

# Cognitive Critique



## LISTENING TO BOB DYLAN

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### ABSTRACT

What does it mean to say that one is listening to a piece of music, to a performance, or an artist? Initially, it may seem that there is little or no difference between these three questions. Upon closer reflection, though, there may be significant differences and these may be contingent on a variety of variables pertaining to musical content.

This paper examines the case of listening to Bob Dylan and argues that it may provide a unique listening protocol. This case is examined in the context of a larger theory of music listening that considers issues including memory, erudition, focus versus diffusion, and verbal versus non-verbal musicality. Aspects of the research are grounded in the field of disability studies in music, and intermittent mental disability in particular. The potential of a role for experimental research based on this theory of listening in the making is discussed.

## INTRODUCTION: LISTENING TO MUSIC

Heretofore, my research has focused on disability studies in music, a field I am widely acknowledged to have pioneered (Straus 2011). Out of that research and a lifelong interest in Bob Dylan, I have begun to formulate questions about what is meant by *listening to music*.

My interest is in what precisely we mean when we say we are listening to music. It seems obvious that we mean many things. Listening to Bob Dylan may constitute an interesting example that could in the near future be useful in creating a paradigm for both experimental and survey research on an aspect of cognition. I caution that I am at a very early stage in this work and am mostly developing questions. Also, I am not a scientist; my training is entirely in music and my research is sometimes classified as qualitative sociology, although I plan to collaborate with colleagues from the Brain Sciences Center and Center for Cognitive Sciences at the University of Minnesota.

Any discussion of listening to music must consider the particular circumstances of such audio encounters. I would propose, though, that certain assumptions precede all such encounters. The first of these is that taking in music is never a linear affair in which the listener simply engages with the sounds of a musical work and no others, consecutively, as they unfold. And the listener's attempt to make sense of what she hears – whatever *making sense* of music means – requires memory. This is obvious on a basic level, since all comprehension requires memory, but less so when one complicates the question by asking what memories or types of memory are utilized, in what manner, and at what time. The total listening experience does not begin and end with the rendition of the work.

The kind of listening I am concerned with presents a challenge to testing in laboratory environments with current imaging technology. It is, more or less, what most people think they are doing when they engage deeply with music, to listen with rapt attention. Here, memory can serve either to focus or diffuse the listener's attention into a variety of possible relationships with the work.

If a listener engages with an unfamiliar work, memory might make sense of it by drawing upon a vocabulary of similar sounds and relationships. If a work is familiar, then memory can draw upon an aural imagery that is similar to what is being heard at the moment. I am aware that I am dealing with some unstable terminology here. Musicologists have wondered what precisely constitutes a musical work (Boretz 1970), given that performances may differ radically from each other, even to the point of creating a perception that different interpretations are multiple works. This situation is often more marked in vernacular, often oral and improvisatory, traditions such as folk, blues, and rock – some of the idioms in which Bob Dylan has worked. In classical music it has been claimed that the

notated score is a purer representation of a work than any performance, except perhaps the composer's own. Orality and improvisation are also the foundations of jazz, an idiom in which Dylan has not been involved, although some of his recent compositions evoke the Tin Pan Alley standards that constitute much of the traditional jazz repertoire. In vernacular traditions, different renditions of the same song often constitute recompositions, even radical ones, such as jazz saxophonist John Coltrane's many interpretations of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *My Favorite Things*. In such recomposition, memory may act upon an unfamiliar rendition, a process quite different from the use of memory to decode an unfamiliar work, and important to the manner in which certain listeners hear Bob Dylan.

### VERBALLY MEDIATED VS. MUSICAL LISTENING

My concept of focused versus diffuse listening draws from the work of ethnomusicologist Charles Seeger (1971, p. 392). Seeger posits that there is a distinction between speech knowledge of music and music knowledge. He said of this difference that *Every musician knows that if he knows anything at all*, and of a *'pure' music percept unmediated by speech*. He means by this that one might engage music with the assistance of verbal mediation – to think about it in words – or to know it directly – as sounds and relationships between sounds, free of such mediation. Seeger believed that music might be known by a combination of these methods. I assume he believed that other ways of knowing music – such as visually or tactily – were also possible, or perhaps were included in nonverbal *music knowledge*. Whether he meant that or not, I do.

My music major students tend to believe that unless one knows music verbally, one does not really know it. Doubtless, this has a great deal to do with the manner in which we were taught, as well as the way in which knowledge is believed to reside. It comes up prominently when I am teaching about Mozart and point out some intricate thematic relationship. Because Mozart was an extraordinarily prolific composer and is believed to have conceived entire works before committing them to paper, I am often asked whether he knew that he had made such thematic connections or just wrote what he thought *sounded good*. The assumption is that unless one expresses a musical idea or gesture verbally, such as producing the kind of analytical papers we demand of our music majors, it has

been created without conscious intention. Also implicit in such an observation is that the determination that something *sounds good* is an irrational, primitive, and basic instinct, rather than a reasoned judgment.

I always respond by referencing Seeger and asking the students why, if they hear the relatedness, they believe that Mozart did not, that he simply went with his gut about what sounded good. It seems readily apparent that many of the most gifted musicians, including the best improvisers and the most prolific, and thus fastest, of the great composers, knew what they were doing in the musical, non-verbal manner proposed by Seeger, and which he asserts is among the most fundamental items of wisdom musicians possess. In such rapid artistic production there can be little or no time for verbal mediation, which nearly always slows things down and looms large in what I call diffuse listening.

The kind of engagement with music that I associate with quick studies like Mozart or John Coltrane – who I propose are listening and creating simultaneously – requires that musical sound be tracked fully as it occurs *as sound*, not as verbally mediated ideas about sound. If there is also reflective verbal praxis, it must occur at the same time and not preclude or distract from moment-by-moment attention. I propose that it is not only geniuses who hear this way, but also lay listeners whose verbal mediation is limited by the lack of an extensive theoretical lexicon. Although lay listeners may also verbally mediate using whatever terms they know.

When I refer to diffuse listening, I do not mean situations in which the listener drifts off and loses interest. Rather, I am suggesting that verbal mediation and perhaps other factors inspire a reflective praxis that causes the listener to focus on certain moments while losing others. For me, the paradigmatic example is the Western music composition or theory student who analyzes – and thus mediates – a work as it is heard. During one's musical training, and certainly during the education of a composer or theorist, it is difficult to hear music any other way. Such training can be accompanied by a sense of loss of the enjoyment one had before learning analytical terminology. Sometimes one can internalize theory to such a degree that one returns to a more intuitive, focused listening, enhanced by what has been learned. Consider the line from Garcia Lorca's poem *Se ha llenado de luces mi corazón de seda* that closes composer George Crumb's *Ancient Voices of Children*, in which the singer asks, *Give me back the ancient voice of a child*.

The previous example derives from personal, though hardly unique, experience. It is, however, by no means the only or even the most common one. Nor do I mean to imply that it is an inferior way to hear music, except in the instances when it would impede performance or prolific composition, that is, composition at a speed rivaling performance, in the manner of Mozart, J. S. Bach, or, at times in his career, Bob Dylan. I am also not suggesting that these two ways of listening are an either-or situation. Rather, I believe there is a continuum between these poles wherein most of us listen, and which varies dependent on context.

Anglo-American popular music presents an idiosyncratic case of diffuse listening as a result of verbal mediation because it is nearly always in the form of song. (I am here regarding jazz, predominantly instrumental and often called *America's classical music*, as a category apart from popular music.) Indeed, many of the students I have had over the years in my *non-music major rock music history class* often appear to be nearly unaware of the existence of purely instrumental music and often claim to appraise the relative artistic merit of songs entirely or almost entirely on the basis of lyrics. That they are deluding themselves – given the triviality of many lyrics as well as the students' apparent lack of interest in poetry or other literature — is not central to my concerns here. What matters is that engagement with song texts invites diffuse listening, owing to reflection on the lyrics in the form of verbal thought, and also as visual and perhaps other forms of imagery. Surely an awareness of this kind of reflective listening praxis had much to do with the proliferation of music videos and the escalating priority of visual performance that is responsible for the popularity of, for example, Madonna and Lady Gaga.

### **I FEEL A CHANGE COMIN' ON: LISTENING TO BOB DYLAN**

The intricacy of many of Bob Dylan's lyrics can stop us in our listening tracks and inspire reflection long beyond the duration of an actual performance, recorded or live. This observation may evoke for some the period in Dylan's work that some call *surreal* (Gray 2006, pp 223-224), the songs of the mid-1960s that were inspired by the French Symbolist poets, especially Arthur Rimbaud (Dylan 2004, p. 288), and American Beat poets (Gray 2006, p. 42), one of the headiest lyrics I know, and one that I have meditated on a great deal, appears in *I Feel a Change Comin' On*, the penultimate song

on *Together Through Life* (2009), the artist's most recent album of original songs.

“I'm listening to Billy Joe Shaver  
And I'm reading James Joyce  
Some people they tell me  
I got the blood of the land in my voice”

There's a lot happening in this stanza. This verse contains at least two invitations to the kind of reflection that causes diffuse listening, passages so complex that a listener may stop tracking the sound in the moment. Both the analysis and process through which I created it are, of course, personal, but the results are not esoteric. Nor is this kind of dedication to lyric analysis uncommon, at least for avid Dylan admirers, for whom this kind of performance is commonplace. It has resulted in hundreds, if not thousands, of books and websites such as [www.expectingrain.com](http://www.expectingrain.com), which provides a daily update on Dylan lore and debate.

I ask readers' patience, as what follows may be more about Dylan than cognitive scientists wish to know. It is an illustration of the sort of information overload associated with analyses of particularly heady Dylan lyrics (and, to a lesser degree, the music that supports them), arguably the most important element in the radically diffuse listening associated with the artist's music.<sup>1</sup>

I will offer here an in-depth analysis of the lyrics, and also some salient points regarding the music's role in their expression. I will consider the lyrics to only one chorus of this song, as well as a meta-analysis of the process behind this sort of parsing. This analysis does not attempt to explain what the lyrics *mean*, which, in discussions of song texts, usually involves paraphrasing, an operation that rarely enhances the value of the original. My purpose is primarily to illuminate the lyric's external references and its relationships to earlier Dylan songs.

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<sup>1</sup> Readers who are far more interested in how listening to Bob Dylan offers interesting insights into music listening *per se* than in an actual analysis of a Dylan lyric, may prefer to skim the sections that follow and resume close reading at the section entitled *Listening As Knowing*, or simply note how long an analysis of such a brief Dylan song text (and its music) can be. However, non-Dylan fans, who from my observation, appear to be an overwhelming majority among scholars of cognition (see below), may still benefit from reading the following analysis *in toto*, as it provides an accurate account of how one listener experiences this song fragment as an example of diffuse listening.

## BILLY JOE SHAVER AND JAMES JOYCE

One of the subjects of this lyric and the resulting listening diffusion – the distraction from the musical flow -- is Billy Joe Shaver. Even in my role as the *go-to guy* for old school, American rock music (I regularly teach such a course that I also offer online) on the Twin Cities Campus of the University of Minnesota, I was unaware of Shaver before hearing this song. Perhaps I should be embarrassed by my prior ignorance, as my investigation revealed that Shaver is a highly regarded outlaw country singer and composer (Hoinski 2011). Dylan recorded Shaver's *Old Five and Dimers Like Me* for the 1987 film *Hearts of Fire* (1987), in which he also stars. According to Dylan scholar Clinton Heylin (2011, p. 838),

“The one time [Dylan] overtly used someone else’s song as a springboard for his own – Billy Joe Shaver’s *Ain’t No God in Mexico*, a clear template for *I Feel a Change Comin’ On* – he openly acknowledged the debt to historian Douglas Brinkley.”

Knowing of Shaver and his small though significant relationship to Dylan, leading to a name check in the lyric, is only the first step to understanding the significance of Shaver’s inclusion in the song. Shaver’s name is joined in the next line of the couplet with that of author James Joyce, for me, and probably most Dylan fans, a far more familiar figure. But not only is Joyce better known to the Dylan world, he is also from a different intellectual sphere, that of *high culture*.

Dylan is widely regarded as perhaps the most important artist to have bridged high and popular culture, having had numerous top-selling pop albums and many nominations for the Nobel Prize in Literature. This was evident in the mid-1960s when he famously *went electric*, adopting the orchestration of rock music (Dylan’s trademark harmonica is not standard in rock music, nor is the combination of piano *and* organ), and writing songs in which individual lines often mated low and high culture figures (Marqusee 2003, pp 149-153). For example, on the 1965 album *Highway 61 Revisited*, arguably his most radical, the song *Tombstone Blues* couples blues great Ma Rainey with Beethoven. There is irony in both lyrics, since in each the pop culture figure is less known than the high culture icon.

What makes the juxtaposition of Shaver and Joyce in a song from 2009 even more interesting is that it is a lyric device Dylan has used far less in recent years. Thus, it sounds like a throwback to the music

of his distant youth, this on an album of age-appropriate songs aptly entitled *Together Through Life*. That Shaver and Joyce meet over the course of a couplet rather than a single phrase, as they would likely have done in the 1960s, in an easygoing tempo (*Highway 61 Revisited* is often musically fierce, especially *Tombstone Blues*), and in a bit of what is obviously autobiographical reflection (even the first person songs on the often 'surreal' *Highway 61 Revisited* seem like fantasies), adds an even greater poignancy to this chorus, song, and entire album's sense of a remembrance of things past.

Musically, *Together Through Life* is, by Dylan's own admission, a throwback to, though by no means an imitation of, the sound of the great Chicago-based, black music — blues, rhythm and blues, and early rock n' roll — label Chess Records (Michaels 2009), whose most famous releases date from the 1950s. Dylan scholar Michael Gray (2006, pp 318-321) observes that the same mixture of black music influences, in different proportions, is foundational to the sound of the 1965 landmark album *Highway 61 Revisited*.<sup>2</sup>

## THE BLOOD OF THE LAND

The other question that arises from this lyric chorus is what layers of meaning can be culled from the expression *the blood of the land*. It is almost certainly a pun on *the blood of the Lamb*, a reference to Jesus Christ which comes from Revelation 12:11. The expression revisits the rite of animal sacrifice in pre-rabbinic Temple Judaism in Israel (when actual lambs were sacrificed) in a manner that suggests that the religion of the New Testament has supplanted that of the Old. *Blood of the lamb* recalls the Agnus Dei (Lamb of God) portion of the Ordinary (fixed daily liturgy, the portion set to music by most composers) of the Roman Catholic Mass. It also appears in the familiar Protestant hymn, *Are You Washed in the Blood of the Lamb?* by Elisha A. Hoffman (1878). Protestant hymnody is repertoire that has influenced Dylan's melodic style considerably (Hillburn 2004). Dylan played a recording of the hymn performed by Da Costa Woltz's Southern Broadcasters on Episode 5 (*Blood*) of the third and final season of Theme Time Radio Hour, the Sirius Satellite Radio show Dylan deejayed (Viklund 2008). The title of Hoffman's hymn, though not its music, is used as a refrain Vachel

<sup>2</sup> US Highway 61 runs from Minnesota's Iron Range, where Dylan grew up, to the Mississippi Delta that birthed the blues that have been so important to Dylan throughout his career.



Lindsay's poem *General William Booth Enters into Heaven*, set to music by American composer Charles Ives.

However, even after listening to the recording countless times, until I looked up the lyrics<sup>3</sup>, I did not realize that it was a pun, thinking simply that he was singing *the blood of the Lamb*. One issue this resurrected for me is the much-discussed quality of sound on Dylan's recordings (and also in concert, a subject that will be treated later), which is widely regarded as having been better – that is, clearer, with the words easier to hear – in his earlier recordings. (Negus [2008] is the foremost source on Dylan's recorded sound.) Whether the expression is heard as the pun that it is or the text upon which it is a pun, it evokes several issues in Dylan studies. Most obvious is his *born-again Christian period*, the years 1979-81, and the question of whether Christianity continues to play a role in his spiritual life (Pichaske 2010). But there is also, and I believe more relevantly, the notion of Dylan having been persecuted in what might be portrayed as a Christ-like manner both before and during the period in which he *went electric*. As a young cultural phenomenon of nearly unprecedented proportion, Dylan was frequently harassed by reporters asking obnoxious questions (see the documentary *Don't Look Back*) and assailed by those on the left, such as Irwin Silber in his notorious *An Open Letter to Bob Dylan* in *Sing Out Magazine* (1964), who felt he had abandoned them when his work became more introspective and less overtly political. Lyrically, Dylan references persecution most obviously – though also ambiguously – in his *Rainy Day Women #12 & #35*, from the album *Blonde on Blonde* (1966), whose refrain declares that *Everybody must get stoned*. A simple, out of context reading of the lyrics would seem to refer to the Biblical punishment (though not the one Jesus is said to have endured) had they not first appeared in the druggy 1960s, when other inferences about another meaning of *stoned* (not otherwise apparent in the song) were made. Although drug references make no sense in the context of the whole lyric, Dylan could hardly have been unaware that listeners and critics would make the association.

The closing line of Dylan's chorus, however, refers not to *the Lamb* but *the land*. There is no doubt that *the land* refers to America, the source of nearly all of Dylan's musical influences, in contrast to the eclecticism of the Beatles. (One of the best books on Dylan is US historian Sean Wilentz's *Bob Dylan in America* [2010].) For me, and

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<sup>3</sup> Dylan's song texts are available and searchable on the official website [www.bobdylan.com](http://www.bobdylan.com).

I suspect others, America here is not only *the land* but *this land*, a reference to *This Land Is Your Land*, the best-known song of Dylan's great early influence Woody Guthrie. That Dylan claims in this lyric that he is told by some people that he has the blood of the land in his voice refers to the career-long contention by his critics, now perhaps more than ever with the ravages of age upon him, that his singing is problematic. David Hadju has much to say in *Positively 4th Street* (2002) about the early reception of Dylan as *weird*, owing in large part to his unusual voice (which helped make Anglo-American popular music safe for generations of iconoclastic vocalists), but also to his lyrics and unique stage presence. Even Dylan has said his voice is *bad* (Cott 2006, p. 264)

Beyond the four lines of lyrics in question, the song's *I Feel a Change Comin' On* clearly refers to *A Change is Gonna Come*, by soul music legend Sam Cooke, whose well-known and complex relationship to Dylan (Rolling Stone 2012) adds further layers of meaning to this song. Of additional interest is Seth Rogovoy's fascinating discovery of references to Jewish scripture herein (2009, p. 288). These, however, simply gild the lily in question, which is a pair of rhyming couplets which, with relatively little sleuthing by a knowledgeable but by no means obsessed admirer of the music of Bob Dylan, can generate thousands of words of analysis.

## LISTENING AS KNOWING

The above analysis of a few lines of a Dylan song is not unusual in its depth. Similar discussions abound in books, articles, web pages, blogs, and online chats about Dylan. Many, notably those in Michael Gray's *Bob Dylan Encyclopedia*, are more extensive than mine, and Greil Marcus has even written an entire 200+ page book devoted to a single song, the eponymous *Like a Rolling Stone* (2005). There is nothing else like this corpus of analysis in Anglo-American popular music and, to my knowledge, little like it written about other types of music. It is not only that much has been said, but also that the topics which arise from Dylan studies are wide ranging, and knowing the work of Dylan, even as admirers rather than scholars, is challenging. The most important question for the study of cognition is how possessing all this information affects listening to music or compels new definitions of what it means to listen.

It is hard to imagine that Greil Marcus can ever again listen to *Like A Rolling Stone* without recalling not only the substance of his

book but the work of writing it, or having lived through the turbulent 1960s which it has come to emblemize, memories that would make tracking the music as a moment-by-moment flow impossible. Readers of Marcus's book are likely to share some of that experience. Listening to *I Feel a Change Comin' On*, I invariably rehearse some or all of my analysis, and not only the four lines I discuss here. Were I called upon to perform the song, this could be distracting.

Among Dylan's admirers, the act of researching lyrics, biography, history, and sociology is not the province of professional scholars alone. His lay admirers are often similarly avid, something that can be witnessed on numerous, often constantly updated websites, as well as in the sales of numerous books on and occasionally by Dylan, which are usually more scholarly than other books on popular music and musicians. One must ask whether such research constitutes or at least contributes to *listening*, even at times when the song is not actually being auditioned, but when an aural imagery is recalled. I doubt that many Dylan admirers feel the need to have a song playing in the background as they research it, but it's hard to imagine that they research it without simultaneously forming an aural image.

Another question, to which I believe I know the answer, is how becoming more informed about a song affects the focus and diffusion of subsequent listenings. While one might expect more focused listening once a question has been answered, I suspect that there is still considerable diffusion. It remains possible to fully enjoy a play or a composition from the Classical period such as the Beethoven Fifth Symphony through numerous renditions, despite our knowing *what's going to happen next*. There are several reasons for this, but doubtless one is that we enjoy rehearsing the initial experience and reliving its sense of mystery and subsequent enlightenment. When I return to *I Feel a Change Comin' On*, I invariably replay the manner in which I educated myself to the intricacies of its lyric, though I have no doubt it lessens my ability to track the music moment by moment. This praxis, while worrisome for me as a performer, is surely not problematic for lay listeners, who are freer to use the music as they like.

Thus far, I have presented a generalized idea of focused and diffuse listening, though one that I am reticent to elevate to the status of a theory at this time. It is in part speculation, but it is also informed by my own experience and what I have heard from thousands of my students. I believe that more systematic quantitative research in

the form of surveys and/or experimentation might be both possible and interesting. I look forward to such collaboration with colleagues from the Center for Cognitive Sciences and the Center for Brain Sciences at the University of Minnesota. We have already held discussions of possible magnetoencephalography (MEG) experiments to determine how listening to Bob Dylan may differ neuroanatomically from other musical experiences.

## FINDING THE SONGS

The preceding discussion was of a Dylan example that represents an extreme possibility of diffuse listening prompted by an intricate lyric, its particular intricacies fueled in part by my musical training, a rarity among Dylan scholars, few of whom might reference the Roman Catholic Mass, composer Charles Ives, or both. I will move now to what I regard as the particular circumstances of listening to Bob Dylan, as I perceive it to be practiced by his most enthusiastic admirers, the term I prefer to *fans*, because I believe the relationship they have to Dylan is more serious and complex than for most other musicians. I will conclude by arguing that there may be a unique strategy for listening to Dylan, one that blends focus and diffusion in an extraordinary way.

Dylan has extraordinary fans, some have listened to his music for nearly fifty years. Unlike any of his contemporaries (with the possible exception of singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen), interest in his new work, and not only nostalgia for the old, is at a peak; his last two albums of fresh material have topped the sales charts in both the US and the UK. At age seventy, he retains a punishing touring schedule worldwide. The relationship between his recordings and concert performances will loom large in my characterization of how his admirers listen.

As previously noted, Dylan also straddles the popular culture and art worlds and deserves major credit for having blurred this boundary. He is the subject of many books, whose market appropriately lies between trade titles and scholarly monographs, occupying an extraordinary niche. Many new online postings, often dozens worthy of notice to scholars, appear daily on dedicated websites such as [www.expectingrain.com](http://www.expectingrain.com). Dylan's unusually large recorded legacy, including countless bootlegs, and the voluminous print and online bibliography about and occasionally by him are both responsible for the unusual manner in which he is heard. From both the

records and print/online literature emerge popular conceits that I am confident are wrong.

The first such conceit is the absolute primacy of words over music in Dylan's songs. As a recent essay on Dylan's unparalleled place in academia notes, writings about the artist overwhelmingly emphasize lyrics, with virtually no attention paid to music (Marshall 2009, pp 101-102). Only two of hundreds of books on Dylan seriously engage his music (Marshall 2009, p. 102; Mellers 1985; Negus 2008). A common strategy in Dylan scholarship is to declare him a songwriter rather than a poet, insist that his work must be heard *as music*, and then proceed to virtually ignore the musical elements (Marshall 2009, p. 101-102), even those associated with lyrics such as meter and rhyme. One need not deny the primacy of Dylan's lyrics to ask why, if the works' significance resides in words only, people listen at all or why they attend concerts.

A recently increased element in Dylan's lyrics, though one that has been with him throughout his career, is the use of literary references and quotations, from a remarkably diverse set of sources. Naturally this has been major fodder for Dylan scholars, as they are predominantly English professors or at least English majors who are all about tracking citations, paraphrases, and influences from, for example, Ovid, Confederate poet Henry Timrod, Japanese novelist Junichi Saga (Wilentz 2010, p. 308), Jewish (Rogovoy) and Christian scripture (Gray 2006, pp 696-698), minstrel show lyricists Marshall Pike and James Lord Pierpoint (Wilentz 2010, pp 314-315), and several African-American blues bards (Wilentz 2010, p. 306). Some of this scholarship lays so much literary, cultural, historical, and even political weight on every line that it is possible to forget that the subject is a song in which the words fly by quickly and not always perfectly intelligibly, sung and accompanied by an alluringly good band, and lasting only a few minutes, far less time than it took to read about it and certainly to perform such detective work. It strikes me that there may be an expectation from these scholars that we not only attend more closely to the lyrics as listeners than is humanly possible, but to the implicit footnotes as well. Although I'm often convinced of the veracity of this literary investigation and impressed by the skill and knowledge of the scholars, I'm unsure that any of it figures into even the most diffuse listening or that it enhances musical pleasure. Although I may have saddled the lyric in question with more baggage than its tune can carry, I must note that, other than reading about Billy Joe Shaver and *outlaw country* (Hoinski 2011)

and ascertaining the composer of *Are You Washed in the Blood of the Lamb?*, sifting out the remaining references in the lyric did not require any research on my part other than quiet contemplation of what I already knew, certainly nothing resembling the kind of literary sleuthing that has generated much recent academic writing on Dylan. I can still listen to *I Feel a Change Comin' On* and maintain a reasonable balance between tracking the music in the moment and charting its literary and cultural legacy. When I play my CD, David Hidalgo's elegant accordion solo still matters more to me than faint intimations of Vachel Lindsay and Nehemiah 9 (Rogovoy 2009, p. 288).

Another conceit that looms large in the Dylan world concerns the relative importance of official studio recordings versus bootlegs, mostly of concerts, but also recording sessions (Polito 2004). Dylan has fueled this conceit by declaring that he has no interest in exploiting the resources of the recording studio like the Beatles or Beach Boys (Negus 2008, pp 3-4), and a dislike for its more advanced technological resources (Kleinman and Mogull 2006, pp 315-316), that his studio recordings of songs are not definitive (Negus 2008, p. 4), and that he regards his recordings principally as enticements to lure audiences to his concerts (Kleinman and Mogull 2006, p. 324). Some scholars argue that the countless Dylan bootlegs are a more important recorded legacy than the sanctioned studio efforts (Polito 2004). Hearing Dylan bootlegs was once a matter of privilege, both economic and geographic, the latter because such recordings were not widely available. One needed to be in a major city and, perhaps, to have connections. Owing to the Internet, it is now readily possible for anyone with a modicum of web savvy to access much, if not all, of Dylan's touring activity almost day by day at no cost (Negus 2008, p. 62).

Why this matters so much in formulating a schema of listening is because of Dylan's live performance style of the last two decades. He says almost nothing and never introduces his songs. He radically and continuously revises his interpretations in concert. The degree of recomposition can be so great that even a knowledgeable professional listener may not recognize them. Former Beatle Ringo Starr has been a Dylan fan since the beginning, as well as a friend and sometime artistic collaborator, both live and on record. In a 2007 *Rolling Stone* interview, Starr recounts being backstage at a Dylan concert, at which Dylan asked him to request a song he'd like to hear. Starr requested *Maggie's Farm*, at which Dylan and the band burst

out laughing because they'd already played it before the intermission, in a version that Ringo was unable to recognize. Starr characterized this recurrent situation in Dylan's concerts as an inability to *find the songs*, which the former Beatle regarded as problematic (DeCurtis 2007, p. 67). I will adopt Ringo's colorful terminology from now on.

Ringo's story would be merely an interesting anecdote were it not that Dylan concertgoers also often report not *finding the songs* or *finding* them only with difficulty. This is something Dylan fans are either willing to tolerate or actually enjoy (Negus 2008, p. 148), although some also speak of having stopped attending concerts out of frustration. Among those still ready and willing to *find the songs*, we might assume disappointment at those songs that are never found as well as pleasure in successful finding. The business of song finding – so apparently different from other ways of listening to most popular music – is an area of research that may successfully lend itself to time-sensitive imaging studies, so as to learn what happens at the moment a song is found, particularly in comparison to a parallel event when the music is from a concert performance by an artist for whom song recognition presents no challenge, such as Paul McCartney. Another interesting point of comparison might be between finding a Dylan song and the return of the first theme and original key of a classical symphony by Beethoven or Mozart, in both there appears to be a sense of pleasure imparted in the restoration of the familiar. (Regarding the latter, it would be interesting to learn the difference in reaction using symphonic movements both familiar and unfamiliar to the listener, but with essentially similar forms with regard to theme and key.) I will provide a schema for what I think the process of song finding is like – that is, what it is like for me – but first some background.

Although there are Dylan admirers who claim that his official recordings are of little importance to them, as Dylan himself claims, the circumstances of Dylan's recordings and the process of song finding seem to belie that idea. If one is to *find a song*, which seems a necessary part of enjoying a concert, it needs to be identified with some normative performance to form comparisons. That this would be a familiar studio recording is reinforced by Dylan's practice since 1990 of only premiering new songs on *legit* record releases on his label and never in concert (How Long Has It Been Since Dylan Played... 2012). He has stated that he does this expressly because his concerts are bootlegged (Pareles 2006, p. 394). That is hardly the practice of someone who considers his albums insignificant.

Dylan's studio versus live recordings (especially in the last two decades) differ in that the former establishes a norm against which some concert performances – those songs that are hard to find – deviate. The performance variation that typically makes a song most difficult to find is melodic, particularly if the rhythm of the melody is transformed, and if the phrasing and syncopation are extreme (Negus 2008, pp 148-149). This can obscure the lyrics, which Dylan has been known to change (Negus 2008, pp 48-49). Dylan does this often and some regard his good performances as those which deviate less from the recorded norm, that is, those that sound more like the familiar studio recordings (Weatherford 2011). Dylan seems most likely to play his songs live in easily recognized versions at particularly auspicious events, such as the February 9, 2010 performance of *The Times They Are A'Changin'* at the White House.

Finding the songs does not always depend on finding the melody. Other factors may also serve as crucial clues. In informal experiments, as part of presentations at the 2009 Society for Disability Studies conference and the 2011 Fall Institute of the University of Minnesota Center for Cognitive Sciences, I played a few live performances of Dylan favorites and asked the conferees to identify them. The presentation for the Society for Disability Studies was for a panel on music, where presumably at least some of the twenty or so people in attendance were Dylan fans. Everyone in the audience seemed to recognize the performance of *All Along the Watchtower*, despite its extreme melodic variations, almost entirely different from the original. I attribute this to the song's distinctive harmonic progression, a rarity in Dylan songs, consisting of only three chords, repeated over and over in the same order and in a minor key, a mode which Dylan uses only occasionally. In contrast, no one recognized *Blowin' in the Wind*, certainly one of his best known songs, though one with an undistinguished chord progression. Changing the melody makes finding this song extremely difficult.

When the experiment was repeated at the Center for Cognitive Sciences, whose themes for the year were music and language, there were approximately sixty people in attendance, only about six of whom recognized *All Along the Watchtower*. Again, no one could identify *Blowin' in the Wind*. In both cases, because the marker for *All Along the Watchtower* is the harmony not the melody, and Dylan almost never begins a song without an instrumental introduction, the song was quickly recognized even before the words began.



The process of finding a song, especially one that is radically transformed, is one that requires greatly diffuse listening of a particular kind, different from what has been discussed above. It is a common experience that a popular song performed live needs to be found, since there are rarely printed programs and verbal introductions are sometimes lacking. But many artists of Dylan's generation, including Paul McCartney, The Rolling Stones, and The Who, are virtually exclusively nostalgia acts, whose performances of favorites are very close to the original recordings. Finding such a song rarely takes much time. The process of song finding requires mentally searching one's memory for the right song, which needs to be internally reproduced and heard, probably the most familiar recorded version. This requires listening to two works at once, one virtual – that is, remembered – and one actually being performed.

In a nostalgia concert, this process is brief and easy. The song is readily found and can be enjoyed with whatever combination of focus and diffusion the listener feels. In contrast, nostalgia is impossible when the songs are moving targets and listeners are assigned the challenging task of finding them. In the current millennium, Dylan has performed 207 songs live, not all of them his own compositions (Bob Links 2012), which produces a complicated database to search and mentally audition, while taking in what is being performed in what may be an unfamiliar way. The database is even larger because Dylan sometimes brings long-unperformed songs back into his repertoire that has, at times, included over 500 songs by other composers (Barker 2008). Possible divergences from the familiar original recording include radical rephrasing of the melody, different lyrics, a voice that has shown the ravages of age and overuse (including a precipitous drop in range), and changes in orchestration, tempo, time signature, and key (Negus 2008). That this is an exercise in complex, diffuse listening is an understatement. I have spoken to fellow Dylan concertgoers who agree that undertaking this exercise in song finding is an aspect of concert listening.

Common sense indicates that at least some concertgoers must enjoy this listening experience, and Negus confirms it (2008, p. 148), though certainly in a different way than they might enjoy Paul McCartney's faithful renditions of Beatles songs. I experience something sudden and strong every time I solve such a puzzle at a Dylan concert. I look forward to learning how song finding looks in the brain, in collaboration with my scientist colleagues.

## CLOSING OBSERVATIONS: DISABILITY STUDIES AND INTERMITTENT CLINICAL DEPRESSION

I conclude by *bringing it all back home* to disability studies, the focus of most of my research into how the mind and body relate to music. My experience with the drama of finding — or failing to find — a song is one I initially associated with decades of living with intermittent clinical depression. Surely most readers are familiar with the many television commercials for antidepressants, including those for Zoloft and Abilify, in which the depressive person complains of not feeling like herself or himself. Although these ads are problematic in many ways, for example the use of annoying and condescending cartoons, if the frequency of these commercials is any indication, they are also quite effective in promoting their products. Cartoons aside, since the desire to *feel like myself again* is an apt description of my experience with depression, I assume that part of the success of these ads is their ability to frame the experience of many people.

As soon as I began to explore the process, or perhaps the struggle of finding the songs, I made sense of it by relating it to my own intermittent depression. The initial experience of a song not yet found would be accompanied by a sense of chaos, perhaps more represented (in music) than real, imposed upon live music that was, although internally coherent, frighteningly unfamiliar, while simultaneously frantically running through my aural imagery of the recorded Dylan canon for a match (a found song), the dense and intense combination of real and virtual — that is, remembered — songs evoking the feeling of *not myself*. As fast as possible, I would attempt something akin to reality orientation, indexing the live performance against the *reality* of these canonic songs in their studio versions, music I and many others know well enough to incorporate into our sense of self. Finding a song thus relinquishes the anxiety of unfamiliarity and restores a sense of self.

I am not suggesting that listening to Dylan live resembles the actual experience of a depressive episode and subsequent relief of symptoms, but that the experience provides a narrative shape for the mini-drama that is re-enacted each time one finds or fails to find a song. My speculation on the unique aspects of listening to Bob Dylan arose from an apparently widely shared experience of a *self-not self* binary among people with unipolar depression. Perhaps

others with different intermittent mental disabilities have had similar experiences. My interest in disability studies in music has always derived from a belief that the juxtaposition of musical ability, widely regarded as a great talent or *hyperability*, with disability, would produce findings, principles, theories, and paradigms with broader applications. I hope this has been a step in that direction, and that, with my colleagues, I am on the brink of an interesting and productive avenue of exploration in cognitive science, as well as one that may expand its fan base to include my fellow listeners to Bob Dylan.

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