lyrics that I feel can stand alone from the music for which they were originally written” (Reed, i):

I’ll be your mirror, reflect what you are

In case you don’t know

I’ll be the wind, the rain, and the sunset

The light on your door

To show that you are home

When you think the night has seen your mind

that inside you’re twisted and unkind

Let me stand to show that you are blind

Please put down your hands

‘cause I see you (Reed, 3)

“I’ll Be Your Mirror,” from the first Velvet Underground album, *The Velvet Underground and Nico*, seems to examine the role of an artist, and perhaps more specifically a songwriter or pop star. Because it is important to note, that at this time, the Velvets were fronted not only by Reed but also by Nico, the German model/actress wrangled by Andy Warhol to be the pretty face at the front of the stage as well as sing a

few songs. It seems fitting that Nico sings this song though, in her deep baritone voice, standing six feet tall, blonde and gorgeous over her band mates, whether or not Reed intended it for her, specifically because of the way that it pokes fun at the role of a pop star, to “reflect what you are/In case you don’t know.”

In a way, Reed seems to be offering his services as “The light on your door/To show that you are home,” perhaps in a similar way to what Wilentz suggested was Dylan’s intention in 1964, to “be a friend, if possible.” He takes the metaphor further by asking to “Let me stand to show that you are blind,” ironically questioning the power relationship between the artist and his audience as well as perhaps attempting to set himself apart from those who consider themselves, “the voice of a generation.” By ending the stanza with an image of an artist as the shooter and his work as the gun in the face of the audience, he solidifies his anti-pop status, telling us to put down our hands, “‘cause I see you.” This song also echoes, to a certain extent, one of the oldest Western justifications for poetry as a “speaking Picture” that “holds the mirror up to nature.” Here the speaker within the song, or poem, forces the listener or audience to see themselves whether they want to or not, yet the reflection is that of the artist, for “every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” (Whitman, 1). With “I’ll Be Your Mirror” Reed uses the conventions of poetry as an ironic tool to poke fun at the relationship between a singer/songwriter and his audience, further validating the contention that these song lyrics have their own meaning and sense of poetic irony along with regular poetry.

Also included in *Between Thought And Expression* is Lou Reed’s interview with one of his heroes, Hubert Selby Jr., in which Selby explores the process of creating the type of real, honest, art that is born from the streets. In a preface to the interview, Reed

calls Selby's *Last Exit to Brooklyn* a "great original work, fierce and filled with great rage and tension heralding a Great new Voice—an explosion that leapt off the pages" (Reed, 163). Such a description could be associated with Reed's work as well, and since the novel came out in 1964, there is no doubt that it was on his mind during the composition of his best work, between then and 1972. Within the book, the interview is titled after Selby's closing remark, which he used to describe how he felt when he wrote *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, as "a scream looking for a mouth" (Reed, 171). Selby claims, at the start of the interview, that he wants to put his reader "through an emotional experience. My ideal is that the surface of the line would be so intense that the reader doesn't even have to read it. [Laughs]," something which is also very present in Reed's work with the Velvet Underground (Reed, 163). When Reed goes on and on about "sucking on [his] ding dong" and "searching for [his] mainline [for heroin]," in "Sister Ray," the listener, as Selby says, "absorb[s] it," and is affected internally, especially with the help of repetition. *Last Exit to Brooklyn* is a novel about drug addicts, transvestites, prostitutes, and wife-beating union officials, each of whom is dealt with specifically in sections, which, on their own, could exist as short stories, while the plots do also briefly intertwine. These two men, born only five years apart (Selby being the elder), sought the same response when it came to the meaning of their words, despite the different mediums in which they chose to express them. In relation to one of his stories, "Tralala," Selby realized that "what I had to do...was reflect the psychodynamics of an individual... through the rhythm and tension of a prose line" (Reed, 164), which is exactly what Reed does, except with a song lyric. In what is probably his most famous song, "Walk On The Wild Side," Reed lists all the famous drag queens of the 1960s New York underground, in tribute to

Georgette, the transvestite immortalized in Selby's story, "The Queen Is Dead." In fact, "Walk On The Wild Side" hosts some prime examples of Reed's attempt, even as late as 1972, when the track came out as the single for *Transformer*, to mirror the dark underbelly of New York nightlife unapologetically. In the first two verses, Reed depicts two staples of the 1960s drag queen/transvestite scene, Candy Darling and Holly Woodlawn:

Holly came from Miami F-L-A
 Hitchhiked her way across the U.S.A.
 Plucked her eyebrows on the way
 Shaved her legs and then he was a she
 She says, Hey babe, take a walk on the wild side

Candy came from out on the Island
 in the backroom she was everybody's darling
 but she never lost her head even when she was giving head
 (the colored girls go
 Doo do doo do doo) (Reed, 42).

On the bottom of the page, the songwriter provides us with a footnote, revealing that "They were going to make a musical out of Nelson Algren's *A Walk on the Wild Side*. When they dropped the project I took my song and changed the book's characters into people I knew from Warhol's Factory. I don't like to waste things" (Reed, 42). He did not just choose "people [he] knew," though; there was a conscious decision to include only the transvestites that hung around "Warhol's Factory." Not only that, but it is

important to note here that Reed released a single for a major record label that describes, even if subtly, the act of a man dressed in women's clothes giving another man fellatio. This was unprecedented, especially for a song that became an enormous hit.

Reed's voyeurism in songs like "Venus in Furs" and "Walk on the Wild Side" mirrors that of Whitman in the eleventh section of "Song of Myself." Reed explores the same material as Whitman here, even under similar cultural contexts, despite the wildly different time periods in which they were working. In the 1960s, homosexuality was still considered a disease, and despite its beginning to enter the mainstream at that point, it was still very much something that was kept under wraps. The speaker in Whitman's epic assumes the role of a woman watching men bathe in the eleventh section, resulting in what could be considered some homoerotic stanzas:

Twenty-eight young men bathe by the shore,

Twenty-eight young men and all so friendly;

Twenty-eight years of womanly life and all so lonesome.

...

The beards of the young men glisten'd with wet, it ran from their
long hair,

Little streams pass'd all over their bodies.

...

An unseen hand also pass'd over their bodies,

It descended tremblingly from their temples and ribs.

The young men float on their backs, their white bellies bulge to the
sun, they do not ask who seizes fast to them,

They do not know who puffs and declines with pendant and bending
arch,

They do not think whom they souse with spray (Whitman, 11)

Perhaps Whitman's assumption of a female role for this part of the poem is indicative of his own apprehensions about how an overtly homoerotic section such as this one would be received if it were delivered in the first person. Nonetheless, he still delivers it, and establishes a context under which Reed could later base his work. It is safe to assume that there were few other well known nineteenth century American poets who made allusions to ejaculation in their work. With such beautiful, yet graphic imagery of the male body, Whitman romanticizes what were most likely his own feelings, and he articulates them through the watchful eye of a young woman looking on, who notes that the men are unaware of her presence, for "They do not think whom they souse with spray." Alliteration makes the language sound all the more sexual, with "bellies bulg[ing]" and the men being unaware of who "they souse with spray," all resulting in a true evocation of lust in its most raw state, in pure appreciation of the human—in this case male—form. It seems as though Whitman, or rather the speaker here, desires to be "souse[d] with [the] spray" of these men, who are "all so friendly," while watching the men bathe with their "beards...glisten'd with wet...Little streams pass[ing] all over their bodies. The image of the water dripping could be intended to mirror the dripping of sweat that occurs during sex, or rather the more graphic image of semen dripping off of, well, any part of the body, depending on the type of sex being had—regardless, the image is overtly sexual. In Whitman we find *the* voice, for it was he who gave us our identity,

singing, just like Lou Reed and Bob Dylan, his experience (which, according to Whitman is also ours) into the consciousness of his readers, and thus the greater society in which he lived.

The Velvets set the bar higher for their peers as well as their predecessors, singing about heroin instead of marijuana and bondage instead of sex. They somehow brought what was already shocking to another level, taking Dylan's suggestions of sex and turning them into "shiny, shiny, shiny, boots of leather," used against the "whiplash girl-child in the dark." In Legs McNeil and Gillain McCain's seminal work, *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk*, John Cale talks again about how Lou Reed's early songs made him feel:

The first time Lou played "Heroin" for me it totally knocked me out. The words and music were so raunchy and devastating. What's more, Lou's songs fit perfectly with my concept of music. Lou had these songs where there was an element of character assassination going on. He had strong identification with the characters he was portraying. It was method acting in song (McNeil, 5).

This "element of character assassination" is essential to my understanding of Dylan and Reed's work. Cale is rather brilliantly able to articulate Reed's relationship to his created persona, by seeing the "strong identification with the characters he was portraying," and realizing that it was essentially "method acting in song." Method acting is a specific technique used by many successful actors which involves essentially "becoming" the character, never breaking character for days at a time, whether on set/stage or not; it is an antiquated acting tool that goes back to Russian theatre with Stanislavsky and then moves to the U.S. with Michael Chekhov, Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, and Sanford Meisner. The

way Cale explains this is fitting, because it is important to emphasize that the people portrayed in these songs were indeed fictional characters, yet Reed's delivery of their experience is given with such conviction that we believe what he tells us as truth, he takes on the life of his characters, i.e. method acts within his created universe, mirroring the real one he lived in. Neither Reed's (nor Dylan's) use of the persona is reprehensible; in fact these men are married to the characters they have portrayed, and Selby too, insists upon the fact that "I don't think of them as characters. I think of them as people" (Reed, 166).

Rock and roll critic, guitarist for the Patti Smith group, and curator of the now infamous *Nuggets: Original Artifacts From the First Psychedelic Era* box set, Lenny Kaye opens the second chapter of Clinton Heylin's *From the Velvets to the Voidoids* with this thought on truly understanding the Velvets' music:

If you want to write the story of the Velvet Underground, you have to begin far beyond any of the physical things that actually happened. You first have to look at New York City, the mother which spawned them, which gave them its inner fire, creating an umbilical attachment of emotion to a monstrous hulk of urban sprawl. You have to walk its streets, ride its subways, see it bustling and alive in the day, cold and haunted at night. And you have to love it, embrace and recognize its strange power, for there, if anywhere, will you find the roots. (Heylin, 14)

The city served as the palette for the paintings that were Reed's songs. By internalizing real experiences as well as things he saw around the city, Reed was able to provide his audience with an accurate reflection of what actually went on during the sixties in

downtown Manhattan, with a focus on the more private sexual and illegal activities. There is a sense of honesty and realism in Reed's songs, one that was not present in the other music of the sixties, popular or otherwise, where most artists just seemed to be skimming the thematic surface, other than Dylan, who would not go further than asking his famous questions. Additionally, with Andy Warhol as their manager/producer, the group created a new partnership between rock and roll and the avant-garde, playing with Warhol's films projected behind them, as well as a part of the performance art piece, *The Exploding Plastic Inevitable*. The Velvets' first album, *The Velvet Underground and Nico*, was released in 1967 and for decades has cast a huge shadow over nearly every sub-variety of avant-garde rock, from 1970s early Punk/Art Rock to New Wave, No Wave, and Punk. Referring to their sway over the music of the 70s and 80s, infamous rock critic Lester Bangs stated as previously mentioned, "Modern music starts with the Velvets, and the implications and influence of what they did seem to go on forever" (Bangs, 104).

III

Lou Reed's frank lyrical depictions of sex and addiction are decorated with John Cale's eerie electric viola, Sterling Morrison's spastic guitar, and Maureen Tucker's minimalist drums. It is from this platform that the Punk movement was formed in the early 1970s, providing an alternative attitude to that of the hippies, an attitude based in nihilism as opposed to peace and love, implying that perhaps such ideals were unobtainable. One might suggest that this nihilistic attitude of Lower East Side bands in the mid 1960s is a post-war answer to the mass cultural trauma caused by the Holocaust in the post-Vietnam era.

Considered by many as the originator of Punk, Lou Reed, a Jew, was one of the first to adopt such an attitude, inspiring the likes of Jonathan Richman, Richard Hell, Tom Verlaine, Joey Ramone, and Iggy Pop—all Jews—to make similar music. Certain punk behaviors and attitudes, then, did not necessarily come as a result of, but perhaps as a reaction to the cultural trauma of the Holocaust as it was on many people's minds and slowly becoming a larger part of cultural consciousness. Also, at a time in America when youth morale is at an all time low in response to the failure of the war in Vietnam and the country's economic crisis, what did young Jews like Reed and Hell (born Meyer) have to inspire them? Wanting to break free of their parents' generation and fed up with their government, Reed and other Jewish soon-to-be punks realized the answer: nothing. Instead of attempting to make a change as the hippies were trying to do, they turned to sex, drugs, and a loud, sometimes fast, bizarre, ear-piercing take on rock and roll that sometimes turned to noise. Victor Bockris, who has written celebrated biographies of the

Velvet Underground and Blondie (arguably the New York Punk band to have enjoyed the most success) writes in his book about the Ramones:

Punk was the last great reaction to the Second World War...After the war, you had the Beat Generation, the abstract expressionists, Francis Bacon, and those great Fifties artists. Then it was the Sixties, the rock 'n' roll generation. I was born in 1952. My generation, the punk rockers, grew up totally affected by the war. All our comic books, our games, our films were about it. The reason punks wore Nazi uniforms and flirted with fascist iconography was the same reason the Stones had. It was like, 'Stop fucking telling me about the war.' (True 2002 p.59)

Punk, then, can be seen as a postmodern answer to the acting out of nihilistic tendencies as initiated and filtered through the experience of these Jewish songwriters. One can only imagine the constant reminders Reed, Dylan, Hell, and the members of the Ramones must have gotten from their mothers about the genocide while they were growing up, and they must have been sick of it. With quite the sick sense of humor, Joey Ramone wrote the lyric, "I'm an Nazi, baby, I'm an Nazi, yes I am," as an ironic dismissal of his parents' generation by declaring himself as what was once, and in some ways still their enemy. Perhaps he wanted to convey that the word "Nazi" and the image of the swastika, just like anything else, can lose its meaning at a certain point, and simply become a fashion statement. In more recent years, for instance, it has become popular among young people to wear shirts with Che Guevara's face printed on them, or the hammer and sickle symbol for communism; the majority of these kids have no idea what Che Guevara did or who he was, let alone the fact that he murdered many people during and after the Cuban Revolution. The flirtation of punk music with Nazi imagery and style began purely as a

crudely ironic attempt at post-modernism, basically, to shock people. Of course, it did, and despite its offensive nature, the bands that chose to do this consisted of Jews. It is significant to note that there was a common rejection of heritage among Jewish punks, where Nazi symbolism proved to be the most effective and immediate form of rebellion, insensitivity notwithstanding.

Musically, the punk form pioneered by bands like the Velvet, then The Stooges, early MC5, and Pere Ubu collapsed conventional harmony and melody into noise at times, going back and forth between order and chaos—offensive lyrics paired with catchy music or discordant cacophony paired with repetitive, bizarre and mostly offensive lyrics. One example of this marriage between chaos and order lies within the way many of these songwriters keep the popular song form intact, i.e. verse/chorus/verse, etc., except they bring a certain cruelty to it by adding things like distortion, feedback, or dissonance, to name a few. The music of the Velvet Underground, as well as most of those to follow in their footsteps, is grounded in the synthesis of subtlety and cruelty, being driven both by loud, and sometimes atonal music, as well as never before seen disturbing lyrics.

What distinguishes Reed from the other popular Jewish songwriters of the 1960s—namely Dylan, Paul Simon, and Leonard Cohen—is that, despite his application of the popular song form, his lyrics set him aside as a purveyor of darkness, protesting not just against the government, but against all pop culture. Reed told stories of drugs, sado-masochism, and as previously exemplified, transsexuality and prostitution. In his book about Jews in rock n roll, Michael Billig states that “Dylan and Simon could be said to have attempted to elevate the pop song, raising it lyrically to new levels. Reed was dragging it down—further down than it had ever been before” (Billig, 142). In terms of

subject matter this may be true, but, in his “dragging down,” Reed furthered this supposed elevation of the pop song by exposing what was real, what people did not necessarily want to hear. The earliest examples of this are “I’m Waiting For The Man” and “Heroin.” John Cale, Reed’s bandmate and the man responsible for incorporating drone and other avant-garde elements into the Velvets’ sound, was at first unsure of these two tracks, which have since gone down in history as some of the most innovative to have been recorded:

By 1965 Lou Reed had already written “Heroin” and “Waiting for the Man.” I first met Lou at a party and he played his songs with an acoustic guitar, so I really didn’t pay any attention because I couldn’t give a shit about folk music. I hated Joan Baez and Dylan—every song was a fucking question! But Lou kept shoving these lyrics in front of me. I read them, and they weren’t what Joan Baez and all those other people were singing...At the time, I was playing with La Monte Young in the Dream Syndicate and the concept of the group was to sustain notes for two hours at a time. (McCain/McNeil, 4)

Reed re-appropriated Dylan’s treatment of folk and rock for his own purposes, avoiding the use of a “fucking question” as the basis for a song’s theme and instead choosing what surrounded him, which at the time was essentially debauchery in its most raw form, the Factory being the kind of place where artists of all kinds would stay up on amphetamines for days at a time, making art and having sex.

In a way, Reed’s depictions of sex and drug use can be seen as an answer of sorts to the depravity committed by the Nazis in World War II and the massacres our own troops were committing in Vietnam. Irony is an integral piece of Reed’s lyrical puzzle; it

serves as his primary ammunition when it comes to proving any kind of point. Rarely will he simply say what he feels; rather, he takes a given situation, such as the artist's place in society, and pokes fun at it, as in "I'll Be Your Mirror." Before hanging out at Andy Warhol's Factory of pop art and bizarre activity, Reed and Cale were in La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela's group, the Dream Syndicate, who, according to Factory staple Billy Name, were "the best drug connection in New York...Great big acid pills, and opium, and grass too...When you went over to La Monte and Marian's place, you were there for a minimum of seven hours—probably end up to be two or three days" (McCain/McNeil, 4). To say the least, there were lots of drugs being taken in and around the Lower East Side avant-garde/bohemian scene, which eventually, by the mid-sixties, revolved around The Factory and Max's Kansas City, both of which were on Union Square in Manhattan, just down the block from each other. The Velvet Underground's relationship to Andy Warhol is a complicated one to discuss so many years later because the story changes depending upon whom you ask. In one of many different instances where Reed has been quoted answering the question of how, or why, Warhol became their manager, his praise is at first surprising:

Andy Warhol told me that what we were doing with the music was the same thing he was doing with painting and movies and writing—i.e. not kidding around. To my mind nobody in music was doing anything that even approximated the real thing, with the exception of us. We were doing a specific thing that was very, very real. It wasn't slick or a lie in any conceivable way, which was the only way we could work with him. Because the very first thing I liked about Andy was that he was very real. (McCain/McNeil, 7)

What's interesting about this is that it serves as an early example of Reed's famous arrogance, especially in terms of his songwriting ability. Additionally, the question of persona and the extent to which it can remain authentic is raised once again in Reed's contention that Warhol "was very real." "Real" is not the right word; in fact, there is a certain "fakeness" to Warhol's art in the way that he mass produced prints of iconic, distinctly American, images, but in doing so put a mirror up to society forcing it to look itself in the face through the lens of the products we buy. Similarly, Reed is taking a pre-established form and turning it around, using it to "reflect what you are, in case you don't know" as Nico ended up singing in "I'll Be Your Mirror," with a wink.

Being the creator of a mass-produced product puts one in that position, that is, of having the freedom to convey whatever message is in his art with either the hope or confidence that it will in turn be recognized and identified with by strangers. This is the nature of celebrity, and it is the role of persona that keeps such a nature alive. Lou Reed is famous for being an incredibly disagreeable person; archived in McCain and McNeil's oral history, *Please Kill Me*, Johnny Ramone "thought Lou was a real jerk," Mary Harron experienced "Lou Reed being rude to us, really, and Duncan Hannah "imagined something really different. It wasn't like it was in the books: "God, I met my hero and we were talking about Raymond Chandler!" Instead it was, "Can I shit in your mouth?" (McCain/McNeil, 197, 206, 207). Reed, of course was taking this cue from Dylan, no doubt having seen the film *Don't Look Back*, in which Dylan is portrayed as a cool, mean, arrogant rock star whose time is more precious than everyone else's. Those who looked up to Reed in the seventies, in turn, would also adopt his arrogant persona, one of whom was Tom Verlaine, singer of Television:

It when on like this, and then I realized what [Verlaine] was doing. He was practicing his Lou Reed cruelty, like in the documentary on Bob Dylan. *Don't Look Back*. You know how Dylan is in that, he's just like a killer, right? And Verlaine was grooming himself to be the new Dylan. (McCain/McNeil, 196)

It is here where we can begin to understand the distinction between the singer-songwriter's public persona and the one that is presented within his or her songs. Of course, the "I" within a poem or song is not necessarily meant to represent its author, but at the same time, a storyteller gathers his material from within, as well as from his surroundings. While the public persona of both men was well known to be unapproachable, to say the least, a different character emerges in their songs—a much friendlier, more understanding one. It was their initial success and constant praise that must have made them feel so superior to their peers, or civilians, rather, since after a certain point, they ceased to be "regular guys," creating an enormous divide between them and their audiences. Dylan chose not to take a stance, having his speaker simply present the listener with the question, even if the answer is obvious, while Reed sort of embellished his own surroundings and experiences, seeking to expose, through the semi-fictionalized lens of his own speaker, that which is most real and disturbing about human nature in its most raw forms: when doing drugs or having sex.

Lou Reed's music, as well as that of his punk followers, exhibits a certain anxiety over domination and subordination. On *The Velvet Underground and Nico*, Reed writes "Femme Fatale" for Nico to sing, their original German supermodel turned "lead singer"—she was put in the band by Andy Warhol and his people for her good looks and superior stage presence—to sing. Within the song, "she," is a strong woman who has a

powerful influence upon men, who is “just a little tease” and with whom “before you start, you’re already beat” (Reed, 10). On the same album there is Reed’s tribute to sadomasochism, “Venus in Furs,” the title of which was taken from the book of the same name by Leopold Sacher-Masoch:

Kiss the boot of shiny shiny leather

Shiny leather in the dark

Tongue the thongs, the belt that does await you

Strike, dear mistress and cure his heart

Severin, Severin, speak so slightly

Severin, down on your bended knees

Taste the whip, in love not given lightly

Taste the whip, now bleed for me. (Reed, 9)

Moving between the third and first person, the lyrics place the audience in the role of voyeur as the song’s speaker takes pleasure in his own domination, intending to suggest that it is with these controversial lyrics and unconventional music that Reed may be unconsciously responding to the image of Jewish passivity in the face of Nazi extermination, and in doing so he inspired an entire generation of troubled youths. The image of “Shiny leather in the dark,” especially in the form of boots, surely conjures up imagery of Nazi uniforms and the leather combat boots that went with them. Perhaps unknowingly, Reed uses sado-masochism as a metaphor for the Holocaust, with the dominatrix in the role of the Nazis and the masochist in the role of the Jews. It may seem like an overly bold claim, but when we look at who followed in their footsteps, there is

Nazi imagery everywhere, all conveyed by Jews. The Stooges, during their first couple of years, wore leather bomber jackets with swastikas on them, The Ramones wrote a song about being “a Nazi-Schatzi, gonna fight for the fatherland,” and over in Manchester, UK, Joy Division got their name from the group of Jewish women selected for the Nazis’ sexual enjoyment. Shock value, in its many different forms, became the tool with which these pre-punks, punks, and even Dylan to some extent could act out their post-modern strife against the preceding generation. In what more effective way could one reject one’s Jewish upbringing than adorning the clothes worn by the people who (could have) killed their families, themselves or their relatives? Of course, these lyrics are meant to be ironic, but what these songwriters intended to do was take self-deprecation to the next level, and satirically associate themselves with Nazi symbols, for no purpose other than upsetting people. Each individual must have had his specific reasons, Reed’s most likely being that his parents sent him to multiple sessions of electroshock therapy as a teen in the hopes of “curing” his “homosexual tendencies.” Reed’s lyrics began this post-modern tradition, which lasted, arguably, until the mid to late nineties, but he was the first to put such blatant displays of vulgarity and debauchery on record, and with the help of Dylan, he made meanness-by-way-of-pretension into an archetype for aspiring rock stars. With the Velvet Underground, Lou Reed gave outsiders something to listen to; the music was for those who could not identify with the larger political questions Bob Dylan was asking, those who would prefer to hear music about what was more immediately relevant, which was in this case drugs, nihilism, angst, bisexuality, and a never before seen attitude of masochism.

The second-to-last track on *The Velvet Underground and Nico* is “Black Angel’s Death Song,” in which Reed’s lyrics are juxtaposed with Cale’s eerie, screeching viola. The close relationship between the lyrics and music here induces a sense of terror felt by both the listener and the speaker, which breaks down the narrative of the song itself, perhaps portraying trauma of some kind. The lyrics begin by alluding to “his fate,” going on to describe what the man portrayed in the song cannot lose:

The myriad of choices of his fate
set themselves out upon a plate
for him to choose what had he to lose
Not a ghost bloodied country all covered with sleep
where the black angel did weep
not an old city street in the east
gone to chose
...
Cut mouths bleeding razors forget in the pain
antispetic remains coo goodbye
so you fly
to the cozy brown snow of the east
Gone to choose, choose again
Sacrificials remains make it hard to forget
where you come from (Reed, 7)

In the footnote at the bottom of the page, Reed adds that “the idea here was to string words together for the sheer fun of their sound, not any particular meaning. I loved the title.” Adding such a footnote is quite indicative of Reed’s public persona, having no trouble admitting he is the best, but never revealing that it took hard work, or even has meaning. Despite his footnote, it seems to me that Reed suggests that we “forget the pain” and perhaps even embrace it, because “Sacrificials remains make it hard to forget/where you come from.” In many ways, “Black Angel’s Death Song” serves as Reed’s response to “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall,” with the apocalyptic imagery and suggestions of loss and sacrifice—very human, yet very abstract all at once.

Taking a cue from the apocalyptic nihilism of the Velvet Underground are the Ramones, who are now considered pioneers of the 1970s New York punk scene in which this philosophy came to light. With lyrics like “Now I wanna sniff some glue/Now I wanna have something to do,” the Ramones are nihilistic as a result of their boredom, sharing with their predecessors a need to express that they have nothing to do other than sit around and take drugs, and write songs about it. The songwriting was honest because of the sentiment behind it; boredom is something with which all can identify.

In the same vein, Richard Hell howls about how nothingness is all he feels in his seminal “Blank Generation,” which served as the inspiration for the Sex Pistols’ much more popular “Pretty Vacant.” The first two verses find Hell, born Meyer, screaming from straight out of the womb:

I was sayin let me out of here before I was
 even born—it's such a gamble when you get a face
 It's fascinatin' to observe what the mirror does

but when I dine it's for the wall that I set a place

I belong to the blank generation and

I can take it or leave it each time

I belong to the _____ generation but

I can take it or leave it each time

Triangles were fallin at the window as the doctor cursed

He was a cartoon long forsaken by the public eye

The nurse adjusted her garters as I breathed my first

The doctor grabbed my throat and yelled, "God's consolation prize!" (Taken from

Hell's website)

Richard Hell's lyrics carry a great weight of personal and cultural trauma. He sings "I belong to the blank generation, and I can take it or leave it each time," in the chorus, giving an appropriate name to a group of youths who seemed not to have faith in anyone, including themselves. The generation is blank not because of anything that they themselves have done, but as a result of the actions, or mistakes, of their predecessors and their elders. This rejection of an entire culture was an ethos specific, at first, to these downtown New York punk bands, until the Ramones went to London in 1976 and played for members of what would become the Clash and the Sex Pistols, both of whom made more money than any seventies New York punk band. Richard Hell and his band The Voidoids came out of the tradition started by Reed and Cale in the sixties when nobody seemed to be paying any attention. Guitarists Bob Quine (who later went on to play on

one of Reed's better solo albums, *The Blue Mask*) and Ivan Julian screech and snarl all over *Blank Generation* the album with their dissonant, almost free jazz-like riffs, sounding like thick glass being hurled at a brick wall. The Voidoids, like the Velvets, created an experimentally charged soundscape within the rock/pop format to back up Richard Hell's poetic screams of existential strife. He his calls existence "such a gamble," suggesting that he was predestined to be a part of this "blank generation," "sayin' let met out of here before I was/even born." Seen as a seventies response to The Who's "My Generation," "Blank Generation" stood out not only as a nihilistic anthem but a positive one as well, one which embraces a rejection of cultural norms and takes control of life, giving one the freedom to do what he wants. Many years later, as quoted in Clinton Heylin's *From the Velvets to the Voidoids*, Hell says that he was misunderstood:

People misread what I meant by 'Blank Generation'. To me, 'blank' is a line where you can fill in anything. It's positive. It's the idea that you have the option of making yourself anything you want, filling in the blank. And that's something that provides a uniquely powerful sense to this generation. It's saying 'I entirely reject your standards for judging my behavior.' (Heylin, 123)

Artists like Hell in the seventies blurred the line between persona and authentic character, singing about his own strife, and purveying an image that was truly original, unconcerned with how his public persona is perceived but very concerned with the way he presents himself. Hell understood the implications and importance of image. He

...wanted us to stand for something that showed in everything we did. And that included clothes and the look of our graphics and all that imagery...the intention

was to make it as true to life as possible in every way that we presented ourselves...It was this kinda anti-glamour, angry but poetic sensibility that Tom [Verlaine] and I shared but that i was much more interested in translating into media. (Heylin, 122)

Unlike Verlaine, who used to be Hell's bandmate in Television before their creative differences forced Hell out of the band, he understood the nature of fame and its relationship to the art being created as well as the ways in which that art is portrayed.

Verlaine was overly concerned with letting the music speak for itself, which added to his sour mood, while Hell was interested in cultivating a genuine image of themselves as well as of the Lower East Side scene from which they emerged. Was Verlaine a fake? Yes, in the sense that his public persona was a reflection of what he had seen Reed and Dylan do before him, and therefore attributed to his eventual success. Hell, on the other hand, was true to himself as well as to others, and as a result, did not succeed as a musician, later quitting music all together to focus on writing poetry, but his music was never forgotten.

The Velvet Underground's influence upon the bands that dominated the New York scene in the seventies is obvious, but it is important to remember that their most innovative music was made at a time—only four years earlier—when there was little to no positive response from audiences in New York, to the extent that the Velvets stopped booking gigs in the city, playing residencies at venues in Cleveland and Boston, where they were apparently better received. Ronnie Cutrone, the well-known Pop artist who spent a lot of time with Reed during the early Andy Warhol days, is quoted in *Please Kill*

Me, where he provides an alternate, and perhaps more accurate account of New York in the sixties:

The sixties have a reputation for being open and free and cool, but the reality was that everybody was straight. Everybody was totally straight and then there was us—this pocketful of nuts. We had long hair, and we'd get chased down the block. People would chase you for ten blocks, screaming, "Beatle!" They were out of their fucking minds—that was the reality of the sixties. Nobody had long hair—you were a fucking freak, you were a fruit, you were not like the rest of the world. So for me, there was a strong pull toward the dark side. Lou and Billy Name would go to this Vaseline bar called Ernie's—there would be jars of Vaseline on the bar and there was a back room where the guys would go to fuck each other. While I was never gay, I was into sex, and when you're thirteen or fourteen, sex is not that available from women. So I figured, Gee, wouldn't it be great to be gay? So I tried it but I was a miserable failure. I remember I was actually sucking this guy off once, and he said, "Man you're not into this." I went, "Yeah I know. I'm sorry." (McNeil 14)

It is this "dark side" that Reed and his followers were drawn to; the sexual ambiguity as well as the inherent disapproval of the larger society that came with it proved attractive to them as a means of transcending their cultural trauma and thus creating an identity for themselves. What drew people to the Velvet Underground's music was that Reed wrote about "urban street stuff, it was about kink, it was about sex—some of it was about sex that I didn't even know about, but I was learning," admits Cutrone later on in *Please Kill Me*. It can be inferred, then, that the Velvet Underground provided a voice for this Blank

Generation to come, who, like the band's drummer Maureen Tucker, "didn't like that love-peaceshit," and were searching for an alternative (McNeil 17). In other words, the music and aesthetic of the hippie movement as well as a lot of the folk movement, revolved around the idealization of a better world as a means of improving the real one, while punk and proto punk was more concerned with the harsh reality of the world in which they lived—why preach peace and love when neither seem to have provided any evidence for their existence? The answer, in many ways, was "Heroin," both the substance and the song.

Around the time that *The Velvet Underground and Nico* was recorded, in 1966, confrontation, in every form, was a major part of both Cale and Reed's psyches. Cale is quoted in *From the Velvets to the Voidoids* saying that he "had no intention of letting the music be anything other than troublesome to people. It was a revolutionary, radical situation. We really wanted to go out there and annoy people," and, for the most part, that was what they did when they played live (Heylin, 22). In San Francisco, "[the critics] convinced themselves that we were there to destroy the innocence and purity of their music," and in New York, people did not seem to be catching on either, except for Andy Warhol and his crowd (Heylin 23). "Heroin," the recording of which turned out to be a disaster in drummer Maureen Tucker's eyes, but nonetheless provides some of Reeds best lyrical work, in his romantic vision of a love affair with heroin:

I don't know just where I'm going
But I'm going to try for the kingdom if I can
'Cause it makes me feel like I'm a man
When I put a spike into my vein

Then I tell you things aren't quite the same
When I'm rushing on my run
And I feel just like Jesus' son
And I guess that I just don't know
and I guess that I just don't know

I have made a big decision
I'm gonna try to nullify my life
'Cause when the blood begins to flow
When it shoots up the dropper's neck
When I'm closing in on death
You can't help me, not you guys
or all you girls with your sweet silly talk
You can all go take a walk
And I guess that I just don't know
and I guess that I just don't know (Reed, 5)

By the summer of 1965, as previously mentioned, Reed had already written two of the most important songs that came out of his collaboration with Cale, “Heroin” and “Venus in Furs,” and that is very important to remember, because in 1965 “*nobody* wrote songs called ‘Heroin’—though it would not be accurate to suggest that ‘Heroin’ was the first ‘drug-song’ ever to be written,” but it was definitely the most overt. Dylan’s “Mr Tambourine Man” was made popular by The Byrds, and is supposedly about some kind of “drug induced experience” (Heylin, 11). The harrowing nature of “Heroin” lies within

its unapologetic matter-of-factness about such a controversial topic. Reed sings about addiction to the drug in a wholly believable, first person manner which has the addict in the song trying to rationalize his habit— “When I put a spike into my vein/Then I tell you things aren’t quite the same—while simultaneously conveying the addict’s understanding that the only escape for him is the final one— “When I’m closing in on death.”

Reed and the rest of the group were completely aware that such subject matter was potentially shocking, which is why they pushed it forward with such loud, yet controlled cacophony that rises and falls mirroring the progression of the addict’s high. Dealing with such taboo subjects was part of their program, “there was commitment there,” as Cale points out, “that was the powerful advantage that all of Lou’s lyrics had. All Bob Dylan was singing was questions—How many miles? and all that. I didn’t want to hear anymore questions. Give me some tough social situations and show that answers are possible. And sure enough, ‘Heroin’ was one of them. It wasn’t sorry for itself” (Heylin, 10). Reed is exactly that, not sorry for himself, or any of the music he puts out, echoing the writer who some see as the father of the punk aesthetic and philosophy, William S. Burroughs, in his portrayal of junkies. Burroughs portrays, throughout much of his writing, junkies whom he bases on himself or on friends of his, as “The world network of junkies, turned on a cord of rancid jissom, tying up in furnished rooms, shivering in the junk-sick morning” (Burroughs, 7).

Obviously a fan of Burroughs’, Reed feels the need to portray that which is most real, that which is most true to the human condition, in this case being the graphic telling of what could be seen as a junkie’s final high, choosing to “make a big decision” and “nullify [his] life,” perhaps past the point of just getting high. Is this poetry? Perhaps not

in its most classical sense, but the emotional response is poetic. By portraying something so deeply personal, Reed is getting at existential questions that go beyond getting high—“I don’t know where I’m going” presents that “tough social situation” in the first line, then, as the song’s tempo speeds up, “the blood begins to flow,” and he “feels just like Jesus’ son,” and the listener is left disturbed. What’s brilliant about the nature of the song is that it does not lie, nor does it feel sorry for itself, as Cale mentioned, in its unabashedly honest portrayal of drug addiction. The speaker of the song is not concerned with death or overdose, only the pursuit of his high, where though “Heroin, be the death of me,” “it’s my wife and it’s my life/Because a mainer to my vein/Leads to a center in my head/And then I’m better off than dead” (Reed, 6). “Better off than dead:” Reed’s answer to “It’s life and life only.” And in Reed’s answer, of course, we hear echos of Whitman’s “knit of identity, always distinction, always a breed of/life” (Whitman, 3).

Lou Reed and Angus MacLise (the Velvet’s first drummer), co-wrote an article together about the Velvet’s early striving to place Eastern notions of tone in a Western context:

Western music is based on death, violence and the pursuit of PROGRESS...The root of universal music is sex. Western music is as violent as Western sex...There is no such thing as the Indian influence...The V.U. is the Western equivalent to the cosmic dance of Shiva. Playing as Babylon goes up in flames. (Heylin 11)

The Velvet Underground brought weirdness to New York, and more so were able to encapsulate some of that weirdness on record, especially Reed with his depictions of all the downtown transvestites in “Walk on the Wild Side.” Essentially, before John Cale left the band in 1969, there was no question of artifice or authenticity within the context

of the Velvet Underground, for what they were doing was so unique and organic on their first two albums, yet as tensions rose and the band continued not to succeed, Reed must have felt pressure to write more conventional songs, after putting out two brilliant albums and remaining unrecognized. Such is the nature of celebrity, or lack thereof, and it is at this point, when the artist becomes overly aware of his work, that his integrity begins to slowly wane.

By 1968, the Velvets seemed genuinely unsure of what direction to pursue, after the large failure of their second album, *White Light/White Heat*, which sold just as badly if not worse than its predecessor, *The Velvet Underground and Nico* (Heylin, 27). Reed always had a pop sensibility—he started his career working as a hack songwriter, for which such a knack was necessary. In February the Velvets went into the studio to record their first non-album single, “Stephanie Says” and “Temptation Inside Your Heart,” both of which were never released until years after the band’s breakup. It was at this point that Cale, the driving force behind the band’s experimental avant-garde sound, was having second thoughts about his place in the group:

There were a lot of soft songs and I didn’t want that many soft songs. I was into trying to develop these really grand orchestral bass parts, I was trying to get something big and grand and Lou was fighting against that, he wanted pretty songs. (Heylin, 28)

Guitarist Sterling Morrison also noticed the change:

[Cale] was going in a more experimental direction, while Lou wanted something within a more ‘pop’ context...John and I were very happy with Sister Ray-type

music...Lou placed heavy emphasis on lyrics. Cale and I were more interested in blasting the house down. (Heylin, 28)

It is here where we see what can happen when a songwriter is put under pressure to please a mass audience, or rather in this case, simply make a living by making the kind of music people enjoy. A fundamental difference between Reed and Dylan is the speed with which Dylan became successful after starting his career. The pressure is still there, yet it exists in a different form—Dylan had to find ways to keep his audience interested after that initial spark, one of which was going electric, while Reed must have been anxious about being destined for failure after four years of little to no success with the Velvet Underground. Considering the position he was in, and the amount of undesirable press they had gotten, I really cannot blame him for taking his music in the direction he did—of course he had no idea that he would, only a few years later, be hailed as a genius for the music he had made in the mid to late sixties. And alternatively, there is a large chance that people may not have become aware of the Velvets' early work as quickly as they did, had it not been for their radio-friendly later work. Lastly, it is important to understand that Reed got what he wanted. After the Velvet Underground disbanded in 1970, he released his first two solo albums, *Lou Reed* and *Transformer*, the second of which had the Billboard hit, "Walk on the Wild Side," and made Reed not only famous, but rich too. He seemed comfortable existing within the orthodox confines of pop music rather than sticking with the free form components the Velvets originally pioneered, and which were the primary influence upon their musical and lyrical offspring.

The question of whether or not what these men, primarily Reed and Dylan, did can be considered literary, or more specifically, poetry, begs another question of whether

or not the song form is comparable to the literary form. Many appreciators of both forms insist that they must be kept separate from each other, poetry always existing as the “high” art looking down upon songwriting, despite their inherent similarities. The two forms cannot be considered one and the same, of course; song lyrics have a certain dependence upon melody, and the music that backs the melody, but aside from that, I contend that certain lyrics can stand alone on the page, and the ones quoted above represent a small portion of this group. Most of the work Reed and Dylan released before 1970 is noteworthy, and it represents the inspiration for the multitude of artists to come who would act according to this model, constantly pushing the boundaries of songwriting and the artist’s image in the postmodern age. Yet, though they came from a similar place, Lou Reed and Bob Dylan took very different paths, as did their influences, to a certain extent. Dylan, for one definitely settled into a place of creative comfort as soon as the seventies hit after enjoying so much success in the sixties, whereas Reed, after having already taken his art to an unprecedented level of thematic as well as sonic intensity, settled into his own fame a couple of years later, around 1972 or ’73, at which point he nearly became irrelevant as well, playing what were once great Velvet Underground songs in such a lazy, classic-rock fashion, with long harmonic guitar solos and a six-piece band backing him.

Specifically, the live album *Rock and Roll Animal* comes to mind, where Reed turns “Heroin” into a tightly packed, Led Zeppelin-influenced brand of classic rock, complete with multiple masturbatory guitar solos played by hired guns, because of course Reed could not bother playing guitar himself when touring stadiums across the world. I do not want to make this a paper about the decline of the artist, because that is inevitable;

nobody has yet been capable of making great art for the entirety of their career. But when we consider whether this art stands as poetry, there is no denying that it does, for in the sixties there was a direct connection between contemporary culture and the high-cultural avant-garde, both in a literary sense and a musical sense—songwriters like Reed, and then Patti Smith, Richard Hell, and Tom Verlaine after him were all evoking Ginsberg, Burroughs, and Rimbaud in their lyrics while taking cues from La Monte Young and his influence upon the Velvet Underground for their sound. In doing so, they helped popularize this close relationship between poetry and the development of rock music, mostly thanks to Reed and partially to Dylan, and one could even claim that the sheer existence of a counter cultural rock music, or punk, tradition within the popular music industry can be explained, partially, in terms of the impact of modern poetry upon its songwriters. It is this relationship that gives the song lyric its merit as an authentic poetic form, for before poems were written down, it is well known that they were sung, performed, in front of large groups of people, and perhaps it was because of their melodies that they survived long enough to be written down.

Understanding song lyrics as poetry can be interchanged with understanding poetry as song—like Whitman did with “Song of Myself,” and just as Lester Bangs promoted the idea of “rock and roll as literature/literature as rock and roll.” There is a reason why these two traditions are so closely related, why the ecstasy of experience so prevalent in Whitman is essential to the work of Dylan, Reed, Hell, and the many who followed them. The result begins first by following Whitman’s instructions, to “no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look/through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the spectres in/books,” because truth emerges from the self, and within the self we

find the truths of others as well. This tradition of defiance, which emerged out of Whitman, still continues today, in varying forms. Artists such as Jeff Mangum, the primary songwriter in indie rock outfit Neutral Milk Hotel, or Conor Oberst, better known as Bright Eyes, keep the magic of Dylan and Reed's early work alive, making use of poetic imagery as well as poetic conventions, only to take them further from their predecessors, while still utterly indebted. Oberst, known for writing heart breaking songs about loss and existential strife, echoes Reed as well as Whitman in his self-examination within "Halign, Halign, A Lie, Halign:"

But I talk in the mirror

To the stranger that appears

Our conversations are circles

Always one sided

Nothing is clear

Except we keep coming back

To this meaning that I lack

He says the choices were given

Now you must live them

Or just not live

But do you want that?

Seemingly unconcerned with death, as Reed is in “Heroin,” Oberst presents his listener with the possibility while the speaker “talk[s] in the mirror/To the stranger that appears,” obviously the speaker himself, and their “conversations are circles,” exemplifying their failure to “get at the meaning” of their own existence (Whitman, 2). The song structure is still relatively simple, with a slightly more complicated chord progression, the lyrics stay quite close to the structure adopted by Reed and Dylan, having been released about thirty years later.

What Jonathan Lethem calls the “ecstasy of influence,” then, is something that has lasted nearly half a century at this point, or even longer if we count the undeniable influence Whitman still has upon poets and songwriters alike. In his having broken so many conventions of popular music, Lou Reed, in many ways, also created new conventions, conventions according to which the punk and alternative rock bands could make their own music, adhering to rules of weirdness set in place by the Velvet Underground. In the 1960s, Bob Dylan and Lou Reed elevated the song form to become a part of the American idiom, reflecting what was true American experience and thought, through song. The playwright Bertoldt Brecht said that “art is not a mirror held up to reality but a hammer with which to shape it,” and this informs Dylan and Reed’s work. While holding their respective “mirror[s]” up to society, they are also breaking societal conventions, and taking part in the creation of a new(er) society, or rather an updated society which is more accepting of individual self-expression. These two men prepared the world for the type of uncompromising, unapologetic music that is still being made today as well as the artists that make it, who, like Whitman, also “Hope to cease not till death.

Works Cited

Bangs, Lester. *Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung*. 1st. New York: Vintage, 1987. Print.

Billig, Michael. *Jews Who Rock*. 1st. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000. Print.

Hampton, Wayne. *Guerrilla Minstrels*. 1st. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1986. Print.

Hermes, Will. *Love Goes to Buildings on Fire*. 1st. New York: Faber and Faber, 2011. Print.

Heylin, Clinton. *From the Velvets to the Voidoids: The Birth of American Punk Rock*. 2nd. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1993. Print.

McNeil/McCain, Legs/Gillian. *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk*. 1st. New York: Grove Press, 1996. Print.

Oseary, Guy. *Jews Who Rock*. 1st. New York: St Martin's, 2001. Print.

Reed, Lou. *Between Thought and Expression: Selected Lyrics of Lou Reed*. 1st. New York: Hyperion, 1991. Print.

Unterberger, Richie. *White Light/White Heat: The Velvet Underground Day by Day*. 1st. London: Jawbone, 2009. Print.

Wilentz, Sean. *Bob Dylan In America*. 1st. New York: Random House, 2010. Print.