Odetta and Dylan: The Legend of Politics and Song in Mid-Century America

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Dedication

To Jeffrey, without whom I would have never believed this was possible.

And to Susy, who would have been very proud.

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Table of Contents

Dedication iii

Acknowledgements iv

List of Figures vi

Introduction 1

Part One: Odetta 13

Voice Like a Hammer 16

The "Odetta" 25

Odetta Sings Dylan 32

Part Two: Dylan 41

"Blowin' in the Wind" and the Aesthetics of Black Youth Activism 47

"Hurricane" and Bob Dylan's Protest Music Rennaissance on the Rolling Thunder Tour 57

"Gotta Serve Somebody": From Counterculture to Conservative Culture 68

Coda 78

Works Cited 81

List of Figures

Figure 1. Cover Art, *Odetta Sings Ballads and Blues*, 1957 27

Figure 2. Bob Dylan and Rubin Carter. Photo Credit Ken Regan, 1975 66

Introduction

The first time I came across an Odetta record I was twenty-two years old, standing in a local record shop in my college town, hastily flipping through the folk new arrivals in search of Joan Baez. It was a copy of *Odetta Sings Dylan* (1965). I picked it up to check it out—Odetta was a name I was only vaguely familiar with, a whisper on the sidelines of my folk music explorations up to that point. I understood that she was important, but I didn't know how or why. She was mostly just a name that kept popping up among a laundry list of other names, a name nobody really took the time to explain and that I didn't take the time ask about. Like many folk albums of the 1960s, *Odetta Sings Dylan* features relatively unassuming album art: a close-up shot of Odetta with her guitar on a plain orange background with a simple list of the songs featured on the album. The main selling point was, it seemed to me at the time, that it was a whole album of Dylan covers. I perused the track list, determined that it was mostly earlier Dylan tracks I was less enamored with at the time, and intrigued as I was, decided that my tight budget couldn't afford the whim purchase. I put the record back in the stacks and kept browsing.

Ironically, I had first gotten into Dylan in a similar manner: happening upon a copy of *Blonde on Blonde* (1966) at a flea market almost a decade prior, which I brought home with me even though I knew little to nothing about it. The difference was that I knew its iconic cover and had been steeped in a notion of the "importance of Dylan" by my Baby Boomer father enough to feel like *Blonde on Blonde* would be worth it. I remember bringing it home and putting it on my hand-me-down stereo in my high school bedroom only to find it initially irksome. It wasn't until the third track, "Visions of Johanna," that I actually liked anything I heard, and for months I would put it on only to

listen to that track and then ignore everything else. But I did just that: I kept listening to it, determined to train myself into liking Dylan.

This project unpacks questions of cultural legacy and power exemplified in these two moments: the decades of cultural memory that have made Dylan a figure worthy of blind appreciation and left Odetta to the margins of being known yet unknown. At the core of this are, unsurprisingly, questions of race and gender, and I will examine the ways Odetta's Black femininity and Dylan's white masculinity have been culturally defined, both by themselves and us, and how in turn their identities—their personas real and imagined—have defined aesthetics of political music and counter-culturalism from the 1960s through today. This project takes an expansive view of each artists' cultural contributions, grounded in the music, but encompassing album art, liner notes, hairstyles, performances, speeches, interviews, and photographs. My approach marries cultural history with close readings to explore the vast web of threads between influencer and influence across Odetta and Dylan's narratives, and to build a new frame for discussing cultural development and impact that spans gendered and racial lines.

When I first started telling people about this project, I would pitch it as something like, "I'm exploring the interweaving contributions of Odetta and Dylan on the 1960s," and then ramble on with a few other random thoughts about whatever I was thinking through at the time. I got a lot of smiles and nods and then inevitably the first question I *always* received was: "So . . . who is Odetta? Is that a name I'm supposed to know?" You might even be reading this now and wondering these very questions to yourself or pausing to look her up on Wikipedia. For my more musically inclined friends or colleagues in popular music studies, I would get a more knowing acknowledgement that

they knew who Odetta was, but still found myself frequently fielding questions about "Why Odetta?" Her role in my project has always required the most explication. Never once has anyone asked why I would be writing a thesis about Dylan. Dylan's cultural value—at least at this point in his career—is never under question.

It is to these questions that this project is indebted: Who is Odetta? Why should we talk about her? Why has she been forgotten? But also, why Dylan? What has made him such an enduring figure in American culture? What made the icon of Dylan? These questions have formed the driving force of my inquiries, feeding into discussions of cultural legacy, the politics of aesthetics, the aesthetics of resistance, cross-racial exchange in American music, and the perceived divide between artistic interpretation and original creation.

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There are two interlocking goals of this project: the first is to bring Odetta back into the fold of our cultural conversations of the 1960s and beyond, acknowledging and unpacking her vast influence on our ideas of political music and aesthetics of resistance, her complication of the folk genre, and our idealization of the songwriter; the second is to analyze Odetta's artistic foil, Bob Dylan, whose success has overshadowed the narrative of Odetta in our cultural memory even as his iconography is deeply indebted to the labor of not only Odetta but a whole host of Black cultural and political influences from which he defined his brand of political music and countercultural aesthetics. In placing these two artists in conversation with each other, my goal is to highlight their symmetry and symbiosis within the cultural landscape of mid-century America. I argue that we cannot fully trace the breadth of Odetta's influence without addressing Dylan and the ripple

effect he has had on popular music in the twentieth century and beyond. But so, too, do I argue that we cannot—and more importantly should not—unpack the influence of Dylan without Odetta. In this project I hope to demonstrate how our cultural conversations can be reformed to hold space for both Odetta and Dylan, combatting the notions of Dylan-exceptionalism—the idea that his artistry exists separate and special from everyone else—that has taken hold since the winning of his Nobel Prize in 2016. Too long has his story been told without hers.

At present, there seems to be a stratification in popular music studies between examinations of Black musical culture and white musical culture. Acknowledgements are made that link the history of Black music to the formation of all American music, and therefore how white artists are indebted to Black artistry. Yet I would argue there is still an overwhelming tendency to leave these discussions as just that—history—while we continue to separate discussions of Black artists from white. The result is an increasingly oversimplified narrative, one which highlights the historical ways in which white artists have taken from Black culture over time, but often does little to explore the complexity of cross-cultural exchange or the systemic inequities that underpin popular music history that go far beyond the level of individual artists to the structures of the musical industrial complex. If we continue to discuss white artists' historical debt to Black artists as a one-way street, it only serves to perpetuate the notion of white cultural power over Black, the idea that whiteness can steal Blackness from itself because it is inherently subservient, that Black resistance only happens in the margins, and that all of this can be mediated on the individual level as if systemic racism and anti-Blackness were an individual choice rather than a structural reality in which we are all trapped in some way.

The 1960s folk music revival and its intersection with contemporary political work—from Civil Rights to nuclear disarmament—provides a complex lens through which to explore ideas of cultural legacy and power, and to break down current stratifications in popular music history. Folk music's definitionally interracial roots and reliance on oral tradition makes it hard to define as a genre. "Folk" encompasses Black American musical traditionals—the songs of enslaved Black Americans and prison laborers, many of which also intertwine with the origins of blues and gospel, and by extension rock and roll—but also world musical traditions from British folk traditionals, songs from the labor movement, Indigenous folk traditions, and more. Broadly construed, folk music is often considered music without a defined origin point or authorship—something that has been passed down, permeating through generations or geographies. But that definition of course begs the question: how does the origin of a song become unknown? Is the history of certain songs muddled because they are simply old, or are there other racialized or gendered power relations that contributed to this idea that certain songs have no defined author? White artists in the 1960s folk revival regularly played songs from the Black folk canon, many of which engaged the voice and perspective of enslaved Black Americans or imprisoned Black laborers, often, though not always, connecting to the contemporary political moment and the Civil Rights Movement. What does it mean for a white artist to engage these pieces—is it vocal Black face? Is it allyship? Something in between?

It is in this period that American culture developed a codified and commercialized idea of counterculture, or that which works against the mechanisms of "mainstream." It was an aesthetic linked to a sort of political idealism and driven by youth, an aesthetic

which I argue originated with Odetta and her redefinition of folk music as a space to politically engage the Black folk archive and through music explore a life relegated to the margins of American culture. Through her work unearthing songs from the folk archive and reappropriating them as a new Black folk archive, Odetta created a new aesthetic of political music which could inspire change in the current moment while acknowledging and holding space for a history untold. She made folk songs personal, imbuing them with power and strength—but also anger, frustration, and pain, ultimately creating an aesthetic that was raw and real. When he moved to Greenwich Village in 1960, Dylan picked up this aesthetic that was rippling through the folk revival thanks to Odetta, and through early hits like "Blowin' in the Wind" or "The Times They Are A-Changin'" mutated it into a universalizable, commercial idea—one born out of the experience of Blackness in America now made to speak to the growing unrest among American youth broadly. Dylan's aesthetic caught fire quickly in the early 1960s, and his personal resilience as an artist—his staying power that has continued to iterate on this aesthetic for the last six decades—has meant that Dylan's role in this history has long since overshadowed Odetta's. Their artistry is both intertwined and divergent, but by placing Odetta and Dylan in conversation together I unpack this aesthetic legacy from a new multi-faceted lens.

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Structurally, this project is divided into two parts: part one focuses on Odetta, part two on Dylan. Shadows and threads of both artists permeate across the entire project as I look at their intertwined artistic aesthetics, but through this structure I wanted to give deliberate space to unravel each artist on their own terms. This is particularly essential in

the case of Odetta, whose contributions I wanted to explore without placing her in a subservient role to Dylan's narrative as she so often has been, when she is acknowledged at all. I begin with Odetta because, quite simply, she came first, her labor provided the groundwork for Dylan's musical growth, and more specifically, it was her cachet in the folk music scene—her endorsement—that allowed Dylan entrée into that space. In short, I begin from the premise that there was once a time when Odetta's star well overshadowed Dylan's, a time which has since been forgotten. As such, part one necessarily focuses on building Odetta's narrative back up in our cultural memory but endeavors to do so by taking Odetta on her own terms and not wholly in comparison to Dylan.

Part two derives from an equal and opposite premise: if we are to build Odetta back up, we must also bring Dylan back down to the realm of the human, as opposed to that of the demigod where he seems to have been increasingly cemented since his 2016 Nobel Prize. I have endeavored, in this way, to give both Odetta and Dylan equal space in the project in the hopes of opening a line of conversation that could examine them both—and their contributions—on equal footing. Each half explores defining aspects of both Odetta and Dylan and looks at the ways they each crafted and operationalized their own aesthetic visually and sonically. At the center of it all is, of course, the music. I conduct close readings of key songs across both artists' careers to analyze the ways Odetta and Dylan used their music as a space of cultural and political exploration and through this fashioned a notion of countercultural aesthetics that revolved around the music.

In Part One, I look at Odetta's contributions towards a new folk aesthetic, one which engaged the folk archive as a space for Black resistance, which moved across the

political and the personal, and created a vision for folk that pushed against the boundaries of the genre. I look at Odetta's artistry across three key themes: her powerful voice and performance style which reimagined the possibilities of folk song; the way she literally embodied this possibility and used folk music to embrace Black beauty and power through her pioneering adoption of natural hair; and lastly through her role as a musical interpreter whose labor defined the American songbook in the twentieth century through her critical engagement of Dylan's songwriting on her album *Odetta Sings Dylan.* Central to Odetta's artistry was her engagement of the Black musical archive which she both drew from and reimagined to speak to her contemporary moment. For example, I examine her version of "Take This Hammer" as a key example of Odetta's musical archival project, highlighting both her vocal and performance aesthetics and her interpretive labor. It was through this work as a musical interpreter that Odetta created a redefined folk aesthetic, in particular opening new avenues for political music.

Odetta was an archivist as much as a singer. She used music to explore the history of Blackness in America that she saw as pushed to the margins, engaging with the folk music archive as a space to unfold the narratives and lives undiscussed, and revisioning the folk archive as a space for Black history. In the 1940s and 1950s folk music was largely defined by the work of white ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax whose field recordings and transcriptions served—and continue to serve—as the basis for much of the folk song archive.[1] Lomax took songs from the Black music archive and placed them within a framework of white Americana. But Odetta took Lomax's archive and turned it

[1] John Szwed, *Alan Lomax: The Man Who Recorded the World* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2010).

on its head, exploring these songs as Black history and using them to empower her own Black identity, she created a revisioned Black folk archive. It was Odetta's engagement of the archive which made her work so unique, that which defined her, yet it was also that which confined her. She was an interpreter, and, with a few exceptions, only played songs written by others—songs which spanned folk, but also blues, spirituals, rock and roll—which made her both difficult to define in an increasingly genre-forward industry, while also removing her from the spotlight of auteur songwriters. She was marketed exclusively as a folk artist and struggled for years to make what would be considered a blues album, yet paradoxically much of her output traverses blues standards. For Odetta there was no confining folk music, but the label of "folk" served to confine her in our musical memory.

It is Odetta's uneasy confinement to our typical definitions of folk music as well as her role as an interpreter rather than songwriter that have left her out of most cultural discussions. Nina Simone, for example, has a background which mirrors many aspects of Odetta's early career, yet Simone is remembered not just for her role as a jazz singer as her role as a Civil Rights activist who penned protest songs like "Mississippi Goddam." For Odetta, it was her role as an interpreter—her relationship to the folk archive—that defined her as an artist, giving her space to explore her own voice through the voices of her history. It is only through engaging the folk repertoire that Odetta was able to craft her new folk aesthetic and define new ways to approach political music, yet it is also this relationship that has confined her to the margins of musical history, overshadowed by auteurs who built off Odetta's work defining political music but did so with their own new contributions.

In part two, I turn to Bob Dylan, whose success has been defined not only by Odetta, but also a myriad of Black artists and activists whose worked helped shape his brand of political music and countercultural aesthetics. I will look at the critical role that Blackness has played in shaping Dylan at key points in his career, from his first major hit, "Blowin' in the Wind," and his relationship to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), to his career "revival" in the mid-1970s; through the song "Hurricane" on the Rolling Thunder Revue and his relationship with the campaign to free boxer Rubin "Hurricane" Carter; to "Gotta Serve Somebody" and his controversial Gospel Period, his most explicit dalliance with Black music. Through this exploration I hope to delve into a richer understanding of Dylan's artistry, one which can serve to appreciate Dylan's cultural value and import while not overshadowing the roles Black artists have played in shaping Dylan.

This is not a project about dismantling Dylan's legacy or arguing that he stole from Black artistry. Dylan's relationship to Black culture is part of a long history of white musical artists participating in this same sort of love and theft of Black musical traditions, one which we as scholars, listeners, and fans struggle to unpack in its entirety. Our current discourse often jumps to ascribing blame to the individual artist in question and fails to expand on the cultural forces at work which led to such a cultural history. Saying "Elvis stole from Rosetta Tharpe," or "Dylan stole from Odetta," only reaffirms the power of whiteness to steal from Black culture. It does not participate in reinstating the importance of artists like Tharpe or Odetta in our cultural memory, but instead further places Black artists in a subservient category under the guise of rightsizing history and

drives a wedge in our ability to understand the complex history of American music across racial lines.

And it is a very complex history. Popular music has always been a mirror through which American culture has reflected on itself, whether it be the contemporary moment or an exploration of history. That the history of American popular music is tied so deeply to our racial history and wrapped up in questions of Black freedom and oppression is no accident. But culture is not a linear progression of influences and artists—we cannot trace the progression of American music in a neat and orderly fashion. Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind" is in debt to Odetta's "No More Auction Block," but so too is Sam Cooke's "A Change is Gonna Come" deeply indebted to "Blowin' in the Wind." We must confront this interchange of cultural influences in American music across racial lines—an interchange that cannot be simplified to the notion of theft or appropriation alone.

In looking at Dylan I hope to illustrate this complex history of American music through one of our most enduring figures and one who himself is constantly attempting to tackle the notion of Americana. I argue that it is Dylan's aesthetic of irreverence—an operationalized flippancy, a seemingly self-actualized disregard for societal rules—that has attracted us to Dylan over the decades, allowing his iconography to keep being reified in the culture. It taps into the core of the American dream, the notion that we can all live precisely the life we want to, regardless of the rules prescribed to us, that you can be whomever you want to whenever you want to. It has become a deeply white, masculine aesthetic: for white cis men, it speaks to their own possibility, for the rest of us it speaks to a desire of how we *could* act or be. But, I argue, it didn't start there, and that to create this aesthetic Dylan drew deeply from Black youth activists and the artistry of Odetta.

The aesthetic has mutated beyond Dylan over the decades, and so in exploring its origin I'm interested in breaking through this *idea* of Dylan permeates through our discourse right now and try and grapple with the actual artist underneath, exploring his work not as it stands alone but as part of a rich tapestry of American popular music to which he is indebted.

Together, through this exploration of Odetta and Dylan—both as individual artists and in conversation—I tell a revised tale of countercultural aesthetics and political music in the 1960s, one which accounts for the cross-racial interchange at the core of this aesthetic development and offers a more inclusive and less stratified modality for discussing popular music history. The aesthetic created by Odetta and propagated by Dylan is one which continues to drive contemporary conversations around resistance, what it means to culturally exist outside of the mainstream, how we conceptualize the role of art and protest, and more. But current conceptions of the 1960s are mired in bifurcated narratives that often separate Black cultural development and white. By opening an examination of countercultural aesthetics and political music that delves beyond these conceptions, I revise not only how we talk about the 1960s, but what we choose to learn from them and bring into our current moment.

Part One: Odetta

In his *New York Times* obituary following her death in 2008, journalist Tim Weiner heralded Odetta as "the voice of the Civil Rights Movement," a tag often attributed to her (when her contributions are acknowledged at all).[2] Yet, if you were to google "Odetta at the March on Washington," for example, you would come across one photo and perhaps 30 seconds of video footage in total. However, if you were to look up "Bob Dylan at the March on Washington," it is of course an entirely different story. In a 2004 interview with NPR's World Café Live program, Odetta recalled, "When I got up to sing, I think all the film crew went to lunch because all the camera lights that were red before I got on went out . . . that hurt." [3] Even as history was ostensibly being made, Odetta was being actively left out of the record of it—the truth of which she was painfully aware even as it was happening.

I'd like to begin with a quote from popular music scholar Daphne Brooks' recent book, *Liner Notes for the Revolution* (2021), which "tells the story of how Black women musicians have made the modern world." [4] Brooks writes, "Black women artists have played crucial roles as archives, as the innovators of performances and recordings that stood in for and as the memory of a people."[5] It is to the labor of Black women artists, Brooks argues, that our modern popular music culture is indebted, yet even as these

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[2] Tim Weiner. "Odetta, Voice of Civil Rights Movement, Dies at 77." *The New York Times*, Dec. 3, 2008. https://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/03/arts/music/03odetta.html.

[3] Odetta, interview by David Dye, *World Café Live*, 88.5 WXPN FM, Jan. 19, 2004. https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=97800151

[4] Daphne Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2021), 2.

[5] Ibid, 4.

artists serve as the keystones of popular music, they "have been overlooked or underappreciated, misread and sometimes lazily mythologized, underestimated and sometimes entirely disregarded, and—above all else— perpetually undertheorized by generations of critics for much of the last one hundred years."[6] Brooks' project is to critically reframe the popular music archive, revising it to account for this labor of Black female voices. Like her predecessor Sister Rosetta Tharpe and countless others, Odetta is a portrait of a Black female artist neglected and forgotten in our cultural history, her legend overshadowed by the white man whose artistry she made possible. Academic and popular music writing has produced very little writing on Odetta: even as examinations of the mid-twentieth century folk revival proliferate, she remains a footnote to the stories of Pete Seeger or Bob Dylan. In Stephen Petrus and Ronald D. Cohen's expansive 2015 scan of the Greenwich Village folk revival, *Folk City: New York and the American Folk Music Revival*, for example, Odetta's contributions appear in two brief photo captions while Dylan's story spreads across multiple chapters. This chapter confronts this imbalance in the archive head on, giving the space to Odetta's artistry that she so critically deserves, and reframe our conversations around Dylan to account for not only her influence, but the myriad of other Black cultural and political influencers on his work.

In his 2019 book on Odetta's album *One Grain of Sand* for the long-running Bloomsbury series *33 1/3*, Matthew Frye Jacobson argues that Odetta was herself a "public archivist," a "social and political historian whose archive happened to *be* music."[7] Jacobson highlights the work Odetta brought to songs like "Midnight Special" or "Take

[6] Ibid, 3.

[7] Matthew Frye Jacobson, *One Grain of Sand* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 22.

This Hammer"—prison songs, work songs, slave songs—as a form of musical archive building: channeling these songs from the past to not only speak to the political moment of the present, but to ensure that they would not lie forgotten. Odetta herself often spoke about the gaps in the archive—the truths of slavery hidden in the American education system—as an influence on her turn towards folk music, which allowed her to learn "about a history that was not projected in the schools."[8] It is in this margin—the disconnected gap between bearing the labor of serving *as* an archive while being neglected *from* the archive of our cultural memory—that Odetta has been relegated. In this chapter, I begin the work of digging her out of this margin, placing her within the lineage of Black female singers who critically shaped American culture and political consciousness in the twentieth century, and opening a conversation between Odetta and Bob Dylan, with whom she is artistically intertwined. In doing so, I pursue a conversation between these two artists, unpacking how Odetta's contributions critically shaped our understanding of Dylan, and asking why he has been so easily remembered while she has been so easily forgotten.

This chapter explores Odetta's artistry across three key themes which define her as a cultural icon: her voice and performance style, which redefined folk aesthetics; her appearance, which pioneered ideas of Black beauty and power; and her role as a musical interpreter who critically influenced contemporary songwriting. In section one, I look at Odetta as songstress and performer, examining her unique vocality which defined her power as a performer and allowed her to engage the long archive of Black traditionals as

[8] Odetta qtd. in Ian Zack, *Odetta: A Life in Music and Protest* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020), 14.

prescient political songs of her present. Section two turns to Odetta's visual aesthetic and examine the way her appearance played a role in her iconography, from the fixated discussions of her size which have defined her even to this day, to her groundbreaking embrace of natural hair which pioneered the Afro as a symbol of Black resistance. Lastly, in section three I discuss Odetta as interpreter, the role she played in shaping the power of songwriting even as she herself was not a songwriter, in particular her role building the iconography of Dylan through her album *Odetta Sings Dylan*. At the center of this we must grapple with the notion of power and control, asking ourselves as cultural consumers to interrogate who drives the artistic narratives in our cultural memory, which artists have been afforded the power to control their own artistic perception which have not, and what does this mean for our cultural archive. In discussing Odetta's legacy, we must address the ways in which her artistic path was pre-determined for her by systemic oppression and anti-Black racism which influenced everything from the songs she sang, to the public perceptions of her voice and body, to the narrow lane through which she has been afforded remembrance. Only then can we both fully appreciate her labor in breaking new ground as a Black woman folk artist but also understand the ways in which her legacy was stripped outside of her control.

Voice Like a Hammer

Powerful. Haunting. Deep. These are the words often used to describe Odetta's voice. On recalling the first time he heard Odetta perform at a hootenanny, folk singer Pete Seeger described the impression her voice left simply: "power, power, intensity and

power!"[9] Similarly, in the liner notes to Odetta's debut solo album *Odetta Sings Ballads and Blues* (1957), producer Dean Gitter wrote, "when she sings she can unleash a force that is startling."[10] Over sixty years on, Seeger's and Gitter's observations still ring true. Originally trained as an opera singer in the lineage of Marian Anderson, Odetta's contralto voice resonates deeply, bringing an energy—a power—that lingers long after the song has stopped. This classical training gave Odetta a command over every note, every breath. You can tell, as a listener, that she is in complete control over her vocal form, but far from sounding staid or overly learned, Odetta was able to use her training to imbue her music with a kind of controlled rawness. Listening to Odetta, one feels that she knew precisely how and when to use her vocal prowess to punctuate her music, knew when to allow herself to be rough around the edges or smooth and operatic, and how to use these elements to tell a story. It was her voice which defined Odetta's artistry, forming the backbone of her performance style which so deftly crafted the old into the new. It was through the power of her voice that Odetta took traditional songs—songs from the Black folk tradition, slave songs, prison songs—and made them speak to the political moment of her present. In doing so, Odetta pioneered a new folk aesthetic.

In no better song is this exemplified than "Take This Hamer," the song which earned Odetta early recognition on the folk circuit in the early 1950s and caused Seeger to exclaim so emphatically "power!" Popularized in the early 1940s by Huddie Ledbetter (popularly known as Lead Belly), "Take This Hammer" is a traditional prison work song originating from Black prisoners in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries

[9] Seeger qtd. in Zack, 1.

[10] Dean Gitter liner notes, *Odetta Sings Ballads and Blues*, recorded September 1956, Tradition Records, 1957.

following Emancipation. The song's central theme is the dream of escape: telling the white captain to essentially "take this hammer" and shove it. Like many prison work songs of its kind, "Take This Hammer" is deeply melancholic, a painful rumination on freedom denied paired with playful scenarios that will never come to pass: "If he ask you, was a I running / Tell him I'm flying, boys / Tell him I'm flying." Odetta's version, which first appears as a studio recording on her second solo album *At the Gate of Horn* (1957), leans into this mood and paints a portrait of a narrator on the brink. Her jaunty upstrum beat—which became known as the "Odetta strum"[11]—creates the sonic impression of feet on the run while her voice conjures a defiant, uncontainable power, starkly punctuating at some points and at others lingering for a long, almost mournful, moan. Through her voice, Odetta creates a deep connection between listener and song by channeling herself into the narrator and bringing this song from the collective into the realm of the personal.

Lyrically, Odetta's version closely follows Ledbetter's 1940s rendition, with the addition of a second stanza:

I don't want your cold iron shackles

I don't want your cold iron shackles

I don't want your cold iron shackles

Round my leg, boys

Round my leg[12]

[11] Zack, 28.

[12] Odetta, "Take This Hammer," track 15 on *At the Gate of Horn*, Tradition Records, 1957.

It is a small but crucial inclusion which exemplifies Odetta's project as a radical archivist interested in what she herself called the "history that was not projected in the schools."[13] The album on which "Take This Hammer" appears, *At the Gate of Horn*, takes its name from the Gate of Horn folk club in Chicago where Odetta got an early start as a live performer. The goal of the record was to capture the atmosphere of her live performances, and the track list even mirrors that of her nightly setlist. So too would it have mirrored her audience, one which would have likely been a predominately white or mixed crowd of northerners, further removed from the front lines of the issues in the Jim Crow South. Pragmatically, the addition of this stanza provides a clear marker at the beginning of "Take This Hammer" that quite literally explains the positionality of the narrator. It is a signal for what is ahead and how you should be listening to this song, as if to say this is not simply a work song, but more specifically a prison song, one originating from Black prisoners kept shackled in bondage. It is an explicit nod to the reality that Emancipation was not a totalizing freeing force and that many Black Americans were still not free. A point which Odetta drives home in the liner notes to *At the Gate of Horn* in which she described the song as such:

> Take This Hammer—Prison and work song.
>
> 'I don't want your cold iron shackles'
>
> what man has done to man
>
> 'Hurts my pride—hurts my pride'
>
> and continues to do in one form or another.[14]

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[13] Odetta qtd. in Ian Zack, *Odetta: A Life in Music and Protest* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020), 14.

[14] Odetta liner notes, *At the Gate of Horn*, Tradition Records, 1957.

Odetta's liner notes call special attention to this stanza, blending her own thoughts in conversation with the lyrics of "Take This Hammer" to speak to the present moment. In these notes, as with her vocality, she places herself in the direct positionality of the narrator, making "Take This Hammer" a personal declaration in which Odetta herself exclaims "*I* don't want your cold iron shackles."

Odetta lets the momentum of the upstrum—her musical footfalls—propel her through this song, the urgency and desperation of her vocality increasing as the momentum of anger builds on itself until her sense of control completely releases in the last thirty seconds as she repeats the opening stanza, "Ah you can take this hammer, carry it to the captain / Tell him I'm gone, boys / Tell him I'm gone," this time punctuating each line with a guttural "wah." This "wah" exhalation comes directly from Ledbetter's aesthetic, meant to mark the rhythmic sound of hammer hitting stone. Where Ledbetter uses these "wahs" to punctuate every verse, Odetta holds them until the last possible second, allowing the music to pick up a frenetic speed before adding this element—as if she herself needed to pick up speed before she could careen herself into these "wahs" with the full intensity required. In Ledbetter's version, the continual punctuating "wahs" tie "Take This Hammer" indelibly as a work song: you hear the singularity of Ledbetter's voice, but you understand it as a stand-in of sorts for the collective that would have sung this while working the quarry. Odetta's version operates quite differently, instead crafting an arc in which the listener loses themselves along with the narrator in the dream of freedom. For two minutes we feel as though we are running alongside that narrator, escaping, moving forward, and then in the last thirty seconds Odetta quite literally slams

us back down to earth. The narrator never left the line, the freedom we perceived to have been running towards was in fact "cold iron shackles."

Odetta once reflected on the personal power of folk music, "The folk songs were the anger, the venom, the hatred of myself and everybody else and everything else. I could get my rocks off within those work songs and things without having to say 'I hate you and I hate me.' In fact, it was the area of the work songs that helped heal me."[15] We can see this personal connection clearly reflected in the vocality, performance style, and even the liner notes for "Take This Hammer," where Odetta takes from the old and pulls it forward to speak to her own pain and become a cathartic moment for herself. For her Black audience she provides space for their own catharsis—to see their own anger and pain reflected in her—and for her white audience she offers a lesson, a portrait of history untold with deep connections to the realities of the present. In doing so, Odetta created a new aesthetic for folk music, one which crossed the realms of the personal and the political in new ways. Like those who came before her, Odetta's folk music was an act of interpretation on traditional songs from the archive, but Odetta never let that create a staidness in the music. These songs may have been from a specific place and time, but they were hers in the moment.

At the center of this aesthetic was Odetta's voice, a powerful voice of Black female anger and resistance. The blend of operatically refined contralto with "unrefined" guttural sounds heard in "Take This Hammer" became signature to Odetta's unique style. As Jacobson notes, "there were undeniably political valences to her sonic palette of

[15] Odetta qtd. in Jacobson, 4.

contralto wails and guttural growls."[16] Odetta's vocal aesthetics tested the beauty of folk song and pushed against the notion that a "traditional" was meant to be traditional and sound refined. She resisted common assumptions of authenticity, sonically but also personally. As a Black woman from California, Odetta's very existence broke pernicious expectations around Black folk performers which dictated that they have some sort of authentic claim to their music and would be evaluated accordingly (as Ledbetter who had himself been incarcerated and therefore was designated an authority to sing prison work songs). Instead, Odetta asked more of the folk song, engaging with them not on the level of preserved history bound by a set of rules for use, but as a living archive meant to be played with. In doing so, Odetta opened space not just for righteousness but anger in folk music. Jacobson highlights this anger and venom heard in Odetta's vocality as central to the "social justice project that was Odetta's voice."[17] In Odetta we hear the political possibility of folk music for the first time—one based not on the past but the present, that touched on the personal, and made the coffeehouse as much a political battleground as the rally.

In her landmark essay "When Malindy Sings: A Meditation on Black Women's Vocality" (2004), Farah Jasmine Griffin writes of the archetypical image of the singing Black woman as a symbolic force of the American nation. Pointing to examples such as Marian Anderson singing at the Lincoln Memorial in 1939 and Whitney Houston's performance of the "Star Spangled Banner" at the 1992 Super Bowl, Griffin argues that "these various images demonstrate the way the black woman's voice can be called upon

[16] Ibid, 4.
[17] Ibid, 1.

to heal a crisis in national unity as well as provoke one."[18] Griffin's work defines a critical duality of the Black songstress, one in which she is both symbolically deployed by the nation within a white public sphere while also sparking resistance against this very sphere. Griffin attributes this to the way Black femininity "develops alongside and not fully within the nation, it maintains a space for critique and protest."[19] Griffin's work allows us to understand Odetta's contributions towards a new folk aesthetic as part of a broader lineage of Black women's labor in song. Odetta's work unearthing and reappropriating Black folk traditionals was pivotal for creating a new aesthetic of political music and influencing a budding symbiosis between Black culture and political work in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Her arrangement of the "Spiritual Trilogy" (sometimes called the "Freedom Trilogy"), which appeared on her debut solo album *Ballads and Blues* and for which Odetta is perhaps most famous, became a standard at marches and rallies during this period. Odetta's deft interweaving of the personal and the political created a new aesthetic of resistance and resilience, one based on strength, power, and even anger. Griffin's framework allows us to understand the ways in which Odetta's position as a Black woman and singer gave space for this critical work by nature of the very way that it placed her in the margins, but so, too, has it also allowed Odetta to be trapped in these margins. It is this framework which allowed Odetta to be titled the "voice of the Civil Rights Movement" and be deployed as a symbol of that movement, even though her presence at the March on Washington was stripped from the archive.

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[18] Farah Jasmine Griffin. "When Malindy Sings: A Meditation on Black Women's Vocality." In *Uptown Conversation*, edited by Robert O'Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Farah Jasmine Griffin. New York Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 2004, 104.

[19] Ibid, 110.

And it is this framework which built the iconography of Bob Dylan on the labor of Odetta.

In 1959, a young Robert Zimmerman stepped into a Minneapolis record store in search of folk music. What he found was Odetta's *Ballads and Blues.* From Dylan's reflections on first hearing Odetta from *Chronicles: Volume One*: "What I was looking for were folk music records and the first one I saw was Odetta . . . I went into the listening booth to hear it. Odetta was great. I had never heard of her until then. She was a deep singer, powerful strumming and a hammering-on style of playing. I learned almost every song off the record right then and there, even borrowing the hammering-on style."[20] It was Odetta's folk aesthetic that first turned Dylan onto folk music and convinced him to turn in his electric guitar for an acoustic one. It's a rather striking image to think of an eighteen-year-old Bob Dylan working his way through the coffeehouses of Minneapolis singing Odetta's songs. These were prison songs, work songs, straight from the archive of Black America that spoke to the pain of racial oppression and enslavement, getting sung by a teenage white Jewish boy on the coffeehouse circuit in Minneapolis. But it was with a repertoire of Odetta's songs that Dylan entered the world of folk music—her arrangements and characteristic style that were seeping into Dylan's consciousness and building Robert Zimmerman into Bob Dylan. And, as I will explore more deeply in Part Two, we can clearly trace this aesthetic ricochet not only on Dylan's early music but through his entire career. Odetta taught Dylan how to make a folk song mean something, how to sing at the intersection of the personal and the political, how to

[20] Bob Dylan, *Chronicles: Volume One* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 237.

bridge history into your present, how to play a song with power. Where Odetta could do all this through voice and performance, Dylan would have to expand outwards and use songwriting to craft his voice. Odetta's aesthetics would become the core of Dylan, what he has been known for and praised for over sixty years, even earning him a Nobel Prize.

The "Odetta"

Through her voice Odetta pioneered a new vision for folk music, one which engaged new possibilities of resistance made possible by her position as a Black female singer. But Odetta's new folk aesthetic moved beyond the realm of just the music and her role as the literal "voice of the Civil Rights Movement," and crafted a notion of folk that ricocheted into a whole way of being. In this section, I look at the way Odetta's look was as impactful as her sound in crafting an aesthetic of Black resistance, one built out of the Black archive and which furthered her new folk aesthetic, taking folk beyond the confines of a musical genre and into a proto-countercultural aesthetic that interweaved music, politics, and lifestyle.

I'd like to turn now to a look at Odetta's entrée into our popular consciousness and the opening liner notes to Odetta's solo debut *Odetta Sings Balads and Blues* (1957), written by the record's producer Dean Gitter, which described Odetta as such:

> A magnificent new voice is here to sing the old songs. It belongs to a woman whom we believe to be the queen of American folk singers, the latest descendent of the line which gave birth to Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, the rightful heiress to Leadbelly's Legacy. Her name is Odetta, and like everything else about this remarkable personality it is unusual. When one first sees her, her size and height

> give rise to the uneasy feeling that she belongs to a race a cut above our own; but in her strong, haunting face there is a reassuring beauty and charm. In her normal speech her voice is quiet and delicate, but when she sings she can unleash a force that is startling.[21]

These were the words which introduced Odetta to the world. Gitter's position as a white male is utterly apparent in these liner notes which are as othering to Odetta's Black femininity as they are praising. In particular, I am interested in the way Gitter begins from an evaluation of Odetta's physical presence, her body, before discussing her vocality or music—a striking choice for liner notes, and one which would become a recurring theme throughout Odetta's career. Gitter's language is, unsurprisingly, highly racialized: Odetta is "unusual," her imposing stature leaves one "uneasy" at her strength and power. Gitter even goes so far as to quite literally describe Odetta as a racial other, separated from his assumed white audience and instead belonging to "a race a cut above our own," as if by praising Odetta's othered Black woman status it wouldn't be such a racially charged sentiment. The implication in Gitter's notes is that only through visualizing Odetta, understanding her physical presence, can one appreciate the wonders of her voice which are so surprising when juxtaposed with her body. In doing so, Gitter created an entrenched connection between Odetta's body and voice, a sort of collective understanding that the "startling" force of Odetta's voice was linked to Odetta's size, and that Odetta's meek personality and "delicate" speaking voice were an ironic juxtaposition to this power.

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[21] Dean Gitter liner notes, *Odetta Sings Ballads and Blues*, recorded September 1956, Tradition Records, 1957.

Figure 1. Cover Art, Odetta Sings Ballads and Blues, 1957.

This preoccupation with Odetta's size extended throughout Odetta's career and influenced how she was marketed and discussed. The cover art for *Ballads and Blues* features a stylized image of Odetta from the neck up—a sort of disembodied singing head against a striking red background. A move which as biographer Ian Zack points out, highlighted an effort from the producers to "to deemphasize her large body," a trend which would continue throughout Odetta's recording career.[22] Of Odetta's nineteen studio albums, only a handful feature Odetta below the shoulders, and those that do make liberal use of guitars, flowing fabrics, or lighting to in some way obscure Odetta's body. This juxtaposition between Gitter's uncomfortably racialized description of Odetta in his

[22] Zack, 56.

liner notes while her image on the cover was deliberately censored represents the way Odetta's body became an object of both reverence and discomfort in the public image—it was the source of her vocal power, yet its non-conformity with codified standards of beauty meant that it was obscured, or perhaps more accurately, controlled in the public sphere. Odetta's look—her body, her visual aesthetic—was in this way heavily mediated by the white public sphere in which Odetta would always be othered. Odetta had little control over her own image, much of which was pre-determined for her by a set of expectations levied on her Black femininity.

Except for her hair. In the summer of 1952, several years before coming to prominence as a folk singer, a twenty-two-year-old Odetta cut off her long, straightened hair, and adopted a short, cropped natural hairstyle. This decision was decidedly bold. At the time, Black women's hairstyles were dominated by straightening, an aesthetic stemming back to the Reconstruction Era when newly freed Black men and women were under pressure to acclimate to white aesthetics in their pursuit of employment and livelihoods, and which stretched into early 20th century notions of respectability. For Odetta to adopt a natural hairstyle in the early 1950s would have been nothing short of shocking, a deliberate subversion of the norms which still prized white aesthetics and an embrasure of Black beauty as something that could stand outside of these white-dominated norms. Odetta's decision to adopt a natural hairstyle was directly linked to her immersion in folk music, which as she described taught her "the stories that came along with the songs, which was a history of us, and was definitely not in our history books."[23]

[23] Odetta interview by Camille O. Cosby for the National Visionary Leadership Project, 2007.

Folk music, Odetta said, "straightened my back and it kinked my hair."[24] The music provided a space for Odetta to explore Black history—an archive through which she could channel the anger and pain of her present, but also discover new modes of Black resistance and empowerment from her vocal styles to her hairstyle.

As Odetta gained popularity in the folk music scene in the late 1950s and early 1960s, her natural hairstyle became a key part of her signature look, one which set her apart from other Black women entertainers at the time: "I was the only Black going around with nappy hair then . . . and I looked so exotic, so unlike other Black American women, that people assumed I was an African." [25] Odetta was among the first Black women entertainers to embrace a natural hairstyle and bring into the white public sphere, and perhaps most importantly, link this choice explicitly to her own Black empowerment. For Odetta, her natural hair was a form of resistance—resistance to the white dominated culture that subjugated Black personhood, resistance to the systemic oppression that had kept Black Americans in bondage and was still keeping them in bondage, and resistance to the whitewashed archive that sought to keep this history suppressed. Odetta linked the aesthetic of her natural hair to an African heritage and in the early 1960s began wearing African printed kaftans in performance, further embodying her ideas around Black power and history, and bringing similar ideas from Black intellectuals and activists such as James Baldwin, who were connecting the work of the Civil Rights Movement to the African independence movement, into the cultural consciousness through her music and performance. Her hairstyle, called "an Odetta" at the time, would in the 1970s become an

[24] Ibid.
[25] Odetta qtd. in Zack, 36.

Afro and grow into a symbol of Black power and resistance synonymous with activists such as Angela Davis.[26] In this way, Odetta's embrace of natural hair and presentation of herself as unapologetically Black pioneered ideas of Black feminism, resistance, and power.

Black women vocalists have long played a critical role in elevating Black political ideas in the public sphere and tackling notions of Black identity. In *Staging the Blues: From Tent Shows to Tourism* (2014), Paige McGinley analyzes the contributions of early blueswomen pioneers Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith whose innovative use of costume developed a public vision of Black female glamour that critically "pushed back against the Topsy and mammy figures that dominated stage representations of black women" and "fashioned a model of black womanhood that was, above all, capable of protean transformation."[27] Rainey and Smith forged a pathway through which future Black songstresses could leverage not only their musicality but their visual persona and aesthetics to drive forward new ideas of Black identity. Ruth Feldstein argues in *How it Feels to Be Free* (2009) that Black female entertainers like Nina Simone were key drivers of the Civil Rights Movement through their capacity "to make the civil rights movement meaningful to people around the world," people who "never marched or boycotted, but they encountered and responded to the politics of black activism when they listened to certain music."[28] So, too, did Odetta weave her visual persona alongside her musical performance to crack open assumptions about Black femininity and lay claim to an

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[26] Jacobson, 6.

[27] Paige A. McGinley, *Staging the Blues: From Tent Shows to Tourism*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 27 and 34.

[28] Ruth Feldstein, *How It Feels to Be Free: Black Women Entertainers and the Civil Rights Movement*, (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 6.

aesthetic of Black beauty and resistance. Odetta's approach was tied to folk music, steeped in the archive, and the work of reframing and reorienting the present moment to account for the forgotten history of Black America and break the cycle of oppression for the future. Odetta didn't just sing folk songs, they were an entire framework for understanding her world, one which allowed her to explore herself and her Black culture outside of the restrictive confines of white America. In doing so, she in turn built a new way of folk life, an aesthetic of resistance that spanned music, politics, and life.

As with her musical style, Odetta's aesthetic of resistance which bridged the gap between folk music and lifestyle—blended the song and the image—had a profound influence on Dylan. As I will explore further in chapter two, Dylan's countercultural aesthetic which he built in the early 1960s was steeped in the aesthetics of Black youth activism, and followed this same mode which Odetta built in her new folk aesthetic. Before becoming a songwriter, Dylan, like Odetta, entrenched himself in an exploration of the folk archive. Like Odetta, the folk archive taught Dylan about America and provided him vectors through which to understand the issues facing his present. Dylan's early songwriting took directly from this archive—"Blowin' in the Wind" was musically entirely based off of the Black folk traditional "No More Auction Block." And even as Dylan moved beyond the genre of folk music, every move which built the persona of Dylan retained this same modality of countercultural aesthetics drawn directly from Odetta.

Odetta Sings Dylan

It was 2 A.M. in recording Studio A at RCA Victor Studios in New York in January 1965. Odetta, who liked to record late into the night, was in deep concentration recording *Odetta Sings Dylan* when Bob himself stopped by for a visit. As producer Jack Somer related the story to Odetta biographer Ian Zack: "he didn't step in more than 3 or 4 feet, and it was in the middle of a take. She saw him, she stopped playing, she looked through the glass and she said, 'Get your white ass out of here!' And he turned around and left."[29]

So the story goes that Dylan didn't know of Odetta's record until it was already happening. Odetta's manager, Al Grossman (who also managed Dylan at the time), gave Odetta a package of demo songs Dylan recorded for his publishing company, M. Witmark & Sons, for her use in recording in the album. Of the twelve songs on Odetta's 1965 *Odetta Sings Dylan* (the first major album of Dylan covers to ever be released), seven of the tracks had not yet been formally recorded or released by Dylan. To this day, five of these tracks have still never been formally recorded by Dylan, and have been released only as official entries in the Bob Dylan Bootleg Series as part of *Vol. 9: The Witmark Demos: 1962–1964*.

I mention this to highlight an overall aesthetic approach to *Odetta Sings Dylan* that I think is key to understanding the work Odetta does on this album: this album begins from the premise of Dylan as a songwriter, rather than performer. This is not an album of covers. It is an album of interpretations—and in some key cases *completions*—of songs which Dylan started and never finished. This distinction between a cover and an

[29] Zack, 161.

interpretation is critical here, particularly in the case of Dylan whose performance style, even at this stage in his early career, was known for its idiosyncrasies. Understanding *Odetta Sings Dylan* as an album of which the lion's share was not "known Dylan output" signals the work of Odetta on this album not as a mimicry, but as a deep artistic creation in her own right, something which Odetta herself was very aware of while making the album.

In the liner notes to *Odetta Sings Dylan*, Odetta wrote: "Because of the strength of Bob Dylan's songs, especially in his presentation of them, it is sometimes quite difficult to resist imitating him. But something I did not allow me to become was a reflection. I believe it is known as 'ego.'"[30] This is not an album of Odetta riding the coattails of her former mentee, but a public acknowledgement between two artists. The work Odetta did on this album not only created definitive versions of these songs, but also critically cemented the role of Dylan in American music as a songwriter. It establishes a methodology for approaching Dylan's work and making it artistically your own—a methodology that goes beyond the pop-output of Peter, Paul and Mary's cover of "Blowin' in the Wind" (1963) or The Byrds' cover of "Mr. Tambourine Man" which would be released later that year, both of which are often attributed to early Bob Dylan success on the charts. For Odetta it was a mode of exploration. As she wrote in the liner notes: "when Mr. Dylan's songs and I got to working together, I made some lovely discoveries."[31] It is this curiosity and invention that we hear on the album.

[30] Odetta liner notes, *Odetta Sings Dylan*, RCA Victor, 1965.
[31] Ibid.

Odetta Sings Dylan opens with "Baby, I'm in the Mood for You," one of the seven never-before-heard Dylan songs on the album. It is a fitting opener: a jaunty love song filled to the brim with the "whoops" and guitar slaps that are the hallmark of Odetta's style. It establishes a rockabilly sound that gets carried throughout the rest of the album—a markedly bluesy, Southern sound that stands out against much of Odetta's early discography. Of all the songs on the album, Odetta makes the most significant edits to this one, reordering stanzas, moving lyrics around to pick and choose her favorite lines, and cutting a few stanzas entirely to get the track down to a tight two-and-a-half-minute pop song in the vein of Elvis' "My Baby Left Me." The edits and stylistic choices Odetta made to "Baby, I'm in the Mood for You" have since become the standard version of the song. Early rock and roll icon Dion recorded a version later in 1965 in this same style produced by Dylan producer Tom Wilson (though unreleased until 2017 as *The Lost Album*). And in 2016 when Miley Cyrus performed the track on *The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon*, it was Odetta's arrangement that Cyrus used (although notably if you view the clip on YouTube it is tagged as only a "Bob Dylan cover" with no mention of Odetta).

Odetta does similar work on "Tomorrow is a Long Time," another of the unreleased Dylan songs on the album. Odetta's version does not make as many dramatic lyrical shifts as in "Baby, I'm in the Mood for You," but musically she dramatically alters the tempo, and layers in a blues rhythm which transforms the song into a six-and-a-half-minute ballad of lost love. If you listen to Bob Dylan's original, with its backing guitar lines a direct mirror of "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right," Odetta's transformation is that much more dramatic in the depth it gives "Tomorrow is a Long Time." And as with

"Baby, I'm in the Mood for You," her version of "Tomorrow is a Long Time" became a definitive arrangement. Elvis infamously heard the track by way of record producer Charlie McCoy and went on to record his own cover of "Tomorrow is a Long Time" in Odetta's style. Even Dylan himself has played with this more southern, country blues style of "Tomorrow is a Long Time," heard in performances from Dylan's rehearsals in advance of his 1978 world tour, for example. Thus, with "Baby, I'm in the Mood for You" and "Tomorrow is a Long Time," we begin to see a recurring theme presenting itself in the narrative of *Odetta Sings Dylan*: Odetta put significant artistic labor into crafting the empty vessels of these Dylan demos, creating interpretations that have in turn become definitive versions of many of these songs, even feeding back in some ways into Dylan's own interpretations. This labor built many of these songs into a new brand of folk-pop crossover standards, opening Dylan's songwriting up to rock and roll and country-pop genres even as Odetta was herself confined to the folk milieu.

Equally compelling—or perhaps even more so—than Odetta's work on Dylan's previously unreleased songs are the interpretations she offers to the already popularized songs, in particular, his "finger pointing songs," Dylan's phrase for his more explicit protest music contributions. Of special note is her version of "Masters of War," previously released on Dylan's 1963 *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*. Odetta's "Masters of War" runs a full two minutes longer than Dylan's original, following a significant trend on *Odetta Sings Dylan* of Odetta slowing Dylan's tempos and adding more dynamic flavor from the guitar accompaniment. These subtle shifts in tempo give songs like "Masters of War" more room to breathe, allowing the power and force of lyrics a significantly greater impact. When Odetta sings "You hide in your mansion / As young

people's blood / Flows out of their bodies / And is buried in the mud," it becomes a powerful crescendo to the song, a stark contrast to Dylan's version which maintains an ostinato rhythm and style throughout.[32] As she drives forward into the next the next stanza,

> Well that's the worst fear
> That can ever be hurled
> Fear to bring children
> Into the world
> For threatening my baby
> Unborn and unnamed
> You ain't worth the blood
> That runs in your veins[33]

Odetta creates a dynamic tension within the song that was not present in Dylan's more steadied original. The result is a song filled to the brim with urgency, a prescient commentary that serves not only as an anti-war commentary on the war in Vietnam, but also the war at home: the fight for civil rights raging in the streets of America. In this stanza, we hear the voice of a powerful Black woman decrying the threat on Black bodies, speaking to the fear of Black motherhood. As with "Take This Hammer" and other folk standards, Odetta brings a narrativity to "Masters of War," using her performance style enhance the lyrical moves of the song and make it all the more personally affecting.

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[32] "Masters of War," written by Bob Dylan, as performed by Odetta, track 5 on *Odetta Sings Dylan*, RCA Victor, 1965.

[33] Ibid.

But it is not only what she brings to "Masters of War" that transforms it, but also what she critically removes lyrically. In her version of "Masters of War," Odetta cuts the final stanza in its entirety, which in Dylan's version goes:

And I hope that you die

And your death'll come soon

I will follow your casket

In the pale afternoon

And I'll watch while you're lowered

Down to your deathbed

And I'll stand o'er your grave

'Til I'm sure that you're dead [34]

She makes similar cuts in her version of "With God on Our Side," opting to cut the final two stanzas in which Dylan asks "You'll have to decide / Whether Judas Iscariot / Had God on his side."[35] These deletions represent a critical tonal shift in these songs, adding a notable maturity and power which transforms them from Dylan's "finger pointing songs" into Black anthems. What we hear in Dylan's versions of these deleted lines from "Masters of War" and "With God on Our Side" is a glib irony, an anger that speaks very tellingly to Dylan's own position as a young white man. They are biting, to be sure, but reveal a level of flippancy from Dylan: it is relatively easy for Dylan to dash off a line about Judas when there is less at stake for him. His power and positionality are secure. Odetta's power is a direct contrast to that. Her interpretations are no less angry than

[34] Ibid.

[35] "With God on Our Side," written by Bob Dylan, as performed by Odetta, track 8 on *Odetta Sings Dylan*, RCA Victor, 1965.

Dylan's—far from it, her rage and pain are quite apparent—but she poignantly mediates that anger away from flippancy towards a deeper, more emboldened rage.

Perhaps the most exciting of all of the songs on *Odetta Sings Dylan* is her version of "Mr. Tambourine Man." Odetta's version is notably the first publicly released recording of "Mr. Tambourine Man," coming out in January 1965, the same month Dylan went into the recording studio for *Bringing It All Back Home* on which "Mr. Tambourine Man" would appear, and five months prior to The Byrds' rendition of the song which would quickly skyrocket both their own careers and Dylan's. Aside from the serendipitous overlap of recordings of "Mr. Tambourine Man," there is really nothing to link these three versions of this song—so much so that Odetta's "Mr. Tambourine Man" is almost a completely different song.

Coming in at almost eleven minutes, "Mr. Tambourine Man" is the longest track on the *Odetta Sings Dylan*. It is double the length of Dylan's version and nearly four times the length of The Byrds'. What for Dylan and The Byrds is a quick-tempo pop-folk song, to Odetta is a longform blues meditation. The result is quite frankly stunning. More than drastically dropping the tempo, Odetta takes the song in an entirely different direction. Accompanied by Bruce Langhorne on guitar, Odetta adds a baseline to the song, giving it a blues rhythm paired with a sultry up-strum on the chorus. It is definitively Southern and feels more aligned with the Black musical traditions of the South than the psychedelic rock version popularized by The Byrds or more classically folksy version by Dylan. The result is a ballad, a melancholic ode—poignantly moving and deeply personal. As a listener, we can feel the connection between Odetta and the music. In short—Odetta transforms the song into poetry.

Some accounts have pinpointed guitarist Bruce Langhorne as an early inspiration for Dylan's "Mr. Tambourine Man," as he would regularly bring a Turkish drum to session recordings with Dylan. It is fitting that Langhorne would join Odetta on her version of this song, and the space which Odetta's version provides for Langhorne's guitar feels like a warm nod to the song's inspirer. In a way, Odetta's "Mr. Tambourine Man" becomes an emblematic centerpiece to the project of *Odetta Sings Dylan*, one which redefines Dylan's work in a Black musical sphere. If we consider the legacy of Dylan's early career as one often connected to the Civil Rights Movement, the influence of SNCC, and the way he is remembered as part of the March on Washington in Odetta's place, then *Odetta Sings Dylan* serves an interesting role in reclaiming Dylan's work out of the white archive exclusively. There isn't much indication that anyone else, Dylan included, has ever taken on Odetta's arrangement of "Mr. Tambourine Man," leaving it as a version truly set-apart from other takes on the song. However, one can't help but wonder if this eleven-minute rendition of "Mr. Tambourine Man" had any influence on Dylan's long-form songs which he would release later in 1965–66, such as "Desolation Row" or "Sad-Eyed Lady of the Low-Lands," two firsts in what would become a robust line of lengthy Dylan entries.

Odetta Sings Dylan is a critical document in cementing Dylan as songwriter. In this crafting of Dylan's earlier protest songs, we see Odetta treating Dylan's songs *as* folk traditionals, giving them the same care that she would any song from the folk archive, and in this way, elevating them as timeless musical standards worthy of entrance into the American songbook. In engaging both his pop output and his protest music, Odetta shapes our vision of Dylan as songwriter, opening up new possibilities for engaging with

his work beyond the mode of pop hits to be cycled through the various burgeoning white pop groups of the time. For Odetta, Dylan's work warrants the same treatment as the timeless classics, and she approaches *Odetta Sings Dylan* as an actor might a Shakespearean monologue: filling it and shaping it to suit her, allowing the language and the music to speak to the needs of the moment.

Across Odetta's forty-year recording discography over nineteen studio albums, there are only two songs for which Odetta is the copyrighted author. Odetta's artistry was built on the foundation of the archive, a recreation of the American songbook that held space for Black identity and defined an aesthetic of resistance. Her influence shaped the very backbone of American songwriting, highlighting the power of song to endure across centuries and be both timeless and prescient. Odetta's influence still permeates through popular music—seen through other Black female musical artists from contemporary Black folk singers like Yola or Valerie June and even Beyoncé's use of natural hair, through aesthetics of political music, through even her very interpretations and arrangements of folk songs which have themselves become standards. Odetta's legacy can be seen everywhere, yet it is named almost nowhere. This project aims to contribute to what I hope will become a growing appreciation and reconsideration of Odetta's legacy so that we may give her the acknowledgement she so deserved in her lifetime.

Part Two: Dylan

In the opening of her memoir *A Freewheelin' Time* (2008), Suze Rotolo—an early romantic partner of Dylan's who famously appeared with him on the cover of *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*—describes the overpowering "Legend of Dylan" which shadowed much of her life.[36] Rotolo writes, "Dylan's public, his fans and followers, create him in their own image . . . The very mention of his name invokes his myth."[37] It is a myth that spans sixty years of American culture, permeating and adapting over the decades: folk singer, poet, rocker, outlaw, father, preacher, crooner. In the absence of being able to define Dylan's legend within the bounds of fixed markers his changeability has become his defining feature. It is a changeability marked by a sense of flippancy, brazenness, and abrasiveness, in which Dylan (seemingly) couldn't give two shits about whether or not you like him and might very well be mocking everyone in a pursuit to accrue as much wealth as possible—or maybe he carries a deep empathy for humankind, or maybe it's both, or neither. Laura Tenschert, host of the popular podcast *Definitely Dylan*, defined this during Dylan@80, a conference celebrating Dylan's eightieth birthday, as a kind of seeming "irreverence" which has attracted listeners and fans over the decades and buoyed Dylan in the twenty-first century.[38] It is this vision of Dylan's persona, this obsession with Dylan's complex irreverence, that has built Dylan into a kind of infallible paragon of Americana that stretches beyond his own fandom to permeate American culture writ large. Dylan's brand of self-assured disregard for societal rules

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[36] Suze Rotolo, *A Freewheelin' Time: A Memoir of Greenwich Village in the Sixties*, (New York: Broadway Books, 2008), 3.

[37] Ibid, 2.

[38] Laura Tenschert, "How Do We Talk about Bob Dylan in the 21st Century?" talk at Dylan@80 conference, May 24, 2021.

taps into a core tenant of the American dream: that you have the power to be whomever you want to regardless of the rules prescribed to you. I am interested in the way Dylan's white (often Baby Boomer, often male) fandom has latched onto this aesthetic of irreverence, tied it up with the notion of the auteur, and operationalized it into a deeply white, masculine aesthetic. For white cis men it speaks to their own possibility, for the rest of us it speaks to *desire*, a desire of how we *could* act or be under a different identity.

What I love about Rotolo's observation, though, is not only the way she calls out Dylan's pervasive—and at points pernicious—mythology, but the way she defines it as one which has been created not by Dylan himself, but by us. It is from this premise that this chapter begins. That the aesthetic has mutated beyond Dylan over the decades, and by exploring its origin we might break through this *idea* of Dylan that permeates through our discourse right now and try and grapple with the actual artist underneath, exploring his work not as it stands alone but as part of a rich tapestry of American popular music to which he is indebted. In this way, I hope to begin to unravel some of the unfettered power which Dylan's persona has been given in our culture over the last six decades, and in particular in the twenty-first century. Dylan's Nobel Prize award in 2016 is a culmination of this unchecked Dylan exceptionalism, or a pervasive belief in Dylan's auteur artistry that is at present allowing him to function outside of the bounds of cultural interrogation in a way that no other artist has ever existed. There is no shortage of pieces to be read investigating Dylan, to be sure, and the discourse around Dylan spans scholars, cultural critics and music journalists, and fans in broad-reaching way. However, this presents both a virtue and a challenge, as the intermingling of fandom and critique often do. One is hesitant to question their favorites too much, and so there has seemed at points a limit in

the Dylan discourse to *interrogating* Dylan—as if at any point we might be a little afraid to unearth something we're not so proud of. These limitations are most apparent in discussions of Dylan and Blackness and Dylan and gender, two areas where only a handful of commentators are willing tread deeply.[39]

The project of making Bob Dylan into an indelible cultural icon has been driven in large part by the white critics of Dylan's own generation who still perennially take center stage in the production of scholarly and popular knowledge about him. This manifests both on a large scale with the continued preeminence of voices like Clinton Heylin or Greil Marcus (whose writings on Dylan are often saturated in a deep layer of nostalgia), but also on a small scale in the informal spaces of Dylan fandom where women and people of color have often found themselves fighting to prove their Dylan knowledge or carve space for their interpretations of his work. I am not interested in dismantling Dylan—this is not a Cancel Dylan argument—in fact, I would argue quite the opposite. In beginning from the premise that cultural consumers (fans, critics, bystanders) have all contributed in some way to the creation of Dylan's legend, I argue that we can formulate a richer, deeper understanding of Dylan's cultural impact beyond "Nobel Prize genius Bob Dylan," and push Dylan's white audiences towards an understanding of Dylan's relationship to Blackness that goes against the white savior narrative often circulated.

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[39] Gayle Wald and Daphne A. Brooks, "Women Do Dylan: The Aesthetics and Politics of Dylan Covers," In *Highway 61 Revisited: Bob Dylan's Road from Minnesota to the World*, edited by Colleen J Sheehy and Thomas Swiss, 169–85, (University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Charles Hughes, "Allowed to Be Free: Bob Dylan and the Civil Rights Movement," Ibid, 44-59; Mike Marqusee, *Wicked Messenger: Bob Dylan and the 1960s*, (New York: Seven Stories Press), 2003.

To better understand Dylan's influence on our culture we must first develop a fuller and more comprehensive understanding of the artistic and cultural influences that shaped Dylan himself. More specifically, we must look at the role of Black artistry and activism in crafting Dylan throughout his career, which has been by far the most formative influence on Dylan's work and the least acknowledged. Too often Dylan scholars and fans have repeated the same Woody Guthrie pilgrimage story with no mention of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Odetta, Rubin Carter, or the countless other Black artists, figures, and organizations who shaped our cultural interpretations of Dylan over the decades. Too often has Bob Dylan taken center stage as the greatest contributor to American popular music without acknowledging that he—like all white musical artists—has been influenced by Black popular music artists and traditions which form the very basis of American popular music. Only through this lens can scholars disentangle Dylan from the almost fanatical fandom which often defines Dylan's listenership and engage with Dylan on a richer critical level. So, too, can critics better understand the cultural wave that wafts out of Dylan's persona to craft particular whitewashed narratives of mid-century America and the notion of musical counterculture and resistance more broadly.

Dylan's relationship to Black artistry in the 1960s is in no way a unique story. White musical artists have a long history of participating in and profiting from this same sort of love and theft of Black musical traditions. The case of Elvis and Sister Rosetta Tharpe provides a longstanding example of this history at play: Elvis, who is often attributed as the pioneer of rock-and-roll was heavily influenced by Tharpe, her finger-picking guitar style became the backbone of much of Elvis' rock-and-roll style. As

popular music scholar Gayle Wald writes in *Shout, Sister, Shout!: The Untold Story of Rock-and-Roll Trailblazer Sister Rosetta Tharpe* (2007), "Indeed, it's hard to conceive of as seminal a figure as Elvis. . .without first imagining Rosetta."[40] Like Odetta, Tharpe lingers in the cultural memory as a shadowy name dropped by deep music afficionados as a sort of proof they know their musical history. But the discourse often stops at attributing blame on the white artist in question, rather than expanding to question the cultural forces at work which allowed this history to happen. One says, "Elvis stole from Rosetta Tharpe, you should really listen to her if you want authentic rock and roll" rather than "we as a culture allowed Rosetta Tharpe to be forgotten in Elvis' stead." This distinction is important: the notion that "Elvis stole" continues to reaffirm the power of whiteness to steal from Black culture and does nothing to undercut this power, instead leading towards a reductive notion of "cancellation and moving on" rather than true cultural interrogation. In the end, saying "Elvis stole" really does nothing to build an appreciation for Rosetta Tharpe and the role of Black women in creating rock and roll. And in talking about Dylan, it is imperative that we account for the cultural forces of fandom, critics, media, and even us as individual listeners who have all participated in creating the cultural icon that is Bob Dylan.

So this is not a chapter about unearthing ways in which Dylan "stole" from or "profited" from Blackness throughout his career. This is a chapter about opening a dialogue through which to better understand Dylan as a cultural element, one which, like all American popular culture, has deep ties to Black culture and political work that has

[40] Gayle Wald, *Shout, Sister, Shout!: The Untold Story of Rock-and-Roll Trailblazer Sister Rosetta Tharpe* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007), xi.

often gone underdiscussed. In doing so I hope to open a richer discussion of Dylan's genius (because I do think there is some undeniable genius at work) that does not come at the expense of other genius. As Dylan himself sings on his most recent release *Rough and Rowdy Ways* (2020), he "contains multitudes" and in those "multitudes" there are cracks and "contradictions" we must grapple with wholeheartedly.[41]

This chapter will look at three points in Dylan's career in which Black culture played particularly key roles: "Blowin' in the Wind" and the start of Dylan's career as a protest singer; "Hurricane" and the campaign to free Rubin Carter as part of the Rolling Thunder Revue tour; and "Gotta Serve Somebody" and Dylan's Gospel Period. This is by no means a comprehensive list of all the key moments Black culture has influenced Dylan's career or artistry, but each of these moments presents a clear picture of how Black artistry continually shaped and reshaped Dylan from the very beginning of his career through one of his most controversial turning points. In section one I will explore the relationship between "Blowin' in the Wind" and the folk traditional "No More Auction Block," which Dylan used to form the base instrumental melody of the song. I argue that in "Blowin' in the Wind" Dylan established his persona based out of his experiences with Black youth activism, vaulting a new brand of activist aesthetics into white counterculture in the early 1960s. In section two, I will look at the way "Hurricane," and Dylan's relationship to the movement to free the wrongfully incarcerated boxer Rubin Carter, provided a wayward Dylan with a return to this activist brand at a key moment of revitalization of his career. I will examine Dylan's provocative

[41] Bob Dylan, "I Contain Multitudes," recorded January-February 2020, track 1 on *Rough and Rowdy Ways*, Columbia, 2020.

use of the n-word in "Hurricane" (the only instance he has used it in his entire discography) as a as an exemplar of Dylan's conflicted relationship between the political and the aesthetic. And lastly, in section three I will explore Dylan's Gospel Period, his most explicit dalliance with Black musical culture, and the ways in which this built off and fed into a growing American conservatism. Looking at "Gotta Serve Somebody," I will draw comparisons to Odetta's version of the traditional Black spiritual "God's Gonna Cut You Down" which appears on her solo debut *Odetta Sings Ballads and Blues* (Dylan's first entrée into folk music) to view Dylan's Gospel period as a return to his musical and aesthetic origin points.

At the center of all of this is, of course, Odetta, whose shadow lurks across Dylan's entire career. In analyzing Dylan's relationship to Blackness, I hope to not only paint a clear picture of the broad-ranging influence of Black artistry and activism on Dylan, but also highlight the powerful force Odetta enacted not only on Dylan but by extension the last sixty years of American popular music culture. In a way, this is just as much about Odetta and her legacy as it is Dylan's, for it is also her legacy that faces the precipice of being completely forgotten by the forces of our cultural memory.

"Blowin' in the Wind" and the Aesthetics of Black Youth Activism

In July 1963, Dylan traveled to the heart of the Jim Crow South to sing at a rally led by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) as part of their voter registration campaign in Greenwood, Mississippi.[42] The trip, which came at the request

[42] Stephen Petrus and Ronald D. Cohen, *Folk City: New York and the American Folk Music Revival* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2015), 227.

of actor and activist Theo Bikel, who also helped finance Dylan's visit, was a culmination of an ongoing campaign of sorts among early Dylan friends and influencers to politicize the young Midwesterner. Suze Rotolo, alongside sister Carla and their mother, was responsible for introducing Dylan into much of the youth political culture brewing in New York in the early 1960s through her relationship to organizations such as the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Over the course of 1962–63, Dylan became a close ally with SNCC, playing at support of their events in New York City. But Dylan's relationship to political activism was at this point centralized to New York City, far removed from the front lines of the fight for racial justice happening in the South, and largely mediated by a white friend or acquaintance as intermediary.

The trip to Greenwood was, then, a formative and transitional experience for Dylan, opening him up to the political workings of the Civil Rights Movement and the Black youth activism which was playing a key role in the movement's actions on the Southern front lines. Founded in 1960 under the guidance of Ella Baker, SNCC was the central force of student and youth organizing within the Civil Rights Movement, spearheading efforts such as the early sit-in movement and the 1961 Freedom Rides. While affiliated with Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, SNCC was driven by more radical language and actions aimed at the total destruction of white supremacy. It was through SNCC, for example, that Stokely Carmichael, who served as chairman of the group in 1966, would first popularize the term Black Power, and it is this lineage that would go on to shape the work of the Black Panthers.

In *Wicked Messenger: Bob Dylan and the 1960s*, Mike Marqusee details the controversy around John Lewis' speech on behalf of SNCC at the 1963 March on Washington: "The draft of Lewis's speech included not only barbed criticisms of the failures of the federal government and the inadequacies of JFK's proposed legislation . . . but also what seemed to the elders an incendiary pledge."[43] Movement leadership from various factions, including King himself, called on Lewis to amend his draft prior to delivering his speech, calling on him to tone down the more radical anti-establishment rhetoric in favor of movement unity. Lewis did ultimately edit his speech to satisfy movement leadership; however, even in its toned-down form, Lewis refers to the movement as "a serious social revolution," and explicit calls out the systemic and governmental establishments which force Black Americans to "live in constant fear of a police state."[44] As Marqusee notes, Lewis' speech stood out among others at the March as it "emphasized that political institutions, and not merely 'prejudice,' were the key obstacles to equality." [45] Marqusee traces resonances between Lewis' speech at the March and Dylan's performance of "Only a Pawn in Their Game" that day, which similarly stood out against the other protest songs of the day in its exploration of institutionalized racial violence in contrast to individualized white prejudice:

> But the poor white man's used in the hands of them all like a tool
>
> He's taught in his school

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[43] Mike Marqusee, *Wicked Messenger: Bob Dylan and the 1960s* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003), 11.

[44] Lewis, John. Speech at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, August 28, 1963. Transcription accessed https://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/lewis-speech-at-the-march-on-washington-speech-text/.

[45] Marqusee, 12.

From the start by the rule

That the laws are with him

To protect his white skin

To keep up his hate

So he never thinks straight

'Bout the shape that he's in

But it ain't him to blame

He's only a pawn in their game[46]

It was during his visit to Greenwood, playing for the SNCC rally, that Dylan first debuted "Only a Pawn in Their Game," and through this aligned rhetoric we can clearly trace the influence of SNCC on Bob Dylan's music in 1963.

But it is not only in Dylan's music that we can see the influence of SNCC and Black youth activism. It is also in the broader aesthetic iconography which Dylan was forming for himself in the early 1960s. Suze Rotolo writes in *A Freewheelin' Time* of the aesthetics of Dylan's early years and the growing folk movement in New York: "Much time was spent in front of the mirror trying on one wrinkled article of clothing after another, until it all came together to look as if Bob had just gotten up and thrown something on. Image meant everything."[47] Rotolo offers not only a hilarious image of a vain twenty-year-old Dylan frantically searching for the perfect wrinkled work shirt, but also a poignant insight into the power aesthetics had over Dylan's early artistic impulses. The Civil Rights Movement and Black political activism provided another aesthetic

[46] Bob Dylan, "Only a Pawn in Their Game," recorded August 1963, track 6 on *The Times They Are A-Changin'*, Columbia, 1964.

[47] Rotolo, 9.

outlet for Dylan to dig into in 1961–64. Alongside the dirty work shirt and the gravely voice, Dylan was crafting a vision of the disgruntled youth in America born out of frustration with the establishment. This was not a new aesthetic in and of itself, but rather one built off the image of Woody Guthrie as well Dylan's contemporaries from the folk revival. What Dylan brought was the element of irreverence, an anger that added an edge to his work, which he took directly from the Black youth movement and SNCC. This relationship to Black youth culture and activism is a crucial connection, one which is overlooked in the legend of Dylan which so often focuses on the primacy of Woody Guthrie in influencing Dylan in this period. Dylan may have gotten his corduroy hat and penchant for dropping letters in his liner notes from Guthrie's influence, but it was Black youth activism that ultimately posed the most significant impact on Dylan's aesthetic development from 1961–64. And for Dylan, these aesthetic interplayed directly with the political: it wasn't enough to talk to the talk, one also had to look and act the part, distancing oneself wholly from the codified establishment.

This dynamic came to a dramatic head in Dylan's infamous Tom Paine Award acceptance speech to the Emergency Civil Liberties Union, a moment often pointed to as the moment Dylan turned away from political work although it came at the height of his protest music output in December 1963. Dylan began his speech talking about this very notion of youth as an oppositional aesthetic against the old established system, "it's took me a long time to get young and now I consider myself young. And I'm proud of it. I'm proud that I'm young."[48] Poignant here is Dylan's assertion that it took him "a long time

[48] Bob Dylan, speech for the acceptance of the Tom Paine Award from the Emergency Civil Liberties Union, December 13, 1963, transcription accessed https://speakola.com/arts/bob-dylan-tom-paine-acceptance-1963.

to get young," as though youth as it existed in his schema was not a matter of numbers but a set of ideas or ideals that one must work towards. A sort of counterprogramming if you will. He extended these generational dynamics to the Civil Rights Movement itself, echoing sentiments from John Lewis and SNCC: "I was on the march on Washington . . . and I didn't see any Negroes that looked like none of my friends. My friends don't wear suits . . . My friends don't have to wear any kind of thing to prove that they're respectable Negroes." Here Dylan was publicly echoing sentiments he was actively exploring in his music, the youth pull to question the establishment, even the establishment that was ostensibly pushing for change was still part of the systemic issue holding back progress for Dylan, and the only true path forward was a sort of total youth upheaval. For Dylan, the idea of the establishment moved across racial lines: anyone too stuck in their mode of thinking was holding back the tide of change. Towards the end of the speech, which took place three weeks following Kennedy's assassination, Dylan made perhaps his most famous misstep with his declaration: "I got to admit that the man who shot President Kennedy, Lee Oswald, I don't know exactly where—what he thought he was doing, but I got to admit honestly that I too—I saw some of myself in him." Even now, the statement is quite a provocative one, and one which I think exemplifies Dylan's project during this period at its most extreme. It is a politically charged statement to say you can relate to the man who assassinated the president, but it also an aesthetic one: no really believes Dylan capable of pulling an Oswald, but this statement represented the start of a kind of combative, irreverent rhetoric from Dylan. An aesthetic tone that would set the stage for things like his move to electric later in the decade.

As Dylan's fame grew during this period, his aesthetic proliferated among youth culture, in particular influencing the trajectory of white youth counterculturalism in this period. We can see this influence at work in his music perhaps most palpably in "Blowin' in the Wind." First debuted in 1962 at Gerde's Folk City, "Blowin' in the Wind" quickly gained notoriety both within the folk movement and the entwined political movements which saw the song as a powerful protest anthem. It was Pete Seeger who famously first made the connection between the shared melody of "Blowin' in the Wind" and "No More Auction Block," another folk standard which originated as a song sung by former slaves in Canada and first documented by Alan Lomax in *The Folk Songs of North America*. As Marqusee points out, the song was popularized by Paul Robeson, "Odetta picked it up from him and Dylan picked it up from her," highlighting yet another instance of Odetta's profound influence hiding in the margins of 1960s culture.[49]

Odetta's version of "No More Auction Block" as recorded on her 1960 live album *At Carnegie Hall*—the version we can assume Dylan who famously pored over Odetta's discography was likely familiar—takes its roots from the Gospel tradition. She strips down the guitar accompaniment, simplifying it to a base line and drawing the power of her voice to the forefront of the melody. Accompanying her vocals is the Choir of the Master, providing a haunting Gospel backing harmony which showcases this song's roots as a traditional slave song sung by many voices in unison. It is a simple song, the lyrics centering and repeating the main refrain "No more auction block for me / No more, no more / No more auction block for me / Many thousands gone." The tempo is slowed, lending a pensive quality to the song: this is not a triumphant declaration of freedom, but

[49] Marqusee, 59.

more of a haunting lament, one which reflects the political moment in 1960 in which Black Americans, while perhaps literally freed from the auction block, were still facing the ongoing metaphorical and symbolic weight of it and its legacy of violence. The emphasis on "Many thousands gone" asks the listener to reflect on the cost of freedom, a reminder that the fight continues long after freedom is won. Like "Only a Pawn in Their Game," Odetta's version of "No More Auction Block" is a chilling nod to the persistent systemization of racial oppression and the toll of such a system.

Before writing "Blowin' in the Wind," Dylan himself experimented with performing "No More Auction Block." Released on Dylan's *The Bootleg Series Volumes 1–3 (Rare & Unreleased) 1961–1991* (1991), we can hear live performance of Dylan's "No More Auction Block" recorded at the Gaslight in October 1962, right around the time he wrote and recorded "Blowin' in the Wind." The similarities between both songs, as sung by Dylan, is completely undeniable. Dylan's version of "No More Auction Block" sounds functionally identical to "Blowin' in the Wind" in its tempo, guitar-work, and melody, the only exception is the lyrics. Dylan does his best to adopt a somber tone to his version of "No More Auction Block," but where Odetta or Robeson could rely on the power of their voices to carry the song, Dylan employs more robust backing music from his guitar to counterbalance his vocals and offer a folksier take on the song more in alignment with the sounds of the folk revival in 1962. But where the simplicity of the lyrics works in favor of Odetta's Gospel version, Dylan's relationship to the lyrics feels distanced and flat. And let's be honest: it comes as no surprise that a song originally sung by freed slaves escaping to Canada sounds a little forced coming out of the mouth of a twenty-year-old white man in 1962. For Dylan, there are no stakes in a line like "No

more auction block for me": his freedom was not under siege in 1962 or any other time, and so his subjectivity will always exist far removed from a song such as this.

What we hear in Dylan's 1962 performance of "No More Auction Block" is Dylan actively grappling with his positionality, his voice (literally and figuratively) in the schema of the political music milieu bustling around him. And where he landed was "Blowin' in the Wind," a reworking of a traditional Black song pulled forward in time and molded to speak to a broader constituency of American youth. At its core, "Blowin' in the Wind" is a coming-of-age song and the lyrics reflect an ennui that comes with grappling with ones place in the world for the first time. It reflects the pressing issues of its time, issues which occupied the growing youth counterculture: racial justice ("Yes, 'n' how many years can some people exist / Before they're allowed to be free?") and anti-war activism ("Yes, 'n' how many times must the cannonballs fly / Before they're forever banned?").[50] It is genuine in its concern, almost too sincere at points, but its chorus betrays an almost agnostic perspective: "the answer my friend is blowin' in the wind / the answer is blowin' in the wind." And so it is melodically tied to the Black musical tradition yet translated and rewritten to incorporate a white audience: it is a song that a young white Dylan could sing and not be distanced from. The virtue and curse of "Blowin' in the Wind" is its universality. The themes explored reflect the youth experience both Black and white in the 1960s, and so in contrast to the original "No More Auction Block" which lyrically serves more concretely as a call for racial justice, "Blowin' in the Wind" has perhaps a less clear agenda. To a twenty-first century listener,

[50] Bob Dylan, "Blowin' in the Wind," recorded July 1963, track 1 on *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, Columbia, 1963.

removed from the ethos of the folk revival and the 1960s youth culture, I would argue that "Blowin' in the Wind" reads first and foremost as a song about the ennui of youth than as a protest anthem, at least not in the way we have come to discuss protest music.

Yet many have called "Blowin' in the Wind" an anthem of the Civil Rights Movement over the years, a title which is not completely without merit as "Blowin' in the Wind" did serve a key role at protests and actions throughout that period. It had a profound impact on the musical community, both Black and white, inspiring many covers as well as new original songs. Sam Cooke's landmark "A Change Is Gonna Come" (1964), for example, was influenced by the success of "Blowin' in the Wind," cementing a cross-racial musical conversation or lineage spawning out from "No More Auction Block." But I would argue that in the white cultural sphere the impact of "Blowin' in the Wind" was more aesthetic than concretely political. This is what made it such a successful hit for Peter, Paul and Mary, another trio of young white singers. Their version, also released in 1963, makes use of the trio's distinctive harmonies to mirror a kind of pop call-and-response aesthetic, one which would become the basis of a distinct 1960s pop sound replicated two years later with groups like The Mamas and the Papas. There is significant less ennui in Peter, Paul and Mary's rendition, but if one considers the project of Dylan during this period as one of disseminating and activating a youth aesthetic that functions outside of the societal norms, that Peter, Paul and Mary's cover helped to spread such an aesthetic like wildfire. It would be wrong to accuse "Blowin' in the Wind" of lacking in genuine political spirit, but it lacks a certain urgency or venom in comparison to songs like "Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll" or "Only a Pawn in Their Game." For Dylan as a white artist in the early 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement was

part of an overall landscape of social issues facing the youth of America at that time, carrying equal weight alongside Vietnam War protests or workers' rights, all of which were coming together as part of portrait of changing times. In the end, the single most essential theme of that era of Dylan's work is his focus on the youth experience. "Blowin' in the Wind" highlights Dylan at this crossroads of the political and the aesthetically political. It is this notion of countercultural youth aesthetics—the irreverence and brazen disgruntlement—which Dylan carried forward into the next phase of his artistic journey when in March 1965 he famously plugged in at Newport Folk and "went electric." Over the course of the next decade, Dylan's countercultural youth expression—one influenced directly by Odetta and SNCC—would spread like wildfire among white American youth.

"Hurricane" and Bob Dylan's Protest Music Renaissance on the Rolling Thunder Tour

After helping kick off a youth cultural revolution, Dylan himself remained on the sidelines for much of the late 1960s and early 1970s following his motorcycle accident in 1966. Dylan's studio output during this period was prolific as ever but sporadic in its quality: 1967's *John Wesley Harding* remains a well-regarded release, but Hendrix's cover of "All Along the Watchtower" in 1968 proved perhaps the more compelling sonic impact of that album; 1969's *Nashville Skyline*, recorded during a brief period where Dylan had stopped smoking, boasts some of Dylan's best vocals but lacks the lyrical depth one often expects with Dylan; and from 1970–74 Dylan released a string of five half-hearted and half-baked albums, of which Dylan reflected in *Chronicles*, "I released one album (a double one) where I just threw everything I could think of at the wall and

whatever stuck, released it, and then went back and scooped up everything that didn't stick and released that, too."[51] All of these, of course, have been re-evaluated, re-appreciated, and re-released as part of various Dylan official bootleg series' over the last decade, so it's challenging to say that any period of Dylan's career is considered sub-par; however, this might come closest.

However, what is the most singular about this period in Dylan history is that save for a few occasional performances at events like the Concert of Bangladesh, Dylan did not tour at all from 1967–73. Following this six-year break from touring, Dylan returned to the stage in 1974 performing once again with The Band (who provided backup for him on the 1966 tour as The Hawks) for a six-week stadium show tour. As Howard Sounes notes in his 2001 biography of Dylan, *Down the Highway*, "In 1966, audiences had howled abuse at Bob and The Hawks. The same musicians created almost the same sound for Tour '74 and yet they were received like heroes."[52] It was a big-ticket rock arena show in classic 1970s style, grossing millions in ticket sales and lacking in artistic flavor. Dylan was dissatisfied with the performances feeling that they lacked the kind of musical experimentation he craved, and if you listen to the ensuing live album *Before the Flood* (1974) it's easy to understand why. Of all of Dylan's live recordings, of which there is an abundance to choose from, these are perhaps the most staid and least dynamic of the bunch. Dylan had returned to touring but had not succeeded in reinvigorating his artistic flame lost in 1966. Dylan needed some new inspiration. Inspiration he would soon find in the form of Rubin Carter's memoir.

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[51] Dylan, *Chronicles*, 122.

[52] Howard Sounes, *Down the Highway: The Life of Bob Dylan*, (New York: Grove Press, 2001), 275.

In 1967, boxer Rubin "Hurricane" Carter was given a life sentence for the supposed murder of three individuals at a bar in Paterson, New Jersey. The conviction came following the testimony of two white men: Alfred Bello and Arthur Dexter Bradley, who were coerced by police officers to positively identify Rubin Carter as one of the Black men supposedly seen leaving the scene of the crime. It wasn't until 1974 that Bello and Bradley admitted to lying under oath and the case was reopened. Carter wrote a memoir, *The Sixteenth Round* (1974), in which he asserted his innocence.[53] The memoir caught the attention of many who began organizing to free Carter for wrongful imprisonment, including George Lois who organized the Hurricane Trust Fund to help pay for the retrial. As Howard Sounes writes in *Down the Highway*, "Copies of *The Sixteenth Round* were sent to celebrities including Bob, who was so moved by the book that he visited Carter in prison."[54] Dylan took up the cause and decided to write a song in support of Carter's case. Following the success of their partnership on the song "Isis," Dylan partnered with theater director Jacques Levy to write "Hurricane."

Like its predecessor "Only a Pawn in Their Game" over ten years prior, "Hurricane" takes a scathing view of the American justice system. Over eight and a half minutes, Dylan walks through the entire story with the precision of a journalist, setting the murder scene and detailing Carter's wrongful arrest with biting turns of phrase:

When a cop pulled him over to the side of the road

Just like the time before and the time before that

In Paterson that's just the way things go

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[53] Rubin Carter, *The Sixteenth Round: From Number 1 Contender to Number 45472* (New York: Viking, 1974).

[54] Ibid, 287-288.

If you're black you might as well not show up on the street

'Less you wanna draw the heat [55]

At the center of the song is the chorus' refrain "But one time he could-a been / The champion of the world" serving as a constant reminder of the futurity that was stripped away from Rubin Carter not only by the authorities (the cops, the justice system, etc.) but by the totalizing system of white supremacy which allowed for this wrongful arrest and conviction.

Initially recorded in July 1975, the original version of "Hurricane" contained lyrics that implied Alfred Bello and Arthur Dexter Bradley were "robbing the bodies," a crime for which they were not accused and which Columbia Records made Dylan remove citing fear of a libel suit from Bello and Bradley. Aside from the lyrical change, the original version also differs quite dramatically in tempo, and as a result, tonality. The original version, which was recorded in one take, clocks in at almost a full eleven minutes, although there are no additional lyrics to the eight and half minute album version—the time difference is made up entirely in musicality and tempo. The temporal shift makes the original version sound closer to '60s Dylan: less rock, more pensive folk, than the ultimate album version which careens through its eight and a half minutes with a more aggressive percussive force, in some ways more befitting the anger of an unjust system. Dylan was purportedly disgruntled by the re-recording process, giving up on the whole endeavor after a full day's arduous rehearsal and recording and requesting producer Don DeVito splice together the single how he saw fit. But Dylan couldn't have

[55] Bob Dylan, "Hurricane," recorded October 1975, track 1 on *Desire*, Columbia, 1976.

felt it was a complete waste in the end because ultimately the eight-and-a-half-minute version came on the Rolling Thunder Tour.

While Columbia Records may have been disgruntled with the "robbing the bodies" lyrics, there was clearly no issue with the use of the n-word which appears in the ninth stanza of both versions of "Hurricane:"

All of Rubin's cards were marked in advance
The trial was a pig-circus, he never had a chance
The judge made Rubin's witnesses drunkards from the slums
To the white folks who watched he was a revolutionary bum
And to the black folks he was just a crazy n—
No one doubted that he pulled the trigger
And though they could not produce the gun
The D.A. said he was the one who did the deed
And the all-white jury agreed[56]

This is notably Dylan's only use of the word across his entire sixty-plus-year discography. And it's jarring—not only by today's standards, but even at the time. Dylan refused to release an edited version of "Hurricane" for radio play as a single, so the original 7" was divided into Part 1 and Part II, Part 1 cutting off after 3:45 so that radio DJs could play the song without the "N-word."[57] So the question arises: why did Dylan, who is so deft with language, choose to use a racial slur in this context? His refusal to edit it out for radio play indicates a clear intention beyond perhaps the easy assumption

[56] Ibid.

[57] Clinton Heylin, *Still on the Road: The Songs of Bob Dylan, 1974-2006* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2010), 78.

that it's a quick lazy way to rhyme with "trigger." It is notably not Bello, Bradley, or the cops that drop the n-word in the narrative of "Hurricane," but rather Dylan uses it within the context of the Black communities reaction to Carter's arrest: "And to the black folks he was just a crazy n—." It is this moment that most deeply connects "Hurricane" back to early 1960s Dylan, his use of the n-word feeling most reminiscent of Dylan's Tom Paine speech from 1963 in which he called out all the suits he saw at the March on Washington and the established idea of the "respectable Negro." Once again, Dylan is asserting the notion that the establishment is that which can function across racial lines, drawing our attention to the system of which we are each a part of upholding in one way or another and allows racial violence and oppression to occur.

But what in the context of 1963 comes off as radical rhetoric in support of a burgeoning movement, in 1975 falls a little flat. Dylan's choice of the n-word in 1975 betrays the reality that he had spent much of the last twelve years completely out of touch with the trajectory of Black political work in America. It is frankly quite awkward to hear Dylan deliver that line, an awkwardness that is only amplified on live versions from the Rolling Thunder Revue when his white voice is echoed by that of Joan Baez and Ronnie Blakely. Despite Dylan's insistence on keeping the n-word, it is hard to feel that it was exclusively for the benefit of Rubin Carter's cause and not in at least some small way an attempt to reinfuse a sense of gritty irreverence into Dylan's 1970s work in the midst of a burgeoning clash between the rise of conservative American values (marked by instances such as 1973's Supreme Court case Miller v. California which defined obscenity as that without redeeming social value, a definition that would set the stage for increased censorship in America beyond the realm of pornography) and a growing notion of the

white male auteur artist fighting against these boundaries (Martin Scorcese's *Taxi Driver* [1976] provides an obvious example). Once again Dylan is skirting between the political and the aesthetically political, his use of the n-word in "Hurricane," while based in some form of political ideation, served more as a tool to redefine Dylan's auteur aesthetics alongside his white male peers of the 1970s and present him as "still relevant" even though below the surface it betrayed that he was more detached from Black political activism than ever.

And this aesthetic redefinition worked, to an extent. The single was well received upon its release in November 1975, causing many to herald it as another powerful Dylan protest song, and leaving a lasting impression on the narrative of Dylan in the 1970s. But it also contributed to a lasting aestheticization of protest music more broadly. Set in the summer of 1976, Richard Linklater's 1993 film *Dazed and Confused* tells the coming-of-age story of a handful of white teens in the American South. Of the film's most enduring features is its soundtrack (released over two separate CD editions) which features some of the biggest hits of the 1970s that Linklater uses to capture that particular moment in American culture. Smashed in between the Aerosmith and the Lynyrd Skynyrd is oddly enough "Hurricane," which plays as part of a slow-motion tracking scene as the three young leads (played by Jason London, Matthew McConaughey, and Wiley Wiggins) triumphantly walk into the pool hall—hangout spot of the local teens. The up-tempo strum beat as Dylan sings "Here comes the story of the Hurricane" provides a seemingly perfect backdrop for this sequence, allowing one for a moment to be caught up in these kids being champions of the world. But, of course, if you know the song's premise and its lyrics, it is also an utterly absurd misuse that betrays Linklater's whitewashed vision of

America. It is a moment entirely based on the *aesthetic* lineage of Dylan: this is the 1970s extension of Dylan's same early 1960s irreverence, these young men representing the ongoing desire to rebel against age and the establishment. But where Dylan translated that into a fight for societal change, Linklater's youth are more concerned with the rebelling against their football coach and scoring Aerosmith tickets ("top priority of the summer"). We have to account, of course, for this vision of the 1970s as filtered through the early 1990s, but in this moment we can trace the aesthetic lineage of Dylan, entirely divorced from his political work yet also filtered back through it in the form of "Hurricane."

It was this reinvigorated sense of the artistic, aesthetic, and political found in "Hurricane" the formed the genesis of the Rolling Thunder tour. In September 1975, Dylan performed at a tribute to producer John Hammond—who had worked with Dylan on "Blowin' in the Wind" and other early Dylan successes—with a quartet of musicians who would form the basis of the Rolling Thunder Revue. Dylan performed a trio of songs, including the original version of "Hurricane" (the first known live performance of the song and perhaps the only live performance that can be found of that version) which served as a particular inspiration for Dylan. It's an odd choice of song for a celebratory PBS special, and one has to wonder if Dylan was drawing a connection himself between "Blowin' in the Wind" (which would have been a more fitting choice considering Hammond's role in producing the song) and this new track. Whatever the reason behind choosing it, "Hurricane" certainly left an impression. When interviewed about Dylan's performance, Hammond said of the night, "Just the fact that he came was incredible . . .

And that song about 'Hurricane' Carter is magnificent. I think it's going to free him."[58] Dylan was pushing "Hurricane" to the epicenter of his growing revival. It was the only new single Dylan allowed released in connection with the Rolling Thunder tour. Writer Sean Wilentz notes in *Bob Dylan in America* (2010), "It was the sole song from *Desire* that would be available in stores while the revue was touring," a decision which went against the traditional model of using singles to promote a tour and vice versa.[59] At the time, Dylan acknowledged that "Hurricane" provided the major motivation for touring, and as Wilentz writes, "Just prior to the Rolling Thunder tour, Dylan said he hoped Carter would be freed in ninety days: 'That's our slogan, ninety days or we fight.'"[60]

Dylan famously visited Carter in prison while on the first leg of the tour in December 1975, seeing him briefly at the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women in Clinton, New Jersey where Carter was being temporarily held during his appeals process and Dylan played a brief concert for inmates with his Rolling Thunder Revue. Photographer Ken Regan, who accompanied Dylan throughout the Rolling Thunder tour, was on hand to commemorate the meeting, and the resulting photo (the only readily searchable photo of Carter and Dylan) shows Dylan, clad in his Rolling Thunder getup, staring in at a smiling Rubin Carter standing behind bars. The lighting orchestrated just perfectly to illuminate Dylan's whiteness and shadow Carter's blackness all the more prominently.

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[58] John Hammond interview by Robert Palmer, "Bob Dylan, Jazz Stars Salute Label Pioneer John Hammond," *Rolling Stone*, Oct. 23, 1975. https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/bob-dylan-jazz-stars-salute-label-pioneer-john-hammond-107126/.

[59] Sean Wilentz, *Bob Dylan in America* (New York: Anchor Books, 2010), 149.

[60] Ibid, 154.

Figure 2. Bob Dylan and Rubin Carter. Photo credit Ken Regan, 1975.

The photo is quite clearly staged. Anyone could easily note the peculiarity of those "bars" which are more reminiscent of a roll-down gate at a mall store than an actual prison, not to mention Carter's outfit which appears to be a collared shirt and leather jacket not too dissimilar from Dylan's. The story goes that photographer, Ken Regan, seeking to capture a provocative photo of Dylan and Carter, requested the bars rolled down for the photo even though there were no bars in sight during Carter and Dylan's conversation that evening. The result, of course, is an image of Dylan as a white savior for Carter wrongfully trapped behind bars, a literal aestheticization of "Hurricane." It centers Dylan—literally placing him more centered in the frame than Carter, but also figuratively giving weight to Dylan as the epicenter of this narrative, even as it is Carter's fight for his own freedom at stake. It is a moment analogous to the Tom Paine award which was aimed at honoring Dylan for being at the supposed center of a political

movement, but rather than pushing against this spotlight as he did with his Tom Paine speech, Dylan allows himself to be the auteur of this moment.

The Rolling Thunder tour and its relationship to the campaign to free Rubin Carter marks the first, and perhaps only, time that Dylan has attempted to use the full breadth of his fame towards supporting a specific political cause. As in 1963, Dylan found himself at the crossroads of the aesthetic and the political. It would be wrong to negate Dylan's altruistic impulses in intertwining his comeback to heavily with Rubin Carter, but it would be equally wrong not to acknowledge the ways "Hurricane" also reinvigorated a floundering Dylan career. On December 8, 1975, the fall leg of the Rolling Thunder Revue tour culminated in "The Night of the Hurricane," a benefit performance at Madison Square Garden in support of Rubin Carter. In addition to the robust cast of artists from the Rolling Thunder Revue tour, the evening featured notable appearances from Muhammad Ali and Coretta King and raised $100,000 in support of Rubin Carter's defense. In his journal of the tour in *The Rolling Thunder Logbook* (1977), Sam Shepard, who was a key member of the tour's coterie of non-musical artists, acknowledges this interwoven cycle between the tour and Rubin Carter's defense campaign: "Why wrap it up with a giant fandango in New York City? It seems like a combination of helping to heal the costs of money lost on the New England circuit plus a genuine interest in aiding Rubin Carter."[61] Following the relative success of the evening, which according to the *Rolling Stone* account of the benefit Dylan referred to as "one of the greatest nights of my life," Dylan did a second benefit concert in January 1976 at the

[61] Sam Shephard, *The Rolling Thunder Logbook* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2004), 196.

Houston Astrodome. After expenses, the second benefit raised no money. Dylan would go on to take the Rolling Thunder Tour onto a second leg in the spring, but "Hurricane" would not appear as part of the set. According to Dylan's website, he has not played the song since the Houston Astrodome.

"Gotta Serve Somebody": From Counterculture to Conservative Culture

The gap of time between "Hurricane" and Dylan's Gospel Years, which launched into full swing in 1979, is just three years—a significant abbreviation to the nine-year gap between Dylan's motorcycle accident in 1966 and the Rolling Thunder Revue Tour. Thanks to the success of "Hurricane," its accompanying album *Desire* (1976), and the Rolling Thunder tour, Dylan was basking in a career renaissance once again. But Dylan was artistically restless, likely influenced at least in part by the personal turmoil he was experiencing with the public and prolonged divorce and custody battle with his wife Sara. Despite the artistic invigoration offered by the style of the Rolling Thunder Revue and *Desire*, Dylan quickly moved past the country-rock inspired aesthetic of that period, and there is little to sonically tie 1978's *Street-Legal* to *Desire*. Instead, *Street-Legal* presents a portrait of an artist very clearly in transition, a stomping ground where Dylan plays with sonic elements such as the Gospel-inflected backup singers which would become so crucial to his next three albums, and even 1950s rockabilly aesthetics which Dylan would continue to dabble with for the rest of his career. This three-year period from 1976–79 offers a brief yet critical inflection point for Dylan, one in which, not unlike going electric in 1965, Dylan seemed to be facing an overwhelming urge for reinvention not

based on critical reception or popular standing, but entirely based on his own artistic inclinations.

The trajectory of this moment in Dylan's personal history is murky, in part because Dylan himself has often avoided speaking about this period, though many have tried to carve out answers as to how and why Dylan came out as a full-force Christian rocker in 1979. Like a bedtime fable or an ancient myth, the story of Dylan's conversion to Christianity always features a set of agreed-upon events (some of which have come from Dylan himself, some from those around him at the time) which seem to provide a blueprint for confused fans to wrap their heads around this period: the silver cross Dylan felt compelled to pick up after his San Diego show on November 17, 1978; back-up singer Helena Spring teaching him about prayer; and his visitation from Jesus in a Tucson hotel room. We are also graced with a certain array of more pragmatic facts about Dylan's conversion: the immersion of many of his friends and bandmates in the Vineyard Fellowship and his subsequent attendance at Bible studies classes. Different storytellers embellish the myth with various sensational elements but its core remains the same: in late 1978, Dylan was born again. And in a moment perhaps most analogous to plugging in his electric guitar at Newport Folk over a decade prior, in August 1979 Dylan released "Gotta Serve Somebody," his first overtly Christian song.

Before we move farther, I'd like to turn away from Dylan for a moment and return to Odetta, which, in a way, was precisely what I believe Dylan did during his Gospel Period. I would like to return to *Odetta Sings Ballads and Blues*, the first Odetta album Dylan ever encountered, possibly the first folk album he ever spent real time with, and certainly the album that got him started on his whole path. Released in 1957, *Ballads*

and Blues was Odetta's solo debut, a stunning selection of songs which highlight Odetta's unique power of song and showcase the strength not simply of folk music but of the Black folk tradition specifically. With deep roots in the Black folk tradition, Odetta's selections also traverse Gospel traditions, highlighting the interconnected history of these genres. The album closes with Odetta's "Freedom Trilogy" or "Spiritual Trilogy," a trio of traditional Black spirituals "Oh, Freedom," "Come and Go with Me," and "I'm On My Way" which would become a hallmark of the Civil Rights Movement alongside "We Shall Overcome," and cement Odetta as the "Voice of the Civil Rights Movement."

As we look forward in Dylan's trajectory to his Gospel period, we must then return to his origin: that sound booth in the Minneapolis record store where he first encountered Odetta's *Ballads and Blues*. Dylan learned folk music from Odetta, which is to say he learned at the feet of the Black folk tradition, intermixing with the history of Black spirituals and Gospel. This was the lens through which Dylan began his artistic journey. As in 1975, 1978–79 saw a restless Dylan once again returning to his origins, springing out from there in a new trajectory yet preserving his artistic core: the Black folk tradition. It's difficult to speak concretely on Dylan's Gospel Years and the artistic influences on this period—Dylan himself skips over this whole period in *Chronicles* and has often avoided speaking directly about this personal time—but in listening to Dylan's own spiritual trilogy (*Slow Train Coming* [1979], *Saved* [1980], and *Shot of Love* [1981]) clear parallels emerge once again linking Dylan back to Odetta. It is from this premise that I will explore Dylan's Gospel period: not as an aberration or divergence from Dylan's musical trajectory, but rather as another return to form. Through this lens, we can

read Dylan's work in this period as an extension of his ongoing focus on American music origins—which are necessarily rooted in Black music—and aesthetics of Americana.

The crown jewel of this period is, of course, "Gotta Serve Somebody," Dylan's recorded debut of his new Gospel period in 1979 (he had been playing "Slow Train" live for a handful of months prior to the formal release of the singe of "Gotta Serve Somebody"). In considering the full breadth of Gospel songs released by Dylan in this period, "Gotta Serve Somebody" is by far one of the less interesting entries in comparison to songs like "When He Returns," "Saved," or "Every Grain of Sand" which better capture the personal rawness and musical creativity happening for Dylan in this period. But it was "Gotta Serve Somebody" that caused the most ruckus, causing John Lennon to implore Dylan to "Serve Yourself" but also giving Dylan his first single to crack the top 50 since "Hurricane" in 1975, and even earning him his first Grammy Award for Best Male Rock Vocal Performance in 1980. According to the archive on his personal website, "Gotta Serve Somebody" is also notably the only song from Dylan's Gospel period that he still plays live (including up to his most recent live tour in 2019), which for an artist like Dylan who regularly reapproaches old work presents a stark contrast to the rest of this period's songs which have largely gone untouched since the 1980s.

The endurance of "Gotta Serve Somebody" is unsurprising, however, not because it is the best or most interesting song from this period, but of all of Dylan's Christian songs, it's the most accessibly Dylan-esque. Formally, it follows the "classic" Dylan style of songs like *Blonde on Blonde*'s "Visions of Johanna" or *Highway 61 Revisited*'s "Like A Rolling Stone": four-to-five-line block stanzas alternating in a steady rhythmic pattern

with four-to-five-line block choruses. In each stanza, Dylan rolls out a series of personas like "a socialite with a long string of pearls," or "a rock 'n' roll addict prancing on the stage" and as he moves into the chorus concludes that no matter who you are, you will face a spiritual reckoning in the end.[62] Dylan's message is clear from the moment the first recitation of the chorus is finished, and while the song plods along for another four and half minutes with increasingly absurd qualifications ("might like to drink whiskey, might like to drink milk"), there are no twists or complications.

The premise of "Gotta Serve Somebody," that one day we all must face judgement, is a classic Gospel theme, one which bears particular resemblance to the Black spiritual "God's Gonna Cut You Down" (sometimes called "Run On") which appears on Odetta's *Ballads and Blues*. "God's Gonna Cut You Down," originally popularized as a Doo-Wop style Gospel spiritual performed by all-male quartets such as the Golden Gate Quartet and The Jubalaires in the 1930–40s, drives from a similar premise as "Gotta Serve Somebody:" you can run as much as you want, but sooner or later God will have judgement, and if you've got something to pay for, you will. Similar to Dylan's "Gotta Serve Somebody," "God's Gonna Cut You Down" features a list-style of potential wrongdoers from "that long tongue liar" to the "rambler, gambler, and midnight rider."[63] But unlike "Gotta Serve Somebody" which seems to take a general view of judgement (it's coming for us all regardless of if you're overtly good or bad), "God's Gonna Cut You Down" makes a more pointed commentary on society's evils and

[62] Bob Dylan, "Gotta Serve Somebody," recorded April–May 1979, track 1 on *Slow Train Coming*, Columbia, 1979.

[63] Odetta, "God's Gonna Cut You Down," recorded Sept. 1956, track 15 on *Odetta Sings Ballads and Blues*, Tradition Records, 1957.

the hubris of those in power who may think they are above repercussions and judgement. It is this potent anger which Odetta harnesses in her version of the song on *Ballads and Blues*. In a stark contrast to the popular Doo-Wop inflected versions from the 1940s, Odetta's version is recorded entirely a-cappella, creating a startlingly haunting atmosphere. The track runs for just under two minutes, starting slow and pensive as Odetta picks up speed until she's almost frantically declaring:

> You may throw a rock, hide your hand
>
> Workin' in the dark against your fellow man
>
> But sure as God has made the day and the night
>
> What you do in the dark will be brought to light
>
> You may run and hide, slide and slide
>
> Try to take the mote from your neighbor's eyes
>
> But sure as God made the Virgin and the Pope
>
> What you reap, my brother, is what you sow[64]

The recording captures her sharp breaths which provide the only rhythm-keeping throughout the song and simultaneously lend a frightening undercurrent of urgency to the piece. Odetta harnesses the song's inherent venom and pushes it into a timely political reading. In 1957, when Odetta breathlessly shouts out against those "workin' in the dark against your fellow man" she is not calling out sinners broadly construed, but the systems of white supremacy enacting anti-Black violence across the nation. Where "Gotta Serve Somebody" reads as a warning, Odetta's "God's Gonna Cut You Down" is a promise, a promise that judgement is coming. The messaging in "Gotta Serve Somebody" is overtly

[64] Ibid.

Christian, to be sure, but if you heard it on the radio and were unaware of Dylan's conversion, you might easily find it as tongue-in-cheek as Dylan's earlier invocations of a spiritual-reckoner like "With God on Our Side" off 1964's *The Times They Are A-Changin'*. You might even think he's being ironic. Dylan has never acknowledged any linkages between "Gotta Seve Somebody" and "God's Gonna Cut You Down" in the way he has between "Blowin' in the Wind" and the Black traditional "No More Auction Block," perhaps in part because musically the songs don't share any underlying structures in the same way as "Blowin'" and "Auction Block," but the parallels are undeniable. So as in 1963, here in 1979 we see Dylan experimenting with and retooling a song directly from the Black folk tradition as pioneered by Odetta. But where Odetta extended and enhanced the Blackness of these songs to direct her political commentary, Dylan universalized these narratives, and whether meaning to or not, watered down their poignancy to give space to his whiteness.

Once again, what emerges is Dylan's almost fanatic commitment to aesthetics which he operationalizes towards their extreme. Like a Brechtian play, Dylan seems to start first with the signposts of a certain feeling, theme, or mood, filling in the background that might make it real as he goes along. "Blowin' in the Wind," equipped with the musical grounding of "No More Auction Block," provided a sandbox through which Dylan could develop his brand of folk aesthetic built off of Black youth activism in the 1960s. "Gotta Serve Somebody" and its album *Slow Train Coming* provided a similar crucible through which Dylan would begin grappling with the Gospel aesthetic, one which he would codify for himself wholly on his second album in the Gospel Trilogy, *Saved* (1980). For Dylan, Gospel encompassed spiritual lyrics—sometimes, or

perhaps most of the time, deployed without a particular cohesive message or groundwork—paired with an almost essentialist take on Gospel musicality: organs and backup singers galore. At points, listening to songs from Dylan's Gospel Period is akin to watching Dylan try on a series of wrinkled shirts in the mirror a la Suzy Rotolo's anecdote. But in a way, unlike the wrinkled shirts or the photoshoot with Rubin Carter, the Gospel Period presents a rare picture of Dylan losing *himself* in the aesthetic, rather than layering an aesthetic into the overarching icon of Dylan.

In a 1981 interview about Dylan's Gospel Years, longtime collaborator and mentor Allen Ginsberg (who had been with Dylan in 1965–66 and again on the Rolling Thunder Revue) summed up the tricky dynamic of this period:

> As an aesthetic mood, it's a marvelous mood, in terms of exploring American music and making it his own and reviewing it. Two, it was one of the most integrated shows that I've ever seen. Five blacks and five whites on stage. Three: he seemed to be trying to get out of himself. Transcend himself into something else.[65]

Dylan distilled an aesthetic, but for perhaps the first time in his whole career, it was wholly genuine. Black voices were at the heart of this artistry, from the influence of Odetta and Black Gospel traditional to the literal Black female backup singers Helena Springs, Carolyn Dennis, Clydie King, Monalisa Young, and Regina McCrary Brown who were essential to Dylan's sound in this period. While "Gotta Serve Somebody" made the charts and earned a Grammy, *Saved* commercially tanked Dylan's career in ways that

[65] Ginsberg qtd. in Clinton Heylin. *Trouble in Mind: Bob Dylan's Gospel Years* (New York: Lesser Gods, 2017).

he would not fully recover from for almost two decades until 1997's *Time Out of Mind*. Rather than making a pivot following *Saved*, Dylan doubled down and released yet another Gospel album, *Shot of Love* (1981), a move that scrubs any argument that Dylan's deployment of Gospel aesthetics offered him any sort of commercial gain or cultural clout. Rather, his connection to Gospel aesthetics seems highly personal.

And here we come to perhaps the trickiest aspect of the Gospel Period—that is, how we discuss its legacy beyond the bounds of Dylan as individual artist and into the realm of Dylan as an icon for a particular countercultural aesthetic, one which is bound to whiteness and the notion of the male auteur. For Dylan, it seems inarguable that this period presented a stomping ground for new forms of artistic and aesthetic exploration, one which was in many ways apolitical and instead grounded in the personal. There are no wholesale protest songs from this period, at least not in the topical song sense like "Hurricane," but the body of work itself is socio-politically charged nonetheless beyond the bounds of Dylan. America was on the precipice of the Reagan-era, a period which would define American political and popular culture, forever. Evangelical white conservativism was taking hold. Dylan's work in this period undoubtedly feeds into these changing tides, not only in the literal sense of promoting Christian sensibilities, but even its drive away from the aesthetics of universal social change towards the aesthetics of personal change supported a growing neoliberal framework which places the emphasis on the individual rather than the collective.

Dylan's Gospel Period represented a return to his folk routes, tracing a clear lineage from "Blowin' in the Wind" through "Gotta Serve Somebody," and highlighting the deep influences of not only Odetta but Black music, culture, and activism on Dylan's

whole career. Even as they are grounded in the personal, Dylan's songs from the Gospel Period are equally bound to the shifting routes of American culture and events as their predecessors. In this way, the Gospel Period it is an alarmingly honest refraction of Dylan's whole career up until 1979 (any by extension beyond), one which is as messy as it is poignant. Dylan's relationship to Blackness throughout his career is as uncomfortable as it is inspiring. That he has contributed to and amplified at points the legacy of Black music and activism is undeniable. But so, too, has he overshadowed it and operationalized Black music and activism, whether always intentionally or not, for his own auteur development. The Gospel Period provides a nexus of this shifting dynamic, in some ways offering the sincerest relationship between Dylan and Black music (and the Black artists he was working with) while also solidifying an aesthetic of the individual auteur, one which has been operationalized through Dylan's persona towards neoliberal values in the late twentieth and now twenty-first centuries.

Coda

Right before she died in December 2008, Odetta had been slated to sing at President Barack Obama's first inauguration ceremony, an honor which she deeply hoped to lived to see. She passed away before her dream could be realized and Aretha Franklin sang in her stead. What might Odetta's legacy look like today if she had lived to sing at such a high-profile event as the inauguration of America's first Black president? What would she have selected to sing? Certainly they wouldn't have turned off the cameras and gone to lunch like at the March on Washington—instead, I think, we would've seen a long waited for acknowledgement of her contributions, the contributions which helped make such a moment as Obama's victory possible. But that is not the ending Odetta received. Instead, she passed away at the age of 77 in relative obscurity, acknowledged in *The New York Times* as the "Voice of the Civil Rights Movement," yet trapped to the margins of history, underdiscussed and underappreciated for her true cultural relevance.

Earlier this year Dylan turned 80 years old, spurring a myriad of think pieces and commentary in honor of his milestone—even a whole multi-day conference devoted to his birthday run by the Bob Dylan Institute housed at the University of Tulsa. Imagine what will happen when he dies. Dylan's legacy has long since been cemented in our cultural memory, his contributions and influences smattered across popular culture, his aesthetic deeply entwined with the neoliberal ideals of the American dream. When allegations of sexual assault of a minor were brought forward this fall, the Dylan community—fans, scholars, journalists—whipped into formation, trolling through tour dates and newspaper clippings to find "irrefutable" proof that Dylan could not have committed these crimes before reckoning with the idea that perhaps his cultural relevancy

would need to be called into question. Dylan's place in history is secure. And his influences are vast—his contributions to American songwriting are undeniable—but are they more deserving of our attention than that of Odetta's?

To understand American music is to delve deep into the cross-racial negotiation that has formed the basis of our entire cultural formation—to confront these questions of legacy and power, love and theft, ignorant neglect, and blatant oppression that have influenced the music we hear, the books we read, and the films we watch. This is the legacy of the Transatlantic Slave Trade at work in the very roots of our culture. In the early 1960s Bob Dylan and Odetta shared a manager—Al Grossman. It is not a far leap to posit that when Grossman signed Dylan it was the beginning of the end for Odetta's fame, that as his star skyrocketed into a money-maker for Grossman, she would have received less attention, and that when she died in 2008 after struggling for decades to record and tour, it was at least in some way directly linked to Dylan's immense fame. What has become of Odetta's legacy is a portrait of a Black female artist stripped of her cultural futurity—victimized by the very system she pushed against in her music. We did not celebrate Odetta at 90 this year.

These issues have formed the basis for my inquiry. If my readers walk away with nothing else, I hope it is a final answer to the question "Who is Odetta?" In this project I have begun the long process of revising a deeply embedded imbalance in our cultural memory, to reimagine a narrative of 1960s counterculture and political music that holds space for more than just Dylan, and to drive us towards renewed cultural conversations that are less stratified between Black and white artistry. At the core of this practice is recognizing and dismantling the racialized and gendered power dynamics that still drive

our cultural conversations: to understand that Odetta's artistry is as important as it is because of her embrasure of her identity as a Black woman but that it was also this identity that has confined her to the margins of history, and that to unearth her from these margins we must necessarily erase the margins entirely. In doing so, we will need to re-assess the cultural weight that has been given to non-marginalized artists. Only through this revisioning process can we develop a truly rich understanding of American music, one that unpacks cross-racial interchange, acknowledges the myriad of external forces—anti-Black racism, misogyny, homophobia—at work in creating musical legacy, and confronts the role that we as listeners, scholars, critics, and fans play in building and confining artists. Only through this revisioning can we give back the cultural futurity that has been taken from Black female artists like Odetta.

If there is one more thing that I can offer we learn from Odetta's legacy is it is the vital import of the archive—that it is what we do with histories untold that defines our present. Our musical archive can, if we let it, be a place of radical change. It can offer us insights into the systemic forces still driving our present and tools to break them down. But we have to keep pushing on it: we cannot let the archive be stagnant. We must keep revising and revisioning it.

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