

DYLAN'S APOCALYPSE:
COUNTRY MUSIC AND THE END OF THE WORLD

A Thesis
by
ADAM CLAY GRIFFEY

Submitted to the Graduate School
Appalachian State University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

August 2011
Department of History

DYLAN'S APOCALYPSE:
COUNTRY MUSIC AND THE END OF THE WORLD

A Thesis

by

ADAM CLAY GRIFFEY

August 2011

APPROVED BY:

Dr. James Goff
Chairperson, Thesis Committee

Dr. Timothy Silver
Member, Thesis Committee

Dr. Michael Wade
Member, Thesis Committee

Dr. Lucinda McCray
Chairperson, Department of History

Dr. Edelma D. Huntley
Dean, Research and Graduate Studies

Copyright by Adam Clay Griffey 2011
All Rights Reserved

ABSTRACT

DYLAN'S APOCALYPSE: COUNTRY MUSIC AND THE END OF THE WORLD. (August 2011)

Adam Clay Griffey, B.A., Berea College

M.A., English, Appalachian State University

M.A., History, Appalachian State University

Thesis Chairperson: Dr. James Goff

At the end of the 1960s, with the United States escalating a war overseas while a revolution stirred at home, Bob Dylan retreated from his public (if unmasked for) role as a spokesman for the political Left, and wrote and recorded two albums of country music. In so doing he merged his abiding interest in the apocalyptic with that of the events of his times. This thesis looks at the history behind *John Wesley Harding* (1967) and *Nashville Skyline* (1969) and argues for their relevance as expressions of both the country music tradition and to the history of apocalyptic prophecy. Chapter I discusses Dylan's place in the lineage of biblical prophecy and eschatological writing. Chapter II does the same for his history within the world of country music and explores how each of the albums came to be recorded. Chapters II and III examine each of the albums individually, through the lens of the Dylan's place in the history of prophecy and eschatological writing. What is revealed is that, rather than simply being a flight from the world's problems, these two albums were a substantive commentary on the state of America and an initial resolution of Dylan's own absorption with the apocalyptic.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My most sincere thanks go out to the members of my committee, Drs. James Goff, Tim Silver, and Mike Wade, who, along with being good men and excellent scholars, helped to fashion a historian – though – *ad impossibilia nemo tenetur*.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	v
Introduction.....	1
Chapter I.....	7
Revolution and Revelation: Bob Dylan and the End of Days	
Chapter II.....	23
Dylan Went Down to Nashville: The Creations of <i>John Wesley Harding</i> and <i>Nashville Skyline</i>	
Chapter III.....	42
Dylan's Country Apocalypse: <i>John Wesley Harding</i>	
Chapter IV.....	58
<i>Nashville Skyline: A Paradise Gained</i>	
Conclusion.....	
Works Cited.....	75
Vita.....	

We are but older children, dear, who fret to find our bedtime near.

-Lewis Carroll

*... Can you tell me where we're headed,
Lincoln County Road or Armageddon?*

Seems like I've been down this road before.

-Bob Dylan

INTRODUCTION

When Bob Dylan travelled to Nashville to record *John Wesley Harding* in 1967, the idea of a rock ‘n’ roll or pop singer making a country album was an absurdity. Ray Charles had come the closest with *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music* (1962), but that was an album of country standards performed not in a country style but in a mix of rhythm & blues, jazz, and pop. Six years later the Byrds, with Gram Parsons leading the way, would release *Sweetheart of the Rodeo* (1968), considered the first major country-rock album. Again, the album consisted mostly of covers, though this time the performances were more traditionally country. It is illustrative that the Byrds chose to both open and close the album with Dylan covers, “You Ain’t Goin’ Nowhere” and “Nothing Was Delivered” respectively.

It was Dylan who, a year before *Sweetheart of the Rodeo* in 1967’s *John Wesley Harding*, showed what a committed rock ‘n’ roll musician could do with the tropes of country music; and who, two years after *John Wesley Harding*, showed how successful that same artist could be within the genre when 1969’s *Nashville Skyline* proved to be a huge hit. Ever since then the country music world has merged with that of rock ‘n’ roll to where it at times seems a strained contrivance to keep them separate. It is not that Dylan invented the country crossover; it is just that he did it so well that he made others see its worth as a method of artistic expression. However, there is no evidence that Dylan had

any interest in paving the way for anyone. He seems to have simply been following a musical passion that had been with him from the beginning.

This thesis will trace that interest and will examine Dylan's relationship to country music and his time in Nashville by exploring the creation of two of his least discussed albums, *John Wesley Harding* and *Nashville Skyline*. It locates these albums within the genre of country music, considered by many to be a departure from Dylan's earlier folk approach, though, as we will see, that is a distinction without great merit. It then asks why and to what purpose Dylan chose this style of music as a vehicle. It does this through the lens of the apocalyptic and through Dylan's relationship to the history of biblical prophecy. Chapter I details Dylan's relationship to the idea of the apocalypse and discusses his religious upbringing as a child in rural Minnesota and his eventual conversion to Christianity. Chapter II makes the case for Dylan as an artist solidly within the tradition of country music, and discusses how this led to the writing and recording of these two albums. Chapters III and IV look at each album and attempt to show how country music was used by Dylan as a means of expressing his own fears and anxieties over a changing world.

Apocalypse

For Dylan, the apocalypse has been a subject of career-long, perhaps even life-long, obsession. What might seem whimsy or coincidence when taken in part appears more cohesive if we consider his career as a whole. It will be useful to examine Dylan's changing perspective on the apocalypse before we proceed to the core of the study, as this development will portray the singer as a clear practitioner of the prophetic spirit, one in a long line of those who self-consciously act as "a voice crying in the wilderness."

In classical Greek the word apocalypse (αποκάλυψις) did not carry the meaning of end times. Rather, for the author and audience of The Apocalypse of John (as well as for other works of apocalyptic literature), the term would have conveyed the meaning of a revelation or unfolding – of secret truths being brought to light. Thus the title of John’s letter to the seven churches of Asia Minor can be rendered with equal accuracy as either The Apocalypse of John or The Revelation of John. However, what was being revealed was God’s plan for humanity and that plan had an end point. That end point, which for John took the form of a final conflagration where the forces of evil would be overwhelmed by those of good, took the name eschaton (εσχατον). Yet for an English-speaking audience the term apocalypse has come to combine these two meanings, and it is within this context that the term will be used in this thesis.

So too the term prophet (προφήτης) has a interesting pedigree. As derived from the Greek its original meaning of “one who speaks before” would have denoted a person capable of foreseeing, of being a kind of soothsayer or fortune teller. Yet the role of the prophet in the Hebrew scriptures was much more than that. A prophet could speak of the future and also of the past, but typically this was to implore the audience to make a profound correction to the present. As the prophet Isaiah proclaimed in his warning to the people of Jerusalem:

Therefore, Sheol has enlarged its appetite
and opened its mouth beyond measure;
the nobility of Jerusalem and her multitude go down,
her throng and all who exult in her.¹

Because the prophetic voice made claims on the future it often carried the burden of prescience, and so the two meanings, just as with the two senses of apocalypse, have

¹ Isaiah 5:14, *New Revised Standard Edition*. Same for all biblical citations.

become fused, united into a new understanding that contains elements of both. This symbiosis is evident in the words of Christ found in each of the synoptic gospels. Known variously as the Olivet Discourse, the Olivet Prophecy, and the Little Apocalypse, it is recorded as being delivered on the Mount of Olives and recounts Jesus' warning of the coming destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down."²

Christ went on to outline the signs that will accompany the End of Days:

When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately . . . nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.³

The lamb of God was here shown to be the same figure who warned, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword."⁴

This was the messianic figure that would have held such appeal for the author of Revelation, who warned of the events that would precede the restoration of that same temple that Jesus promised would soon lie in ruins.

Dylan's own relationship to the prophetic tradition and his place within it has been at best mixed. At times he has pointedly refused such a label, while at others he has practically draped himself in the prophetic mantle. But whatever public protestations he has made, the lyrics speak for themselves. There are periods when he has seemed like a man who wishes for the authority of the prophetic voice, while rejecting the

² Luke 21:5.

³ Luke 21:9-11.

⁴ Matthew 10:34.

responsibility that would accompany such power. In “Long Time Gone” recorded in March 1963, but only released as part of Volume Nine of the Bootleg Series on October 9, 2010, Dylan sang, “I know I ain’t no prophet / And I ain’t no prophet’s son”⁵ in a near direct quotation of the biblical Amos and his declaration, “I am not a prophet nor am I the son of a prophet.”⁶ Seth Rogovoy argues that this was

as revealing a gesture of self-awareness as one would find in Dylan’s early work. In other words, by stating the negative – that he’s not a prophet, before anyone has even suggested he may be one – he’s already implying the opposite: that he *is a prophet*, or at least, that the question of his being a prophet of some sort is relevant.⁷

This duality of self-representation, where he at once refuses the role of prophet while doing so in language that demands the listener think of him in just such a role, is a persistent theme in Dylan’s music. Eventually he would put aside this coyness, if only for a little while, though it would take what Dylan thought of as an actual act of God to bring him to that pass.

This preoccupation with the eschatological, though consistent in Dylan’s music, grew over the course of his career. *John Wesley Harding* was significant as the first time that Dylan approached the topic with an entire album’s worth of material. Rather than short bursts of prophetic language, *John Wesley Harding* dealt explicitly with the apocalyptic over the course of a complete cycle of songs. By employing the tropes of country music on this album and on *Nashville Skyline*, Dylan was able to bring his vision

⁵ Bob Dylan, *Bootleg Series Vol. 9 – The Witmark Demos: 1962 – 1964*, Columbia, 2010.

⁶ Amos 7:14.

⁷ Seth Rogovoy, *Bob Dylan: Prophet, Mystic, Poet* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 54.

of a fallen world redeemable only through the restorative powers of familial and romantic love to a style of music that was capable of sustaining such material.

CHAPTER I:
REVELATION AND REVOLUTION:

BOB DYLAN AND THE END OF DAYS

A young man, hair unruly and seemingly untamable, shades worn like armor, the beguilingly simple arrangement of guitar and harmonica, the incongruous old-man rasp and lyrics just this side of reason – this was the iconic Dylan, the boy-poet, the uneasy voice of youthful rebellion. This was the Dylan of the early 1960s, who had moved to New York City from his Iron Range upbringing in the Midwest town of Hibbing, Minnesota. Though a small town far from the centers of American financial and political power, Hibbing's very marginality had a lasting effect on Dylan. It was a town that had been passed over, that had seen its moment come and go, and whose citizenry were profoundly aware of the ability of time and chance to uproot the very foundations of their lives. As early as 1921 the entire mining town had been packed up and moved miles away when it was discovered that underneath its original site was to be found the finest iron ore in the area. That ore would bring prosperity to the relocated town and would attract a thriving immigrant community to the area. But by 1947, when Dylan's parents returned with their young son to Hibbing after a brief sojourn in Duluth, the town was already sinking into economic obscurity as a consequence of the declining need for iron following the end of the Second World War.⁸

As a member of a Jewish minority in a small midwestern town, Dylan's religious upbringing was somewhat ambiguous. The Jewish community in Hibbing was small, numbering less than three hundred, yet it seems to have been a close-knit group. Both Dylan and his brother David attended Hebrew school, and the community was able to

⁸ Clinton Heylin, *Bob Dylan: Behind the Shades Revisited* (New York: Harper, 2001), 5-8.

fund a synagogue. Dylan's bar mitzvah was well attended, with over four hundred guests celebrating the ceremony on May 22, 1954, many having made the trip from Duluth and Minneapolis. Yet there is no evidence that Dylan ever self-identified as a religious Jew.⁹ Certainly by the time he had moved to New York City and began his songwriting in earnest, his biblical interest seemed mostly literary, with his allusions coming just as readily from the New Testament as from the Hebrew scriptures. Despite this, Dylan's early training in the practice of biblical exegesis would serve him well when he began his own personal religious explorations. Indeed, there has been speculation that he began studying Lubavitcher Judaism with a rabbi in the early 1980s. This branch of the Hasidic movement emphasizes the study of Kabbalah and a belief in the direct and constant intervention of God in the world. Interestingly enough, it is also a movement that concerns itself with Messianism, a belief that might have interested a Christian convert like Dylan. There have even been rumors that he recorded an album of Hasidic songs, though no such album has ever been released.¹⁰

New York City

It was from this midwestern landscape and the malaise of his desultory studies at the University of Minnesota that Dylan escaped in January 1961 to start over in New York City. From coffee shop politics and the folk revival a new more confident Dylan emerged. Though his first album, the self-titled *Bob Dylan* (1962) was mostly a series of covers, Dylan soon found himself enmeshed in the politics of the 1960s. It is hard to say how authentic this early persona was; certainly Dylan was heavily influenced by those around him and was greatly affected by their interests. Biographer Clinton Heylin

⁹ Rogovoy, *Dylan: Prophet, Mystic, Poet*, 24.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 225.

identifies Dylan's early girlfriend Suze Rotolo as the major influence on his lyrical output during his more "political" years. Heylin quotes Eve MacKenzie who explained, "Suze ... wanted him to go Pete Seeger's way. She wanted Bobby to be involved in civil rights, and all the radical causes Seeger was involved in. Suze was very much with the cause ... She influenced Bobby considerably that way."¹¹ However, if this early Dylan was like an actor trying on different costumes, still there was in embryo his abiding interest in the overwhelming of the established order. That interest continued throughout his career, though in the beginning it was one of fierce ambivalence. In "The Times they Are a-Changin'" from the 1964 album of the same name, Dylan sang of the need for revolutionary generational change in a direct and confrontational style.

Come mothers and fathers
Throughout the land
And don't criticize
What you can't understand
Your sons and your daughters
Are beyond your command
Your old road is rapidly agin'
Please get out of the new one if you can't lend your hand
For the times they are a-changin.'¹²

The necessity and inevitability of a generational shift, where the tired ways of one generation give over to that of the energy of youth, were codified in that refrain. The end rhyme of agin' and changin' acted as a kind of consummation of change, not just of one age for another, but towards a whole new way of thinking.

However, there was a darker side to Dylan's anxious understanding of the near future. Part of what he believed needed to be swept away was the world's inclination

¹¹ Ibid., 90.

¹² All subsequent lyrics quoted from Bob Dylan, *Lyrics: 1964-2001* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 81.

towards violence and the use of force as a fundamental aspect of humanity's interrelationships. This type of change was necessary in light of the actual non-metaphorical threats that the world faced. In "A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall" from the album *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* (1963), he created a litany of bewildering and oppressive sights, all culminating in the knowledge that "it's a hard rain's a-gonna fall."¹³ In this song the destruction of man seemed just as inevitable as the ordination of a second generation into its rightful place as the engine of cultural change did in "The Times They Are a-Changin'."

And yet, as though prefiguring his 1979 conversion to a severe interpretation of Christianity that anticipated God's judgment on His people, there were moments when Dylan looked on the possibility of apocalyptic change with a kind of glee. With the same severity that led Dante to cast his enemies into the torments of hell, Dylan sang of judgment in "When the Ship Comes In":

Then they'll raise their hands
Sayin' we'll meet all your demands
But we'll shout from the bow your days are numbered
And like Pharoah's tribe
They'll be drowned in the tide
And like Goliath, they'll be conquered.¹⁴

In this brief retelling of two of the events of the Bible, the poet took on the role of prophet, as he reveled in the triumph of God over the sinful. Dylan and Joan Baez would perform this song as part of the March on Washington, where Martin Luther King Jr. gave his "I Have a Dream Speech" on August 23, 1963. Yet as Baez described in the documentary *No Direction Home*, this vengeful screed did not originate from some

¹³ Dylan, *Lyrics*, 59.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 94.

profound revolt against the powers that be. Rather, it came from Dylan having initially been refused entry to a hotel because he looked too “unwashed.”¹⁵

Behind Dylan’s pronouncements, many of which can take on the form of a beguiling universality, there is often a humble and even absurd catalyst. But the prophetic tradition cannot be divorced from the concern of individuals, though we might hope for a more moving cause than a rude hotel clerk. The John of Revelation was himself writing out of either imprisonment on the island of Patmos, or else as a missionary to the prisoners held there by the Roman Empire. The prophetic has always been deeply personal and does not necessarily concern itself with objectivity. At its heart the prophetic spirit often arises out of a sense of personal grievance, or of individual experience, which is then reflected onto the society as a whole.

At Work in the World

As though a warm-up to his 1979 conversion to Christianity, Dylan’s album from the year before, *Street Legal* (1978), contained some of the most intense testaments to his abiding interest in the coming apocalypse. Rather than diminishing as a result of age or maturity, Dylan’s fascination with an eschatological understanding of history only increased during these years. In “The Changing of the Guards,” the opening track on the album, he began in the apocalyptic mode.

Gentlemen, he said
I don’t need your organization, I’ve shined your shoes
I’ve moved your mountains and marked your cards
But Eden is burning, either brace yourself for elimination
Or else your hearts must have the courage for the changing of the guards.¹⁶

¹⁵ *No Direction Home: Bob Dylan*, Directed by Martin Scorsese (New York: Paramount, Sept 20, 2005.)

¹⁶ Dylan, *Lyrics*, 384.

This messianic figure had the power to move mountains and yet it was up to the listener to change his own heart. The consequences were dire, as elimination was the promised end for those who lacked the courage that Dylan felt was necessary for the transformation of the society of men into that of Christ. He went on to promise,

Peace will come
With tranquility and splendor on the wheels of fire
But will bring us no reward when her false idols fall
And cruel death surrenders with its pale ghost retreating
Between the King and the Queen of Swords.¹⁷

“The Changing of the Guards” was an apocalypse in miniature. What later became explicit in Dylan’s gospel-tinged albums was here presented with a density of language and symbolic representation that was akin to that overarching progenitor of all of his eschatological thinking, the Apocalypse of John.

In “Señor (Tales of Yankee Power),” Dylan took this even further. Rather than claiming the artist’s prerogative to an imaginative interpretation of events, he publically insisted on a kind of direct revelation in the writing of this song. He began by speaking to a mysterious and unnamed man who briefly and inexplicably joined him during his trip.

Señor, señor, do you know where we’re headin’?
Lincoln County Road or Armageddon?
Seems like I been down this way before
Is there any truth in that, señor?¹⁸

Indeed, Dylan had been down this road before, many times in fact. What was unique about this song was the way he introduced it during performances. He would tell various audiences during his 1978 tour, in more or less abbreviated forms, of an encounter that

¹⁷ Ibid., 384.

¹⁸ Ibid., 390.

occurred while he was riding on a train from Monterey to San Diego. During his trip he met a stranger:

[The man wore] nothing but a blanket. He must have been about 150 years old. And anyways, I kept looking at him in the mirror. I felt this strange vibration so I turned to look at him. When I turned and looked at him both his eyes were burning. There was smoke coming out of his nostrils. I immediately turned away, but I kept thinking that this was a man that I wanted to talk to. So I waited a little while longer and the train pulled out of the station. Then [when] I turned to talk to him, he'd disappeared. I searched for him at the next town, but he was gone.¹⁹

It is impossible to know how much credence to give to this story, or even how much of it Dylan himself believed. Was it simply a convenient way to introduce his narrative, or was there really a meeting on a train (perhaps that slow train comin' up around the bend) that brought on these powerful visions? Could Dylan's excessive drinking during this period have played a role? Regardless, the message of impending judgment was direct and forceful. Dylan had met his John the Baptist out in the deserts of the world, and though the man had not spoken to him, had not, as it were, revealed anything other than his own mysterious presence, still it was enough for him to once again attest to his own prophetic vision.

The Cause of Christ

Perhaps he should have been on the road to Damascus and not sitting in a hotel room in Texas but, regardless of the place, in the winter of 1978 Dylan experienced an ecstatic vision of Jesus Christ. "There was a presence in the room that couldn't have been anybody but Jesus ... Jesus put his hand on me. It was a physical thing. I felt it. I felt it all over me. I felt my whole body tremble. The glory of the Lord knocked me down and

¹⁹ Clinton Heylin, *Still on the Road: The Songs of Bob Dylan, 1974-2006* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2010), 104.

picked me up.”²⁰ This moment of divine revelation happened after a seemingly insignificant moment when, while performing in San Diego on November 15, he picked up a silver cross that someone had cast up onto the stage. Dylan’s new faith, generally met by those outside the community of believers with incredulity and derision, led to a period of intense biblical study and a turn to gospel music. It was a period that perplexed many of his critics. Kurt Loder reflected this bewilderment in a 1980 *Rolling Stone* review: “Of all Bob Dylan’s public personae over the past nineteen years, none has more confounded his long-time admirers than his latest incarnation as a born-again Christian. Unveiling his new and obviously heartfelt beliefs on last year’s *Slow Train Coming*, Dylan was a perfect caricature of a Bible-thumping convert.”²¹ Loder was not alone in his dissatisfaction with Dylan’s post-conversion beliefs. Seth Rogovoy has argued that “to admirers who remained locked in their view of Dylan as an avatar of leftward opposition to the political mainstream, this seemed the worst kind of betrayal at a time when the religious right was growing increasingly powerful in American politics, culminating in the election of Ronald Reagan as president in 1980.”²²

And yet, though it is often considered the beginning of a fallow period in his career, the gospel ruminations of *Slow Train Coming* offered some of the most compelling music and most straightforward declarations of Dylan’s faith and worldview. As he implored his audience on “Slow Train,” “They talk about a life of brotherly love show me someone who knows how to live it / There’s a slow, slow train comin’ up

²⁰ Heylin, *Behind the Shades Revisited*, 491.

²¹ Kurt Loder, “Review of *Saved*,” *Rolling Stone Magazine*, September 18, 1980, <<http://www.rollingstone.com/music/albumreviews/saved-19800918>> Accessed April 12, 2011.

²² Rogovoy, *Dylan: Prophet, Mystic, Poet*, 189.

around the bend.”²³ For the Dylan of the late seventies, the idea of an apocalyptic conclusion to the world was not one of lyric borrowing or metaphorical rumination; rather, it was a revealed truth. That gospel train, though attentive to a schedule unknown to mortal men, was sure to arrive eventually. As a student at the Vineyard School of Discipleship from January to April of 1979 in Reseda, California, Dylan came under the influence of the writings of Hal Lindsay, author of the best-selling *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970).²⁴ The Vineyard Fellowship’s pastor Bill Dwyer reflected on this relationship:

Our church was definitely focused on the end times....Hal Lindsey hung around the church as well, and I guess Bob was very interested in this topic and talked to various people. [Though] he did not take a course on the end times...I was a little surprised by *Slow Train* and how much Bob had adopted an end-times message.²⁵

Dylan was not shy about declaring his belief in the coming eschaton, as he demonstrated during a December 5, 1979, performance in Albuquerque, New Mexico:

²³ Dylan, *Lyrics*, 407.

²⁴ Hal Lindsay, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1970). Lindsay is still a vocal figure in evangelical circles, and a strong proponent of eschatological readings of contemporary events. In an article published on August 1, 2008 titled “How Obama Prepped World for Apocalypse” for *World Net Daily*, Lindsey commented on a speech then candidate Obama gave to a large German audience: “Obama is correct in saying that the world is ready for someone like him – a messiah-like figure, charismatic and glib and seemingly holding all the answers to all the world’s questions... And the Bible says that such a leader will soon make his appearance on the scene. It won’t be Barack Obama, but Obama’s world tour provided a foretaste of the reception he can expect to receive. He will probably also stand in some European capital, addressing the people of the world and telling them that he is the one that they have been waiting for. And he can expect as wildly enthusiastic a greeting as Obama got in Berlin. The Bible calls *that* leader the Antichrist. And it seems apparent that the world is now ready to make his acquaintance.”

²⁵ Interviewed in Michael J. Gilmour, *The Gospel According to Bob Dylan: The Old, Old Story for Modern Times* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 90.

You know we're living in the end times. I don't think there's anybody ... who doesn't feel that in their heart ... I told you "The Times They Are a-Changin'" and they did. I said the answer was 'Blowin' in the Wind' and it was. I'm telling you now Jesus is coming back, and He is ... Jesus is coming back to set up his kingdom in Jerusalem for a thousand years.²⁶

Though Dylan did not claim to know the exact time of Jesus' return, he was passionate in his belief that it would come and that it would come soon. During this period he could not have been more straightforward in his positioning of himself in the prophetic mold. He specifically cited his own past as a leader in order to burnish his credentials as a speaker of truths whose words should be heeded. If Dylan was reticent in his early years to take on the role of prophet or leader, during the time of his religious conversion he reversed this position, desiring nothing more than to spark a new evangelical movement among his fans and to convert each of them to his new faith.

At the same time Dylan contended that this faith was in some sense an outgrowth of beliefs he had long held. Speaking of his conversion and time at the Vineyard Fellowship, he told a reporter in 1985:

What I learned in Bible school was just ... an extension of the same thing I believed in all along, but just couldn't verbalize or articulate. Whether you want to believe Jesus Christ is the Messiah is irrelevant, but whether you're aware of the messianic complex, that's ... important ... People who believe in the coming of the Messiah live their lives right now, as if He was here.²⁷

Dylan would explain this period in his life without explaining it away, saying, "That [born again period] was all part of my experience. It had to happen. When I get involved in something, I get totally involved. I don't just play around on the fringes."²⁸ This commitment did not end with *Slow Train Coming*. Dylan followed up this album with

²⁶ Heylin, *Behind the Shades*, 499.

²⁷ Quoted in Heylin, *Behind the Shades Revisited*, 498.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 497.

two more albums that spoke to his newfound faith, 1980's *Saved* and, to a lesser degree, 1981's *Shot of Love*.

Twilight of an Idol

The years subsequent to Dylan's overtly gospel albums saw a diminution in his public displays of evangelicalism but no conclusion to his interest in exploring the idea of end times. In *Time Out of Mind* (1979), the fire and fury of his earlier years gave way to a more meditative outlook. He spoke of the personal apocalypse that every soul must experience. There was no great rush, no sprinting acceptance with arms open, no euphoria. He affirmed in "Highlands" that, "my heart's in the Highlands / I'm gonna go there when I feel good enough to go."²⁹ Death, and death's embrace were a given, as were a kind of recasting of the green fields of Elysium. Yet Dylan held himself back, unwilling to leave the small delights and quotidian pleasures of the world.

I see people in the park forgetting their troubles and woes
They're drinking and dancing, wearing bright-colored clothes
All the young men with their young women looking so good
Well, I'd trade places with any of them
In a minute, if I could.³⁰

The singer seemed sad, burdened by the worries of creeping old age. Death was a shadow just outside of his periphery, and while it was a destination that could not be avoided, neither was it a source of terror or despair.

Well, my heart's in the Highlands at the break of day
Over the hills and far away
There's a way to get there and I'll figure it out somehow
But I'm already there in my mind
And that's good enough for now.³¹

²⁹ Dylan, *Lyrics*, 571.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 573.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 573.

“Highlands” evoked a kind of reverie, a kinship with the next world that was not typically present in rock music, but which held a central place in the world of country music, a world that traditionally looked to the hereafter as a confirmation of God’s plan not just for the world, but also for the individual soul. Dylan himself had a brush with this next world after the recording of *Time Out of Mind* when he was diagnosed with pericarditis, a condition where the sac that surrounds the heart is inflamed and cannot accommodate the heart’s expansion as it fills with blood. In the second edition of *Down the Highway: The Life of Bob Dylan*, Howard Sounes reported,

The condition was caused by a fungal infection, histoplasmosis. *Histoplasma capsulatum* is a fungus that grows in soil enriched with bird droppings in certain parts of the Midwestern and Southeastern states, and along the Ohio and Mississippi River valleys. When the ground is disturbed, fungus spores float into the air and can be inhaled. Bob had taken a motorcycle ride through a swampy area in the South while on tour. A storm had blown up – which might have disturbed the fungus – and he had to ride through a foggy area to get back to his bus. He was convinced this was when he had breathed in the spores. If he had been properly diagnosed initially, the illness would not have been serious.³²

Though doing so was blatantly anachronistic, critics and journalists would attribute *Time Out of Mind*’s somber tone to Dylan’s health problems, even though the album was finished before his brush with death. When asked whether or not he would have “regarded it as a satisfactory final chapter,” Dylan replied, “No, I don’t think so. I think we are just starting to get my sound on disc, and I think there’s plenty more to do. We just opened up that door at that particular time, and in the passage of time we’ll go back in and

³² Howard Sounes, *Down the Highway Revised: The Life of Bob Dylan* (New York: Grove Press, 2011), 420.

extend that. But I didn't feel like it was an ending to anything. I thought it was more the beginning.”³³

Dylan's Country Apocalypse

Following Dylan's early years and prefiguring his Christian conversion fell two albums that, at least at first, seemed to have little to connect them. Yet each came through the hit-factory of Nashville, each stood firmly in the tradition of popular country music, and each was a rumination on what it is that is most essential to the spirit of man, as well as those things that betray humanity's poverty of spirit. *John Wesley Harding* was an album of simple arrangements, whose lyrics were dark and overwhelmingly portentous. The hand of God was most noticeable in its absence, and everywhere mankind was adrift, as though every person were his own Cain, each banished from the presence of his fellows.

By contrast, in *Nashville Skyline* Dylan took the superb musicianship of Nashville and created his most beguilingly simple and most love-obsessed album to-date. The lyrics revealed a sense of personal joy and generosity of spirit that could not have seemed less likely to come from the man who produced the dark and forlorn album that preceded it. Yet joy too is part of the story of the apocalypse, albeit a joy that rests on the exclusion of those who do not accept the rule that is being instituted. *John Wesley Harding* was about a society that was falling apart; *Nashville Skyline*, about the love that could bind that society together. It may be impossible to say whether the motivation force of the world is

³³ "Maximum Bob," Interview with Murray Engleheart. *Guitar World Magazine*, March 1999, <<http://www.interferenza.com/bcs/interw/1999guitar.htm>>. Accessed April 12, 2011.

love or inertia, but these two albums suggest that, at least for Dylan, the darkness of the one was necessary for an appreciation of the illumination of the other.

CHAPTER II:
DYLAN WENT DOWN TO NASHVILLE:
THE CREATIONS OF *JOHN WESLEY HARDING* AND *NASHVILLE SKYLINE*

*I really couldn't decide which I liked the best,
country or blues. So I suppose I ended up by becoming
a mixture of Hank Williams and Woody Guthrie.*

--Bob Dylan

Under the brilliant stage lights Dylan seemed calm, professional, or at least passably so. But the composed veneer belied the riot under the surface. With one exception it had been years since he had performed in public, and this was not just any show, not just any audience. His old friend Johnny Cash had invited him to perform on the premier of his eponymous show, broadcast to the nation on June 17, 1969, from the Ryman Auditorium, the home of the Grand Ole Opry, buried like a heart in the body of Nashville. More than this though, there were Dylan's own private fears to contend with. He was still recovering, if not physically then certainly psychologically, from the motorcycle accident that had occurred on July 29, 1966 and had left him suffering from a concussion and several broken vertebrae. This, coupled with his growing apprehension over his celebrity, had led to his retreat from the prying eyes of obsessed fans.

The Johnny Cash Show was not broadcast live, though it was performed in front of an audience, and so during his set Dylan ran through his numbers, and later he and Cash performed a duet on "Girl from the North Country," the opener for his recently

released *Nashville Skyline*. Within the music and while performing, Dylan could at least fake the calm necessary for a man who had achieved a level of fame incomprehensible to most people. Yet his acceptance by this new audience was still in doubt, as was his relationship with his old one. Cash himself recalled how on stage initially “they had an old shack hanging from wires behind him to try to give it a backwoods look. He came off stage upset. He said, ‘I’m gonna be the laughing stock of the business. My fans are gonna laugh in my face over that thing.’”³⁴ Dylan later confessed that he “was scared to death.”³⁵ After the show he quickly retired to the relative obscurity of a Nashville club, where, surrounded by Cash, June Carter, Joni Mitchell, and Graham Nash, he faded into the background. Nashville was most assuredly not his town.³⁶

The Myth of Country Music

One area where questions of definition arise is in the convergence of art and the marketplace. As soon as art becomes a commodity we require a way to sell it, to market it, and to categorize it. The idea of “country music” having a unique and intelligible existence divorced from other forms of music served this purpose. It was the record companies who first conceived of the idea of “country music” when they began looking for new customers in the early 1920s.³⁷ Searching out talent in the rural southeast that might appeal to the displaced masses of migrant workers who had journeyed to the cities looking for work, the music industry discovered that this “new” brand of music sold well. However, if country or “hillbilly” music had its origins in a kind of mythic treatment of

³⁴ Peter Doggett, *Are You Ready for the Country: Elvis, Dylan, Parsons and the Roots of Country Rock* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 5.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 5-9.

³⁷ Paul Kingsbury, “Introduction,” *The Encyclopedia of Country Music: The Ultimate Guide to the Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), ix.

southern, white, Protestant, God-fearing, rural, poor folk, it has since diversified, without ever losing its assumed foundation radiating from some kind of primitive rural origin.

The Encyclopedia of Country Music provides a lengthy list of the types of music that have been placed under the larger heading of country music: “many styles of music now fall under the broad rubric known as country music: old-time, honky-tonk, western swing, Cajun, bluegrass, rockabilly, country-pop, country-rock, folk-country, new traditionalism, hot country, and even insurgent or alternative country.”³⁸ So broad a definition encompasses such a diverse range of musical styles that it would seem to accommodate any type of music that self-identifies as country, and even some that refuse the label. Still, the nebulous idea of country music persists, ill-defined and mutable, and it can be announced by certain signifiers that let the audience know what to expect. Perhaps the most potent of these symbols of the production of country music is Nashville itself.

To say that Bob Dylan was embracing country music when he went to Nashville to record *John Wesley Harding* in October of 1967 would be to imply that he had ever been separated from it. Dylan was always more than a mere fan of folk or traditional music and more than once had demonstrated his encyclopedic knowledge of the history of early American and European musical styles. In 1968 he told *Newsweek* magazine, “I was always with the traditional song. I just used electricity to wrap it up in.”³⁹ By going to Nashville and utilizing their recording spaces and their session musicians, Dylan was making a conscious effort to make something that could find a home within the country

³⁸ Kingsbury, ix.

³⁹ Quoted in Robert Shelton, *No Direction Home: The Life and Music of Bob Dylan* (New York: Beech Tree Books, 1986), 399.

community. In his May 1968 review in *Rolling Stone*, Jann Wenner wrote in an article titled “Country Music Goes to the Heart of Dylan Songs” that “country and western music ... is an idiom that is at the historical core of rock & roll and has returned, with Bob Dylan’s *John Wesley Harding*, to the spiritual core of contemporary rock & roll.”⁴⁰ In writing the songs that made up *John Wesley Harding*, Dylan was paying old musical debts, a point underscored by the timing of the recording; his personal musical hero, Woody Guthrie, had died only two weeks previously. Later, when he recorded *Nashville Skyline*, Dylan went even further into Nashville culture, aping the soft crooning voice and heavy production of the Nashville Sound. However, despite Dylan’s Nashville immersion and his utilization of it and its attendant symbols as heralds of an interest in country music, he still retained his distinct style of partial embrace, partial rejection. That essential ambivalence on his part was the same for his relationship towards any establishment, be it folk, rock ‘n’ roll, or country. Contrariness has run through Dylan’s history to such a degree that at times it has seemed impossible to tell whether or not he is doing what he is doing out of artistic self-assurance, or simply out of a desire to be difficult. There are innumerable examples of producers begging Dylan to include songs on albums, only later to see them appear on “Bootleg” releases. But it is just this type of obstinacy that has enabled the man to create songs and albums that defy the expectations of his critics.

John Wesley Harding

After the electric albums of the early 1960s, which began with 1965’s *Bringing It All Back Home*, Dylan was ready for a change. Having chased that “wild mercury

⁴⁰ Jann Wenner, “Country Tradition Goes to the Heart of Dylan Songs,” *Rolling Stone Magazine*, May 25, 1968, 1.

sound” and perfected it on *Blonde on Blonde*, he moved in a dramatically different direction.⁴¹ Pointing out the antagonistic approach the artist was taking to the prevailing worldview adopted by his fans, Nigel Williamson wrote that “Dylan could not have made a record further removed from the psychedelic spirit of 1967 than *John Wesley Harding*. While the hippies declared love and peace and wore flowers in their hair, Dylan married the outlaw mythology of the Old West to Old Testament allegory.”⁴²

Though songs populated with drifters, cowboys, and hobos would be nothing new to country music fans, it was a stretch to include figures such as Saint Augustine of Hippo and invented characters like Frankie Lee and Judas Priest. Yet of all audiences, the conservative and church-going fans of country music were perhaps uniquely qualified to parse the dense biblical and theological references that filled the songs on *John Wesley Harding*. By one estimation there were at least sixty-one specific allusions to the Bible on the album.⁴³ Language and images that might be dismissed as fantastical or purely metaphorical would have been taken quite seriously by a people for whom such language was a weekly if not daily experience. Dylan sang of sin and redemption, of characters from the Old and New Testaments, and of a world hurtling head-long towards an apocalyptic future brought about by mankind’s moral failures and by God’s divine plan. When Satan was no mere metaphor, but an actual agent at work on earth, the listener’s relationship to songs that deal with the presence of evil in the world was substantially different. At this point in his career and life Dylan seems to have used the Bible mostly as a resource rather than a model for life, but even as a source for imagery and language he

⁴¹ Ron Rosenbaum, “Interview,” *Playboy*, March 1978, 11.

⁴² Nigel Williamson, *The Rough Guide to Bob Dylan* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 210.

⁴³ Heylin, *Behind the Shades Revisited*, 285.

seems to have taken it with extreme seriousness. According to Beatty Zimmerman, Dylan's mother, while writing *John Wesley Harding* "he had a huge Bible opened on a raised wooden bookstand, and the songs of Hank Williams near at hand."⁴⁴ Such an image perfectly encapsulates the foundations for the imagery in *John Wesley Harding*. More would go into the creation of the album, but that merger of the original, country outlaw with the apocalyptic rhetoric of scripture would be central to Dylan's vision.

The lyrical content of *John Wesley Harding* is a strange mixture of the familiar and the bizarre. The title track, which opens the album, is a fairly straightforward outlaw ballad. It recounts the life of Harding as a kind of hero quest, a cowboy criminal whose intentions were always good.

John Wesley Harding
Was a friend to the poor.
He trav'led with a gun in ev'ry hand.
All along this countryside
He opened many a door
But he was never known
To hurt an honest man.⁴⁵

Yet the very next song, "As I Went Out One Morning," takes us into the world of dream allegory when Dylan sings,

As I went out one morning
To breath the air around Tom Paine
I saw the fairest damsel
That ever did walk in chains."⁴⁶

Of this song Greil Marcus commented in his album review:

I sometimes hear the song as a brief journey into American history; the singer out for a walk in the park, finding himself next to a statue of Tom Paine, and stumbling across an allegory: Tom Paine, symbol of freedom

⁴⁴ Quoted in Heylin, *Bob Dylan: Beyond the Shades Revisited*, 285.

⁴⁵ Dylan, *Lyrics*, 221.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 222.

and revolt, co-opted into the role of Patriot by textbooks and statue committees, and now playing, as befits his role as Patriot, enforcer to a girl who runs for freedom — in chains, to the South, the source of vitality in America, in America's music.⁴⁷

Of course none of this information is necessary for an enjoyment of the song. The most pervasive theme of the album is that of the plight of simple people, whether they be the hapless characters of “The Ballad of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest,” the latter of whom expires after a long, vigorous session in a brothel, or the many hobos and drifters who somehow find a way to elude capture. Occasionally this is a result of their own wiles, but so too it may be brought about by the intervention of mysterious forces. We hear this at the conclusion of “The Drifter’s Escape,” when Dylan sings of a homeless man who is the subject of a criminal investigation and is being tried in a court of law. Before judgment can be handed down, the narrator recounts,

“The trial was bad enough
But this is ten times worse”
Just then a bolt of lightning
Struck the courthouse out of shape
And while everybody knelt to pray
The drifter did escape.⁴⁸

By centering his songs on the outcasts from society Dylan was following a long tradition of country songwriting. In *Southern Music/American Music*, Bill Malone and David Stricklin argued that “the tradition of the drifter, the rounder, and even the lawless man, preceded the period of commercialization and constituted a thread in the music from Jimmie Rodgers in the 1920s and ‘30s.”⁴⁹ In the world of *John Wesley Harding*, these

⁴⁷ Quoted in Tim Riley, *Hard Rain: A Dylan Commentary* (New York: Da Capo, 1999), 177-8.

⁴⁸ Dylan, *Lyrics*, 228.

⁴⁹ Bill C. Malone and David Stricklin, *Southern Music/American Music*, 2nd Ed. (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 138.

characters are not relegated to supporting roles; rather, they are the heart of the album, and their lives constitute the battleground of the spiritual war that is taking pace within its songs.

This preoccupation with drifters and hobos was no quaint affectation on Dylan's part, as another profound influence from the world of country music, if not Nashville, was Woody Guthrie. Guthrie's death only two weeks prior to the recording of *John Wesley Harding* came after a long battle with Huntington's chorea. When Dylan had moved to New York City in early 1961, one of the prime motivating factors had been a desire to meet Guthrie. It is not enough to say that Dylan identified with the elder musician. Guthrie's influence on the young songwriter was profound. Jim Miller argued that "Dylan almost obsessively identified with Guthrie. He would listen to Guthrie's famous Dust Bowl ballads endlessly, mastering his Oklahoma twang, mimicking his vocal style."⁵⁰ Those vocal stylings and concern with the landscape as a magnifying force for human misery alongside epiphanic moments of the transcendent came across powerfully in songs like "All Along the Watchtower," with its vision of an embattled city outside of which there are mysterious riders and the dangers of the wilderness.

During those early years in New York, Dylan met often with Guthrie, playing both his own songs as well as Guthrie's, as his musical hero's physical condition no longer permitted Guthrie to play. After *John Wesley Harding* was released, Dylan attended a memorial concert for Guthrie held on January 20, 1968 at Carnegie Hall. He performed three of Guthrie's songs, "Grand Coulee Dam," "I Ain't Got No Home," and "Dear Mrs. Roosevelt." Guthrie's importance was underscored by the rarity of a public

⁵⁰ Jim Miller, "Bob Dylan," *Witness 2* (Summer/Fall 1988): 2-3.

appearance by Dylan at this point in his career. It had been almost two years since he had last played in public, and it would be almost as long again before he resumed touring.⁵¹ His life was intensely and purposefully reclusive during these years, and to break out of that silence and perform in public required a great stimulus.

The reason for this extended hiatus also had bearing on the content of *John Wesley Harding*. Eighteen months earlier, riding near his home in Woodstock, New York, Dylan wrecked his motorcycle, leaving him either incapable of touring, or at least with a convenient excuse to follow his reclusive inclinations. It would be another year and a half until he released *John Wesley Harding*.⁵² It is difficult to gauge the effect of this accident and the resulting convalescence on his musical and lyrical output. Dylan himself later intimated that he thought the accident had the ironic effect of saving his life. He was able to get away from the lifestyle of a traveling musician, filled with its attendant vices. It also gave him time to reevaluate his priorities and to meditate on what he valued. He told *Newsweek* that “I stared at the ceiling for a few months. But since I’ve often sat around staring at ceilings, it didn’t bother me much ... I’m a country boy myself, and you have to be let alone to really accomplish anything.”⁵³ In August of 1969 he would tell *The London Evening Standard*, “in many ways [it] was good for me. It really slowed me down ... touring had been such a pace to keep up. And I was getting in

⁵¹ Heylin, *Behind the Shades Revisited*, 286-290.

⁵² David R. Shumway, “Bob Dylan as Cultural Icon,” *The Cambridge Companion to Bob Dylan*, ed. Kevin J.H. Dettmar (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 119.

⁵³ Hubert Saal, “Dylan is Back,” *Newsweek* 71 (February 16, 1968): 92-93.

a rut.”⁵⁴ So it was a Dylan both broken and restored who chose Nashville as the place for his next recording.

To accomplish this he put together a small band that included Pete Drake on guitar, Charlie McCoy on bass, and Kenneth Buttrey behind the drums.⁵⁵ The band spent only three days in Columbia’s Music Row Studios, though this was spread out over the months of October and November of 1967.⁵⁶ The sessions were quick and subdued, with music and performance taking priority. It was businesslike, with no interruptions or interruptions from famous guests popping in as there would be with *Nashville Skyline* eighteen months later.

Known for his pedal steel guitar, Pete Drake was the son of a Pentecostal minister and a sought-after session musician who played on Tammy Wynette’s “Stand by Your Man,” as well as five of Elvis Presley’s movie soundtracks. In 1964 he also had a Top 30 hit with “Talking Steel.” He had played on recordings by Buddy Holly, the Everly Brothers, Carl Perkins, and Jerry Lee Lewis, and had “pioneered the use of the steel guitar in rock.”⁵⁷ Drake only played on two of the album’s twelve songs, but he returned in a fuller role on *Nashville Skyline*.

Charlie McCoy, inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 2009, had backed Johnny Cash and Presley. Best known as a harmonica player, he was a versatile musician who had played with Dylan before, most notably as the guitarist on “Desolation Row” and “Sad Eyed Lady of the Lowlands.” McCoy was “perhaps the definitive

⁵⁴ Shelton, *No Direction Home*, 376.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 391.

⁵⁶ Clinton Heylin, *Bob Dylan: The Recording Sessions, 1960-1994* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1997), 69-70.

⁵⁷ Craig Harris, “Biography of Pete Drake,” Allmusic, April 23, 2010, <http://www.allmusic.com>.

Nashville session musician,” whose harmonica playing “virtually defined its role within the context of modern country music.”⁵⁸ Despite his pedigree as the preeminent harmonica player in Nashville, McCoy actually played bass guitar for these sessions, leaving the harmonica work to Dylan’s distinctive tones. He too would have a greater role on *Nashville Skyline* with his chosen instrument.

Rounding out the musicians was drummer Kenny Buttrey, who would go on to work extensively with Neil Young. According to veteran country music critic Chet Flippo, Buttrey was “one of the most influential session musicians in Nashville history.”⁵⁹ Writing on the entirety of Dylan’s work, the *Village Voice*’s Robert Christgau commented, “Though Dylan has known great rhythm sections ... his seminal rock records were cut with Nashville cats on drums—Kenny Buttrey when he was lucky, nonentities when he wasn’t.”⁶⁰ Though we could quibble with the definition of *John Wesley Harding* and *Nashville Skyline* as “rock records,” still, the acclaim afforded to Buttrey is worth noting.

In short, these were major players, heavyweights in the Nashville recording scene. Both Drake and McCoy were members of “The Nashville A-Team,” a group of musicians prized for their session work and their ability to blend their sound into the production needs of the group or singer they were backing. They were the perfect musicians to

⁵⁸ Jason Ankeny, “Biography of Charlie McCoy,” Allmusic, April 23, 2010, <http://www.allmusic.com>.

⁵⁹ Chet Flippo. “Nashville Drummer Kenny Buttrey Dead at 59,” *Country Music Television News*, Sept. 13, 2004, <<http://www.cmt.com>>. Accessed April 12, 2011.

⁶⁰ Robert Christgau, “Rock ‘n’ Roll Revolution,” *Village Voice*, July 1969, <<http://www.villagevoice.com>>. Accessed April 12, 2011.

actualize Dylan's vision of a "folk-country simplicity of melodic line and laconic backing."⁶¹

Even though Dylan refused to tour and instructed his record label to refrain from promoting *John Wesley Harding*, recalling "I asked Columbia to release it with no publicity and no hype, because this was the season of hype," the album still sold 250,000 copies in its first week. A review by Gordon Mills pronounced it "another major musical step for Bob Dylan," noting "the predominance of country blues ... from Hank Williams to Leadbelly ... unprecedented in the new electric music."⁶² The album reached number two on the *Billboard 200* and number one in the United Kingdom, despite having no released single.

With the album's success, despite Dylan's fickle requirements concerning its release, a follow up was natural. Although this is exactly what happened, it seems to have never been planned in any concerted way. There is no suggestion that label executives or managers demanded that Dylan make another Nashville record, this time with maybe a few odes to love. It would be perfectly reasonable to imagine someone high in the chain of Columbia Records passing down word that Dylan should make an album that employed some of the tricks of the pop-country market, with the hopes of turning his 250,000 sales into something even more profitable. However, if anyone had done so, we can be almost certain that the reactionary Dylan would have refused. But since no one did, that is exactly what he gave them.

Nashville Skyline

⁶¹ Shelton, *No Direction Home*, 391.

⁶² Quoted in Heylin, *Behind the Shades Revisited*, 288.

If *John Wesley Harding* was the sound of a voice crying in the wilderness, *Nashville Skyline*, released only a year and a half later, “followed a standard country-and-western pattern, not merely in sound but also in attitude.”⁶³ It was as if Dylan was deliberately shrugging off the ghosts of Hank and Woody, leaving behind their dark ruminations and earthy sounds. Nigel Williamson observed, “This was country music of the most mainstream and conservative kind, which gave off the clear message that Dylan wanted no part of the leadership of the new youth movement that was busy burning its draft cards and opposing the Vietnam war.”⁶⁴ What better vehicle was there than country music to make this stand? Despite protestations—or perhaps in part because of them—*Nashville Skyline* was a great commercial success, reaching number three in the U.S. and becoming yet another U.K. number one. The single “Lay Lady Lay” reached the seventh position on the *Billboard* charts.

In terms of poetic sensibility, the songs of *John Wesley Harding* and *Nashville Skyline* could not have been more different. The listener had left the world where Dylan could declare,

I dreamed I saw St. Augustine
Alive with fiery breath
And I dreamed I was amongst the ones
That put him out to death.⁶⁵

Instead purchasers of the new album heard songs like “Country Pie,” with its remonstrations to,

Listen to the fiddler play
When he’s playing to the break of day
Oh me, oh my

⁶³ Williamson, *Rough Guide*, 84.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 84-5.

⁶⁵ Dylan, *Lyrics*, 223.

Love that country pie.⁶⁶

Perhaps the ethos of *Nashville Skyline*, with its insistence on romantic entanglements as the centerpiece of all human endeavor, was best summed up with a verse from “I Threw it All Away”:

Love is all there is, it makes the world go ‘round
Love and only love, it can’t be denied
No matter what you think about it
You just won’t be able to do without it
Take a tip from one who’s tried.⁶⁷

Such lines seemed to define Jonathan Swift’s summation of the art of the ancients when he described it as entailing “sweetness and light.”⁶⁸ That is not to say that the album lacked moments of darkness; “Girl from the North Country” was a particularly somber piece. Yet the album clearly had a greater generosity of spirit and aura of hopefulness than the dread and eschatological musings of *John Wesley Harding*.

Beyond the lyrical content, there was a still greater change for longtime Dylan fans to confront. Put quite simply, the man was crooning. Dylan would later claim that it was a result of quitting cigarettes, but even if doing so improved his vocal range, to attribute the dramatic and obviously intentional change to such a lifestyle choice was disingenuous. Rather, what seems clear is that this was simply another method of singing that Dylan was capable of employing if he so chose. It was also one that he had utilized as his primary style as a much younger man. Terri Wallace, a friend from his early New York days, recalled that “he had...the most beautiful voice...I really thought he had a good singing voice. Which I might add was something of a disappointment after he

⁶⁶ Ibid., 245.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 249.

⁶⁸ Jonathan Swift, “The Battle of the Books,” *A Modest Proposal and Other Works* (New York: Dover Publications, 1996), 11.

became well known, and I heard the voice that made him famous ... it was so different from the voice that I had first heard coming out of him.”⁶⁹

Dylan was not unaware of the commercial prospects for reaching a country audience. In a fascinating reminiscence, Robert Shelton recalled,

I had always found Dylan more aware of the country currents than most other city folk singers ... He often alluded to Hank Snow, Hank Thompson, Bill Anderson, Dolly Parton. In September 1968 he stole in from Woodstock to catch Johnny Cash at Carnegie Hall. He repeatedly told associates that he regarded country music as the coming thing, long before he cut *Skyline*.⁷⁰

The recording of *Nashville Skyline* involved a return to Nashville in early 1969. Once again Dylan worked out of Columbia's Studio A where he reunited the three musicians who had accompanied him on his previous album. To this group he added Bob Wilson on piano, Norman Blake on guitar, and Charlie Daniels on bass (with Charlie McCoy also playing guitar and stepping forward on harmonica). There was even a cameo appearance by Earl Scruggs, perhaps the most famous banjoist of all time, who lent his picking to “Nashville Skyline Rag.”

Norman Blake, “one of the major bluegrass guitarists of the 1970s,” played with Johnny Cash, June Carter, Kris Kristofferson, Ralph Stanley, and Joan Baez. Eventually he would become Johnny Cash's principle guitarist during the run of *The Johnny Cash Show*. Charlie Daniels also appeared on the album. Daniels later became famous for his song “The Devil Went Down to Georgia,” which featured his spirited, if less than technically brilliant fiddle playing. Despite his notoriety as a fiddler, Daniels actually began his recording career by playing bass guitar, appearing on three of Dylan's albums.

⁶⁹ Quoted in Heylin, *Behind the Shades Revisited*, 40.

⁷⁰ Shelton, *Down the Highway*, 399-400.

During the recording of *Nashville Skyline*, Johnny Cash just happened to be occupying the studio next door. After Cash stopped in, he and Dylan agreed to meet for a dual session. As a result, on February 18th they met and recorded a series of duets, which included among others, “That’s All Right Mama,” “I Walk the Line,” “You Are My Sunshine,” “Good Old Mountain Dew,” and “Just a Closer Walk with Thee.” The only duet that would make the album was “Girl from the North Country,” chosen as the album’s opener.

This association would bear further fruit with Dylan’s appearance on the premier of Cash’s show on June 7, 1969. Cash himself later said of Dylan, “I became aware of Bob Dylan when the *Freewheelin’* album came out in 1963. I thought he was one of the best country singers I had ever heard. I felt I had a lot in common with him.”⁷¹ During the broadcast of the show, Dylan sang solo on a cut from *Nashville Skyline*, “I Threw it All Away,” as well as performing “Living the Blues.” The summation of the evening however was the duet performance of “Girl from the North Country.” Cash would go even further in his support of Dylan by penning the liner notes to the album.⁷²

Of course the enthusiasm went both ways. Dylan had long been a devoted fan of Cash, looking up to the man almost as an idol. Cash’s enthusiastic embrace of the younger singer was deeply appreciated by Dylan, who would later declare, “Johnny Cash was more a religious figure to me.” In appearing on Cash’s television show, Dylan was not only hoping to broaden his fan base, but he also felt a sense of duty to Cash, who was himself looking to get his career back on track. This mutual respect was remembered years later when Dylan was inducted into the Rock ‘n’ Roll Hall of Fame in 1989. He

⁷¹ Ibid., 400.

⁷² Ibid., 404.

complained of Cash's exclusion, insisting that "if Johnny Cash isn't in it, there shouldn't even be a Hall of Fame."⁷³ Cash would ultimately be inducted in 1992. Though Dylan himself is not a member of the Country Music Hall of Fame, interestingly enough, he was voted into the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame in 2002, of which Cash is also a member.

The effect of *Nashville Skyline* on the recording industry went well beyond record sales. Shelton argued that "the influence of *Nashville Skyline* was unimaginable. At the end of the 1960s, pop and rock were looking for new directions, and strong elements of country had always existed in Anglo-American pop. Still Dylan provided the strap that began to link pop closer to country, with *Skyline* as the buckle." Because of his influence "a good part of the pop and rock of the 1970s explored country music. Soon Nashville studios were crowded with pop, rock, and folk performers who had earlier disdained country as corn."⁷⁴ Dylan himself could not believe the change that his simple album had wrought, and the degree to which he had "become almost an honorary citizen of Nashville."⁷⁵

All music is derivative. It all builds on those things that came before, as do all human endeavors. No one understood this better than Bob Dylan. He made a career of burnishing the old and recreating it into something that he could use. The poet T. S. Eliot once wrote, "Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different."⁷⁶

⁷³ Williamson, *Rough Guide*, 82.

⁷⁴ Shelton, *Down the Highway*, 404.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 404.

⁷⁶ T. S. Eliot, "Philip Massinger," *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot* (New York: Mariner Books, 1975), 153.

The first part of this quote has been reproduced so often that it has almost become a cliché. Yet the second part bears scrutiny. The transformation that comes from art's lineage is evident in everything that Dylan has produced. Nothing he has written or recorded is new in the sense that it lacks precursors, but at the same time he has made what he has borrowed his own. It does not require too much familiarity with traditional music to recognize the debt that Dylan owes to those that came before him; but if he is a thief then he is a thief in the sense that miners are thieves when they dig down deep for precious things below the surface. Dylan is nothing if not promiscuous in his use of source material, and one of the richest veins he has gone back to time and time again is country music. *John Wesley Harding* and *Nashville Skyline* are perhaps the two clearest examples of Dylan's exploration of the possibilities of country music. What is evident is that he felt comfortable utilizing the symbols and styles of country music, and had no fear of appearing as an interloper.

CHAPTER III:
DYLAN'S COUNTRY APOCALYPSE:

JOHN WESLEY HARDING

*The Sixties were no fouler a decade than the Fifties –
they merely reaped the Fifties' foul harvest.*

-Peter S. Beagle

By the final months of 1967, when Bob Dylan was in Nashville recording *John Wesley Harding*, some 20,000 Americans, along with an unknown but vastly greater number of Vietnamese, had already died in the undeclared war that burned hot in Vietnam. By February of 1969, when Dylan returned to Nashville to record *Nashville Skyline*, that number had almost doubled.⁷⁷ From the American homeland some nine million active duty members of the military would leave during the war, disembarking in a strange country of which most had never heard. The governing elite in Washington maintained, as they must for all wars whatever the reality, that this fight was one between good and evil, between freedom and repression, between the future and annihilation. During the run-up to the 1964 presidential election, appearing on television, Lyndon Johnson laid out the situation succinctly: "this is not a jungle war, but a struggle for freedom on every front of human activity." Ronald Reagan who in 1964 was supporting Johnson's challenger Barry Goldwater was, if anything, more stark in his assessment of

⁷⁷ "Statistical information about casualties of the Vietnam War," National Archives, Accessed February 28, 2011, <http://www.archives.gov>.

the importance of the American effort in Vietnam. In a speech delivered on national television on October 27, 1968, he declared:

We're at war with the most dangerous enemy that has ever faced mankind in his long climb from the swamp to the stars, and it's been said if we lose that war, and in so doing lose this way of freedom of ours, history will record with the greatest astonishment that those who had the most to lose did the least to prevent its happening ... If we lose freedom here, there is no place to escape to. This is the last stand on Earth.⁷⁸

What had begun as a quiet action, a reinforcement of French military presence and American interests in Indo-China, had slowly, almost inexorably, become something far greater.

By 1967, anger over America's presence in Vietnam had grown steadily. The self-immolations that had begun amid the ranks of Buddhist monks in Vietnam had spread to America⁷⁹. At no time since the American Civil War had the nation been so visibly divided. The country was broken into rival camps that demanded allegiance, with ambivalence or non-alignment considered a subtle form of treason. At no other time in history had the anti-war front been so united, and it was a unity that was cherished and fostered. Dylan's voice was considered integral to this movement. Happy Traum, a friend and interviewer of Dylan's, later lamented, "at the time the Vietnam War was on and we were upset about that. And I really wanted him to say something about that. I was trying to get Bob to make some definitive statement about where he stood. But he didn't say

⁷⁸ For background on what was known as "the Speech," which has been widely credited with launching Reagan's ascent into national politics, see Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* (New York: Nation Books, 2001), 499-504.

⁷⁹ As the Quaker pacifist Norman Morrison did below the window of then Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's Pentagon office on November 2, 1965.

anything, he was just talking about this stonemason he knew.”⁸⁰ This dismay over Dylan’s lack of a public stance was disconcerting to many of his friends and associates. What they wanted was for Dylan to take a clear position, to shake off his habitual ambivalence, to throw over poetic obfuscation for direct language. In short, Dylan was expected to act in a manner contrary to the way he had always acted. It was almost as if his friends had never met the man before.

Yet amid this fervor of war and protest, with the rhetoric of apocalypse on the lips of men who would, by virtue of their elections, be granted the power to bring it about, Dylan insisted that he knew “as much about it as the lady across the street does, and she probably knows quite a bit. Just reading the papers, talking to the neighbors, and so forth.”⁸¹ The writer who had provided the movement with songs like “A Hard Rain’s a-Gonna Fall,” “The Times They Are a-Changin’,” and “Masters of War” was now in seclusion in rural New York, recovering from his motorcycle accident but also noticeably absent from a fight in which many considered him a leader. Dylan gave few interviews during these years, but in those he did give, his insistence concerning his non-involvement was apparent. A 1966 interview conducted by Nat Hentoff recorded the following:

NH: Have you lost interest in protest as well as in protest songs?

BD: I haven’t lost any interest in protest since then. I just didn’t have any interest in protest to begin with ... you can’t lose what you’ve never had...

NH: Many of your folk-singing colleagues remain actively involved in the fight for civil rights, free speech and withdrawal from Vietnam. Do you think they’re wrong?

BD: I don’t think they’re wrong, if that’s what they see themselves doing. But don’t think that what you’ve got out there is a bunch of little Buddhas

⁸⁰ Quoted in Heylin, *Dylan: Behind the Shades Revisited*, 294.

⁸¹ Bob Dylan, interview by John Cohen and Happy Traum, “Conversations with Bob Dylan,” *Sing Out!* (Oct/Nov 1968), 18.

all parading up and down. People that use God as a weapon should be amputated upon. You see it around here all the time: “Be good or God won’t like you, and you’ll go to hell.” Things like that. People that march with slogans and things tend to take themselves a little too holy. It would be a drag if they, too, started using God as a weapon ... People who can’t conceive of how others hurt, they’re trying to change the world. They’re all afraid to admit that they don’t really know each other.⁸²

When asked at the conclusion of the interview whether he might ever “reinvolve” himself in the protest movement, Dylan replied, “No, not unless all the people in the world disappeared.”⁸³

If this was not enough, Dylan later affirmed a level of independence that would have shocked those who thought they knew which side he was on. When asked in a 1968 interview conducted by John Cohen and Happy Traum for *Sing Out!* about his feelings on an artist’s responsibility “to say something” about the war, Dylan replied, “I know some very good artists who are for the war.” Traum pressed him, insisting that, “well I’m just talking about the ones who are against it.” Dylan responded:

That’s like what I’m talking about; it’s for or against the war. That really doesn’t exist. It’s not for or against the war. I’m speaking of a certain painter, and he’s all for the war. He’s just about ready to go over there himself. And I can comprehend him ... I’ve known him a long time, he’s a gentleman and I admire him, he’s a friend of mine. People just have their own views. Anyway, how do you know I’m not, as you say, for the war?⁸⁴

Deliberate and provocative ambiguity was nothing new for Dylan. In a speech delivered on December 13, 1963, before the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee, who were presenting him with the Tom Paine Award, he famously told a shocked audience in

⁸² Bob Dylan, interviewed by Nat Hentoff, *Playboy*, March 1966, in *Bob Dylan: The Complete Interviews*, ed. Jonathan Cott (New York: Wenner Books, 2006), 104-105.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁸⁴ Cohen and Traum, “Conversations with Bob Dylan,” 23.

a drunken, rambling and near incoherent speech less than a month after the assassination of President Kennedy:

I'll stand up and to get uncompromisable about it, which I have to be to be honest, I just got to be, as 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. I don't think it would have gone – I don't think it could go that far. But I got to stand up and say I saw things that he felt, in me – not to go that far and shoot [*sic*].⁸⁵

A letter he later wrote attempting to explain his comments was less than successful, though it did in part announce his new lyrical direction. After much back and forth over whether or not he was apologizing, he declared:

I am a writer an [*sic*] a singer of the words I write
I am no speaker nor any politician
an my songs speak for me because I write them
in the confinement of my own mind an have t[o] cope
with no one except my own self.⁸⁶

Here we have in its embryonic state the moment where Dylan explained that he was a singer and not a talker. From this point forward he began the process of distancing himself from his former “finger pointing” songs and began to address himself fully to his own vision.⁸⁷

And yet what seems to have been impossible for his critics to understand was the fact that Dylan still had things to say about the very problems with which they were so concerned. It was just that he needed to say them in his own peculiar way, with all the

⁸⁵ “Speech Given Before the National Emergency Civil Liberties Committee,” New York, December 13, 1963, <<http://www.corliss-lamont.org/dylan.htm>.> Accessed April 17, 2011. Dylan’s “creative” use of spelling is preserved throughout.

⁸⁶ Bob Dylan, “A Message.” <<http://www.corliss-lamont.org/dylan.htm>.> Accessed April 17, 2011.

⁸⁷ This distancing would be most famously expressed in his raucous electric set at the Newport Folk Festival in 1965.

conflict and confusion that characterized his thinking. Despite his rhetoric, Dylan was not unaffected by the war and by the climate of the country. As he would later write in the concluding paragraph to the first volume of his memoir *Chronicles*:

The folk music scene had been like a paradise that I had to leave, like Adam had to leave the garden. It was just too perfect. In a few years' time a shit storm would be unleashed. Things would begin to burn. Bras, draft cards, American flags, bridges, too – everybody would be dreaming of getting it on. The national psyche would change and in a lot of ways it would resemble the Night of the Living Dead ... one thing for sure, not only was it not run by God, but it wasn't run by the devil either.⁸⁸

Dylan did not see these things as a historical aberration, but as part of a longer historical narrative. As he put it: “We’re talking now about things which have always happened since the beginning of time, the specific name or deed isn’t any different than that which has happened previous to this.”⁸⁹

It is no coincidence that during this time of convalescence and withdrawal Dylan made the trip down to Nashville, and in three sessions recorded his most thematically unified album to date, an album united around the image of America as a wasteland. Dylan maintained that he had nothing to say about Vietnam but he had plenty to say about America as a declining empire, of which the mistakes, failures, and crimes in Vietnam were symptomatic. In Nashville no one was waiting for his leadership on the war; no one would have cared. There he could surround himself with professional musicians, not professional activists. While in Dylan’s former circles people were

⁸⁸ Bob Dylan, *Chronicles: Vol I* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 292-293.

⁸⁹ Cohen and Traum, “Conversations with Bob Dylan,” 23.

protesting in the streets and singing songs like “Eve of Destruction,” country music artists largely ignored the war, at least professionally.⁹⁰

At the same time, country music provided the perfect outlet for Dylan’s apocalyptic message. No other musical form outside of the folk music that it sprang from had the deep historical connection to biblical tradition. Most popular music could not withstand the severity of the Judeo-Christian eschatological message. Indeed, what room there was in rock ‘n’ roll Dylan himself had made. Country music had long embraced the world of sin and grace, of spiritual war and of God’s judgment. Sentiments and allusions that would have been out of place, and would have been largely lost on a secular audience, found a comfortable setting in country music, a world only half a step removed from that of Dylan’s folk pedigree. Perhaps one useful definition in this context for country music would be that of commercial folk music. Country music was the natural extension of Dylan’s folk interest and commercial success.

John Wesley Harding

John Wesley Harding crackled with the ambient apocalyptic tensions of those middle years of the Cold War, of which the Vietnam War was but a tributary. It also took the beginning steps to resolve them, at least as a work of art. This effort came to fruition in Dylan’s next album, *Nashville Skyline*. As a reimagining and reworking of the conceptual framework of the *Apocalypse of John*, these two albums achieved a unity that was not initially obvious since they diverged so wildly in subject matter, tone, and musicality.

⁹⁰ Some examples that achieved popularity and either obliquely referenced the war or else were pro-military in content include Barry Sadler’s “Ballad of the Green Berets” (1966) and Merle Haggard’s “Okie from Musgkoguee” (1969) and “The Fightin’ Side of Me” (1970).

The world of *John Wesley Harding* is one of desolation. Humanity is relegated to isolated, lonely outposts that seem on the frontier of life, but could just as well be all that remains. Time seems out of joint, as cowboys, mendicant priests, drifters, and outlaws crisscross the land. The social order has broken down and what remains is a patchwork of individual action and the remnants of a society's perverted justice. *John Wesley Harding* is an album obsessed with the idea of legitimate authority and what happens in the vacuum that is left by its withdrawal. Its mood is apocalyptic and its resonating allusions are biblical. Of his familiarity and comfort with the biblical tradition, Dylan said, "The only parables that I know are the Biblical parables."⁹¹ There are no easy answers in *John Wesley Harding*. The album is more like a series of dreams, at times explicitly so, and its method of conversation is indirection.

By mining American history, and by stepping out of it, Dylan crafted a world that seemed to transcend time or place, where St. Augustine and a mythologized John Wesley Hardin could rub elbows with Tom Paine.⁹² Yet for all of its powerful associations with characters from history, *John Wesley Harding* remained an album that thrives on loneliness. The landscape is bleak, its few characters mostly homeless wanderers that seem to have survived some dramatic reversal of American fortunes.

⁹¹ Cohen and Traum, "Conversations with Bob Dylan," 23.

⁹² As to the spelling of John Wesley Hardin (as the historical figure was known), there is no definitive answer. Perhaps Dylan was emphasizing that this was in fact not *the* Hardin, but rather a Harding of his own devising. Perhaps he preferred the sound, or perhaps he simply made a mistake. However, the fact that Dylan made a distinction between his Harding and the historical Hardin seems to be an important one, as the latter was a much less respectable figure. Throughout the course of his career as a gunfighter in the American West during the later half of the 19th century he was responsible for dozens of deaths. The numbers vary considerably with Hardin's own estimation reaching the higher end at forty-two. Hardin's own account of his exploits can be found in *The Life of John Wesley Hardin as Written by Himself*, 3rd Ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977).

This sparseness was reflected in the music. As Lynne Allen wrote in 1978, “*John Wesley Harding* totally contradicted everything happening musically at the time. The deceptively simple folk melodies only served to draw one’s attention even closer to the intensity of the lyrical message.”⁹³ Until the end of the album there was only Dylan himself, along with Kenny Buttrey on drums and Charlie McCoy on bass. The main source of ornamentation was Dylan’s harmonica, as ragged and desolate as it had ever been. At times it seemed more force of nature than instrument, like a harsh wind blowing over the barren words.

The characters of *John Wesley Harding* embody an idea of forced homelessness and isolation. The title song, which opens the album, brings us immediately into a mythic past. This Harding is more Robin Hood than outlaw. Rather than a criminal, he is a source of justice. Perhaps it is nothing more than coincidence that the character’s initials are the same as the transliteration of Yahweh into English, but regardless, in Dylan’s remaking he “was a friend to the poor” who “was never known to hurt an honest man” and “no charge held against him could be proved.” It is instructive that Dylan was not able to retain his interest in his poetic creation, with the title song ending prematurely with no satisfactory conclusion to the narrative. Justice only makes the most fleeting of appearances on the album.

John Wesley Harding contains, at least initially, no relationships of trust and mutual affection. The one example that seems at first to provide the listener with such a union occurs in “The Ballad of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest,” where the title characters

⁹³ Lynne Allen, “Interview with an Icon,” *Trouser Press*, June 1979, Interview date December 12, 1978, in *Younger Than That Now: The Collected Interviews with Bob Dylan* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2004), 167.

are described somewhat tritely as “the best of friends.”⁹⁴ Yet quickly the song turns into farce, with Frankie’s friendship to Judas leading him to expiration after more than two weeks sequestered in a brothel.

For sixteen days and nights he raved
But on the seventeenth he burst
Into the arms of Judas Priest
Which is where he died of thirst.⁹⁵

Perhaps Dylan was commenting on the licentiousness of the period, but if so, he could not achieve any sort of credible commentary as his own lifestyle was filled with dalliances and affairs.

A second source of displaced order and tradition emerges in “I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine,” modeled after the song “Joe Hill,” which commemorated the life of the labor organizer who was executed for murder in 1915. The song, which began life as a poem by Alfred Hayes with music written later by Earl Robinson begins:

I dreamed I saw Joe Hill last night,
Alive as you and me.
Says I “But Joe, you’re ten years dead”
“I never died” said he.⁹⁶

Dylan looked back even further for his own song. In 410 CE, Rome, the city that had symbolized the power of empire and impregnability, fell to the Visigoths. The center of authority in the western world was in ruins. In response to this and to accusations that the passivity of Christianity was the deciding fact, Augustine began the composition of the *City of God*. Dylan would not have had to read far into *City of God* to find the words, “I

⁹⁴ Dylan, *Lyrics*, 225.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 226.

⁹⁶ Heylin, *Revolution in the Air: The Songs of Bob Dylan, 1957-1973*, (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2009), 363.

must speak also of the earthly city – of that city which lusts to dominate the world and which, though nations bend to its yoke, is itself dominated by its passion for dominion.”⁹⁷ However, the identity of the St. Augustine in Dylan’s song remains in question. A second St. Augustine is remembered by history as having brought Christianity to the British Isles. Of the two candidates, neither’s biography matches that of Dylan’s Augustine. Regardless, the associations of a culture in ashes and an empire arguing over its weaknesses are relevant and unavoidable. The Augustine of Dylan’s creation is another of his wanderers, though this time he goes both in glory and in debasement. Though he wears a “coat of solid gold,” he also “has a blanket underneath each arm.” Exiled from the city, he begins a journey into the wilderness whose end finds no termination within the lyric itself. The prophet has been exiled to the desert, with even the narrator guilty of being “among the ones who put him out to death.”⁹⁸

If there is a song that anchors the album, it is “All Along the Watchtower.” As an expression of the dual mind of Dylan’s narrative thrust, it perfectly encapsulates the confusion of a mind turned in on itself.

“There must be some way out of here,”
said the Joker to the Thief
“There’s too much confusion
I can’t get no relief.”⁹⁹

The Thief’s response is as enigmatic as any of Dylan’s own cryptic responses to journalists:

“No reason to get excited”
The Thief he kindly spoke

⁹⁷ St. Augustine, *City of God*, Trans. Demetrius Zema and Gerald Walsh. Ed. Vernon J. Bourke (New York: Imagine Books, 1958), 40.

⁹⁸ Dylan, *Lyrics*, 223-4.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 224.

“There are many here among us
Who feel that life is but a joke
But you and I have been through that
And this is not our fate
So let us not talk falsely now
The hour is getting late.”¹⁰⁰

The thief acknowledges that this may all be a game played at the expense of humanity while still insisting that the stakes are large for those who see through the atmospheric. The world they inhabit is not so free of peril. It is at once an outpost of an empire, where lookout is kept for an unnamed enemy, while at the same being the place where princes reside. This is not your typical setting for a leisured monarchy, rather; “All along the watchtower / Princes kept the view.” The concluding stanza does nothing to alleviate concerns, but only heightens them:

Outside in the distance
A wildcat did growl
Two riders were approaching
The wind began to howl.¹⁰¹

It is impossible to divorce this final word “howl” from the wrenching harmonica that explodes out of it. The connection to Allen Ginsberg’s poem of the same name seems intentional.¹⁰² Ginsberg gave us America as a doomed land, full of the desperate and the insane locked in battle with their own desires. The vision of New York as a

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 224.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 224.

¹⁰² If there is a great American poem of the apocalypse, then it is surely Ginsberg’s “Howl,” that bizarre love letter to a decaying empire. Perhaps Dylan also found inspiration for his earlier move to electrified music in a line from the third part of “Howl” that reads “where we wake up electrified out of the coma.” *Howl and Other Poems* (Berkeley: City Lights), 20.

modern wasteland was one that Dylan appreciated; indeed he later came to refer to it as “New York City, the city that would come to shape my destiny. Modern Gomorrah.”¹⁰³

Gordon Mills in his review for *Rolling Stone* noted that “Dylan speaks in an almost apocalyptic vein of the Fall to come.”¹⁰⁴ Yet it was not really a Fall to come, but a Fall that had already occurred, and if the Fall was occasioned by the knowledge attained by man and woman and by their exile from the Garden, then a possible remedy would be a return to that perfect blissful state. What then is the answer to this album of restlessness, of peripatetic journeys that seem to have no conclusion? The last two songs on *John Wesley Harding* began the resolution of this tension. “Down Along the Cove” pointed to *Nashville Skyline*’s ebullience and sense of possibility through the transformative power of love and domestic bliss.

Down along the cove
I spied my true love comin’ my way
I say, “Lord have mercy momma,
It sure is good to see you comin today.”¹⁰⁵

If anything, “I’ll Be Your Baby Tonight” was even more sanguine in its treatment of the restorative powers of love. The narrator seemed satisfied, content with the world as it was and willing to let it go as it will.

Well, that mocking bird’s gonna sail away
We’re gonna forget it
That big fat, moon is gonna shine like a spoon
But we’re gonna let it
You won’t regret it.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Dylan, *Chronicles I*, 9.

¹⁰⁴ Gordon Mills, “Review of John Wesley Harding,” *Rolling Stone Magazine* (Feb. 24, 1968), 21.

¹⁰⁵ Dylan, *Lyrics*, 233.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 235.

The mood was of transitory joys taken without concern for the future. This then was the beginning of Dylan's foray into the pleasures of the mundane, where the quotidian was revealed to have as much revelatory content as the bleak excess of despair that preceded it, if only for the lover in thrall to his beloved.

Critical appraisal of *John Wesley Harding* was positive, if confused. Gordon Mills wrote, "Without a doubt this is another major musical step for Bob Dylan. The predominance of country blues, white and black, from Hank Williams to Leadbelly is unprecedented in the new electric music."¹⁰⁷ Concerning Dylan's lyrical experimentations, John Landau's review in *Crawdaddy* was perhaps the most perceptive; "Dylan manifests a profound awareness of the war and how it is affecting all of us. This doesn't mean that I think any of the particular songs are about the war or that any of the songs are protests over it. All I mean to say is that Dylan has felt the war, that there is an awareness of it contained within the album as a whole."¹⁰⁸ Yet reviews like Landau's went unheeded by the more vocal members of the protest community. Because Dylan spoke in metaphor and a language that reveled in obfuscation and allusion, he could not satisfy some of his most ardent fans. This divide would only widen with the release of *Nashville Skyline*.

Yet *John Wesley Harding* was a commercial success, this despite Dylan insisting that it be released without any promotion whatsoever. Such an enthusiastic reception would have been remarkable for any album, much less one concerned with eschatological doom and pervaded with a sense of America as a dwindling and ill-fated empire.

¹⁰⁷ Mills, "Review," 21.

¹⁰⁸ John Landau, "Review of *John Wesley Harding*," *Crawdaddy* (Spring 1968) in *Bob Dylan: The Early Years: A Retrospective*, ed. Craig McGregor (New York: Da Capo Press, 1990), 260.

CHAPTER IV:

NASHVILLE SKYLINE: A PARADISE GAINED

*And I saw a new heaven and a new earth:
for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away...
And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem,
coming down from God out of heaven,
prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.*

–Revelation 21:1-2

In a simple ceremony with only a judge, Dylan’s longtime manager Albert Grossman and a maid of honor in attendance, Bob Dylan and Sara Lownds were married on Long Island, New York on November 22, 1965. For months the Dylans kept their marriage a secret, denying its existence even to close friends and refusing to talk about it until they were outed by the press.¹⁰⁹ Howard Sounes recorded an exchange between Dylan and Ramblin’ Jack Elliot that revealed how Dylan refused to let those closest to him in on his marriage, even when directly confronted. When Ramblin’ Jack approached the Dylans during a dinner at the Kettle of Fish in New York, he excitedly greeted the couple and started to congratulate them.

“Congratulations, Bob!” exclaimed Elliott.
“What for?” asked Bob, suspiciously.
“I heard you got married.”
“I didn’t get married,” replied Bob.
“Well, I’ll be darned! I swear I heard that you got married,” Elliott said, his face clouding over. “I heard from *two* people that you got married.”

¹⁰⁹ Sounes, *Down the Highway*, 193.

“I didn’t get married,” Bob assured him. “If I got married, you’d be the first person I’d tell.”¹¹⁰

But if this spoke to Bob Dylan’s concern for his privacy, it was equally illustrative of Sara’s attraction to secrecy. Throughout the years she has consistently refused to speak to the press, and has never written or commented on their relationship.

Sara was born in either 1939 or 1940 with the name Shirley Marlin Nozinsky (or, according to Dylan’s mother, Novoletsky), which she later changed to Sara Lownds at the request of her first husband, Hans Lownds, a successful photographer twenty-five years her senior who claimed he could not marry a woman named Shirley.¹¹¹ Together they had one daughter, Maria, whom Dylan would later adopt.

Sara’s early life was one of humble beginnings and sudden tragedies. Her father Isaac was a scrap metal salesman and her mother operated a dry-goods store. In November of 1956 her father was shot dead by an acquaintance, and her mother died five years later after having lived with the aftereffects of a stroke that she had suffered when Sara was only nine years old. Sara worked as a fashion model, even working for *Playboy* for a time, before marrying Hans, whom she had met at a photo shoot.¹¹²

Even after their marriage became public the Dylans were constantly attentive to their privacy. For the first few years of their marriage they were never photographed together and in public they rarely walked beside one another. Despite this public reticence, by all accounts Dylan was deeply in love with Sara, and his testimonials to that love ran through some of his most famous songs. Sara was widely believed to be the inspiration for “Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands,” a cut from 1966’s *Blond on Blond* in

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 193.

¹¹¹ Heylin, *Behind the Shades*, 167.

¹¹² Sounes, *Down the Highway*, 163.

which Dylan described “your mercury mouth in the missionary times / And your eyes like smoke and your prayers like rhymes.” On the same song Dylan also reminded her of “your magazine husband, who just one day had to go.”¹¹³ So too, Sara was invoked in the equally suggestive “Tangled Up in Blue” from 1975’s *Blood on the Tracks*, an album widely understood as dealing explicitly with their failing marriage, which ultimately ended in divorce in 1977.

She was married when we first met
Soon to be divorced
I helped her out of a jam, I guess
But I used a little too much force
We drove that car as far as we could
Abandoned it out West
Split up on a dark sad night
Both agreeing it was best.¹¹⁴

But if there was an album that most perfectly encapsulated Dylan’s joy at the early stages of their marriage, after Sara’s first husband was out of the picture and the family had retreated to the relative obscurity of their Woodstock home, it was *Nashville Skyline*. By 1969 the Dylans had four children, Sara’s daughter Maria from her first marriage, as well as Jesse, Samuel, and Issac, with another one on the way, Jakob, born on December 9, 1969. Without the strain of touring or the distractions of life in New York, Dylan was finally able to concentrate on his family life. That solitude, those simple joys, they were what made up *Nashville Skyline*.

Nashville Skyline

After the wasteland of *John Wesley Harding*, the comfort and delights of *Nashville Skyline* may seem platitudinous. Yet not every aspect of the human heart is as

¹¹³ Dylan, *Lyrics*, 211.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 331.

shrouded in despair and loneliness as is the bulk of *John Wesley Harding*. In art the tragic is often given critical preference over the comedic or romantic, but without the latter two the world would lose the vitality that enables people to survive the former. Dylan himself commented on his own understanding of the power behind *Nashville Skyline*'s simplicity in April 1969.

These are the type of songs that I always felt like writing when I've been alone to do so...the songs reflect more of the inner me than the songs of the past. They're more to my base than *John Wesley Harding*. There I felt like everyone expected me to be a poet, so that's what I tried to be. But the smallest line in this album means more to me than some of the songs on any of the previous records I've made.¹¹⁵

Nashville Skyline demonstrated Dylan's willingness to take risks with his art and to transform his sound completely if that is what was required to fully articulate himself. This was most obvious in his new singing style. The critic Robert Christgau, writing in the *Village Voice*, highlighted this change: "By the mere trick of changing his voice, Dylan has crossed us up once again. *Nashville Skyline* is as much a switcheroo as *John Wesley Harding*. It is touching that everyone wants to believe that Bobby Dylan has settled down, but don't count on it."¹¹⁶ The voice, the pared down lyrics, and the obvious sentimentality were a great change from the album that had preceded it. One reviewer noted, in an article that began with oozing condescension but moved quickly towards admiration, that "Dylan is definitely doing something that can be called singing. Somewhere, somehow, he has managed to add an octave to his range. The voice itself is still pinched, but it has a brassy, unstrained quality that suits his lighthearted material

¹¹⁵ "Dylan's Country Pie," *Newsweek*, April 14, 1969, 103.

¹¹⁶ Robert Christgau, "Rock 'n' Revolution."

perfectly.”¹¹⁷ This simplicity was further underscored by the fact that it came in a package of ten songs that totaled less than twenty-eight minutes of music, all at a time when other musicians were recording single songs that could take up half an album.

How then as an artist could Dylan possibly answer the problems posed by *John Wesley Harding*? Where do you go from a world in tatters, where concepts like hope seem more a cruelty than a gift? If *John Wesley Harding* was the album a person writes after having been too long on the road, after too many nights in hotel rooms spent with too many strangers, then *Nashville Skyline* was the album a person might write after they had finally come home. After all, for the problem of despair the poet always has an answer – love. But it was not only physical love or lust; Dylan has already warned us in “The Ballad of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest” that we should not “go mistaking paradise, for that home across the road.” The difference in the word “home” here was paramount, home no longer serving as a euphemism for brothel.

Yet eroticism was an essential ingredient to Dylan’s construction of a happy life. An unlikely Casanova, he had earned the reputation as a philanderer. A friend from the early years, Ellen Baker, recalled,

Bob was funny about his women. At first he seemed very shy, sort of scared...but it didn’t take long before you found out a good deal of that was an act. Bob was surprisingly amorous, and indiscriminating! He’d see a girl on the street or at a party and it didn’t matter what she looked like or who he was with, if he was in *that mood*.¹¹⁸

But for *Nashville Skyline* this energy was channeled into songs that sounded almost devotional. The world of domesticity and married life had a powerful attraction for Dylan

¹¹⁷ “Recordings: Back to the Roots,” *Time* April 11, 1969, <<http://www.time.com>.> Accessed April 17, 2011.

¹¹⁸ Heylin, *Behind the Shades*, 37.

and through the centering power of his marriage he managed to create his most accessible album to date; one that offered a kind of counterpoint to *John Wesley Harding*.

While country music was adept at evoking misery and as such was a useful vehicle for Dylan's reach into the bleak world of the apocalyptic, it was perhaps uniquely suited to convey the sort of satisfied pride a person might take in their home and family. As Bill Malone observed, "Since the 1920s the vision of a clean, decent, and wholesome entertainment form that drew its inspiration from the traditional rural-based values of home and family has been central to country music's self-definition."¹¹⁹ Dylan himself was experiencing the longest stretch of domestic harmony in his life. Though country music has often been saddled with terms like conservative and traditionalist, in the 1960s it was the musical genre that permitted the greatest range of human lyrical expression, at least in terms of the ability to account for the fullness of human experience. A singer could move from murder ballads to hymns to the sexually suggestive, so long as they were skilled and attentive to their audience's mood.

Because of the directness of *Nashville Skyline*'s lyrics, it was easy to think of the album as simplistic. But a great deal of skill and musicianship went into turning those humble verses into something compelling. As Paul Nelson noted in his review for *Rolling Stone*, "Perhaps, after all, it is more difficult to convey meaningfully a total fulfillment of marriage and family than it is to create a nightmare world of complex hallucination, even though the latter seems more painfully our own. In many ways, *Nashville Skyline*

¹¹⁹ Bill Malone, *Don't Get Above Your Raisin': Country Music and the Southern Working Class* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 38.

achieves the artistically impossible: a deep, humane, and interesting statement about being happy.”¹²⁰

Nashville Skyline was not devoid of melancholy, but it flitted along the edges or, when most direct, presented itself as lessons learned on the way to a richer experience of living. The most sustained expression of remorse came in the album’s opening track, “Girl from the North Country,” a song that first appeared on Dylan’s second album, *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan* (1963). However, if listeners’ expectations were thereby raised for the rhetorical equivalents of some of the songs on that early album, “A Hard Rain’s a-Gonna Fall,” “Blowin in the Wind,” or “Masters of War,” then they were quickly disabused. We can guess that the inclusion of “Girl from the North Country” was just as much a product of Johnny Cash’s appearance on the track as it was for the song’s fit to the material at hand. Yet “Girl from the North Country” did provide a look back at the kind of peripatetic journey that had been the focus of *John Wesley Harding*.

If you’re travelin’ in the north country fair
Where the winds hit heavy on the borderline
Remember me to one who lives there
For she once was a true love of mine.¹²¹

The themes of each of the albums, the rootlessness of *John Wesley Harding*’s wanderers and the romance of *Nashville Skyline*’s lovers, were essentially united in this stanza.

As if to dispel the cloud of melancholy, *Nashville Skyline* immediately segued into an instrumental, “Nashville Skyline Rag,” which reinforced that this album was about the experience of joy. Following on the heels of the instrumental were a series of homages to the pleasures of love. “To Be Alone with You” actually compelled the

¹²⁰ Paul Nelson, “*Nashville Skyline*: Bob Dylan,” *Rolling Stone Magazine*, May 31, 1969, 36.

¹²¹ Dylan, *Lyrics*, 54.

listener to dance with another person, a rare thing. There were times on *Nashville Skyline* when the reverent lawn-sitting and coffee-house adoration of upturned faces simply would not do. ‘To Be Alone With You’ began with exuberance and carried the listener along.

To be alone with you
Just you and me
Now won’t you tell me true
Ain’t that the way it oughta be?
To hold each other tight
The whole night through
Ev’rything is always right
When I’m alone with you.¹²²

This joy was, perhaps offhandedly but fittingly for the mood, attributed to the power of God. It was a sentiment common in country music but it was rare thing for the early Dylan to be praising anyone or any power. Yet there he was, telling his lover and his listeners,

I’ll always thank the Lord
When my working day’s through
I get my sweet reward
To be alone with you.¹²³

The sweet reward stood as an inspired proxy for the Heavenly one that seemed almost possible right here on earth.

On “I Threw it All Away,” the central theme of the entire album is reaffirmed by the strikingly direct lines:

Love is all there is, it makes the world go ’round
Love and only love, it can’t be denied
No matter what you think about it

¹²² Ibid., 239.

¹²³ Ibid., 239.

You just won't be able to do without it
Take a tip from one who's tried.¹²⁴

This then became the heart of Dylan's message, told without adornment, without recourse to metaphor. There was no attempt at justification or obfuscation. If Dylan's mystique was that of the poet hidden behind the layers of his own genius, than at least for this one moment he removed those trappings and spoke a common wisdom.

Bob Dylan never lacked for muses. Now however his interests were solidly fixated on his wife Sara and so it was the songs that celebrated love that conveyed the most inspiration. The lyrics of "Lay Lady Lay" in their written form appear to be a plea, but when sung in Dylan's crooning style they seemed much more confident as he enticed her to "Lay lady lay, lay across my big brass bed." So too, the words that followed emphasized both the lover's confidence in his amorous abilities, and the poet's control over his rhetorical powers. Dylan urged, "whatever colors you have in your mind / I'll show them to you and you'll see them shine."¹²⁵ While no singles had been mined from the depths of *John Wesley Harding*, "Lay Lady Lay" reached number five on the *Billboard* charts. Far from being some throwaway tune, "this song *defined* the *Nashville Skyline* sound and set the agenda for these sessions. It was also the only song he went back to at consecutive sessions, feeling that he had a song with some real potential."¹²⁶

It is a strange historical irony that the Dylan song that continues to receive the most radio play, and the song that was emblematic of his most successful album (at that time), remains so very different from almost everything else he has performed. Even after listening to the song numerous times, it is a shock to hear that sweet, urging voice come

¹²⁴ Ibid., 240.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 242.

¹²⁶ Clinton Heylin, *Revolution in the Air*, 386.

through the speakers, when we have been accustomed to the emblematic rasp of Dylan's typical style. "Lay Lady Lay" also works in counterpoint to the album's closing track, "Tonight I'll be Staying Here with You."

Throw my ticket out the window
Throw my suitcase out there, too
Throw my troubles out the door
I don't need them anymore
'Cause tonight I'll be staying here with you.¹²⁷

There could not be a more direct refutation of the peripatetic life of a musician on the road than these lines but Dylan, perhaps once again anticipating the future in his closing material, was only promising that he would be staying there tonight; he says nothing about the next. It was also an oddly prescient song, as soon enough Dylan would be back on the road, leaving behind the solace of his Woodstock home.

Nashville Skyline was a considerable commercial success, reaching number three on the charts. It introduced Dylan to a whole new audience and began the important process of displaying his ability to work within the many forms of American music, and to make them his own. He would later take this ability and adapt it so many times that he ultimately seemed capable of taking on any form he wanted. At the time *Nashville Skyline* was met with consternation by some of Dylan's most loyal fans, though on the whole the critical reception was positive. Looking back, Seth Rogovoy recalled,

That it came in the era of urban riots, violent antiwar demonstrations... [and] political assassinations was seen by some to be a reactionary slap in the face ... If rock music was the soundtrack to revolution, commercial country music was seen by the liberal intelligentsia and media elite as the domain of right-wing redneck culture. For Dylan to embrace this sound at this time was ... a sign of his idiosyncratic temperament at best or perversity of political will at worst.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Dylan, *Lyrics*, 246.

¹²⁸ Rogovoy, *Dylan: Prophet, Mystic, Poet*, 125-7.

At times the hostility to the record was based simply on its association with country music, betraying a contempt for the music that was shocking. Robert Christgau wrote of country music as being “naturally conservative...intensely chauvinistic, racist, majority-oriented and anti-aristocratic in the worst as well as the best sense” and bemoaned Dylan’s association with the form.¹²⁹ Still, the audience response was enthusiastic, and it became Dylan’s first million-selling record, perhaps underscoring the tension between a certain type of critical appraisal and popular enjoyment.

Yet despite Dylan’s obvious delight in his new life, it did not last. His marriage to Sara eventually dissolved under the pressures of fame, infidelity, and the personal difficulties to which the rich and successful are no more immune than anyone else. By the mid seventies Dylan had begun drinking to excess and there were also reports of various affairs and infidelities, a resumption of behavior that he had managed to avoid during most of his marriage. The actress Ruth Tyrangiel claimed to have begun a nineteen-year-long affair with Dylan during this time, and though she was never able to prove these allegations (after a long palimony suit that was dismissed in 1995), those around Dylan knew that he was not being faithful to his wife.¹³⁰ Sara was aware of his infidelity and so the couple separated in 1974, and finally divorced in 1977. For the briefest of moments Dylan had found his paradise even though he was unable to hold onto it. Perhaps if he had, his subsequent ruminations on human frailty and what he considered the inevitable apocalyptic conclusion to mankind’s time on earth would have been subsumed into a style more like *Nashville Skyline*’s exuberant and accepting take on human affairs.

¹²⁹ Christgau, “Rock ‘n’ Revolution,” <<http://www.villagevoice.com>.> Accessed April 17, 2011.

¹³⁰ Sounes, *Down the Highway*, 280-1.

CONCLUSION

During the weekend of August 15, 1969, hundreds of thousands of hippies descended on Max Yasgur's farm near Woodstock, New York. Of all the people there, of all those invited to perform, perhaps the person with the shortest commute would have been Bob Dylan, if he had decided to attend. Woodstock was held practically in the man's backyard and yet Dylan was nowhere to be found. According to journalist Al Aronowitz, "In essence, the Woodstock Festival was nothing but a call to Bob to come out and play."¹³¹ Dylan was horrified by the idea of thousands of people let loose near his home. Over-enthused fans had always been a problem for the singer, but with this development he feared their presence would become an unbearable nuisance. In 1984, recalling the difficulties he had encountered during the years surrounding Woodstock, Dylan complained:

It was like a wave of insanity breakin' loose around the house day and night...they kept comin.' We had to get out of there. This was just about the time of that Woodstock Festival, which was the sum total of all this bullshit ... I couldn't get any space for myself and my family, and there was no help, nowhere. I got very resentful about the whole thing, and we got out of there.¹³²

This was the impetus for Dylan to end his seclusion and to leave the country. First he agreed to perform at the Isle of Wight Festival on August 31, 1969. This trip, and the

¹³¹ Quoted in Heylin, *Behind the Shades Revisited*, 307.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 307.

question of how best to serve his children's education, led him then to return to New York City. Yet even here he could not escape the culture that he had helped to create and now despised.

Lookin' back, it really was a stupid thing to do. But there was a house available on MacDougal Street, and I always remembered that as a nice place. So I just bought this house, sight unseen. But it wasn't the same when we got back. The Woodstock Nation had overtaken MacDougal Street also. There'd be crowds outside my house.¹³³

As if in response to this constant attention and adulation, Dylan released the near-universally despised *Self-Portrait* in June of 1970. A collection of mostly covers with a few originals thrown in, *Self-Portrait's* main contribution to the world of artistic expression probably resides, not in its own merits, but in the most famous album review of all time. Greil Marcus asked a question that has yet to be fully answered: "What is this shit?"¹³⁴ Dylan himself would later claim that "we released that album to get people off my back. They would not like me anymore. That's . . . the reason that album was put out, so people would just at that time stop buying my records, and they did."¹³⁵ If that was Dylan's actual intention, and not a plan he invented in retrospect to account for the poor quality of the album, then the plan backfired. *Self-Portrait* reached number four on the U.S. charts and was another number one hit for Dylan in the U.K. However, this enthusiasm was more a product of Dylan's mystique, rather than a reaction to the actual content of the album.

Self-Portrait was the last of Dylan's straightforward country albums, and yet Dylan never really stopped making country music; he merely submerged it into his own

¹³³ Ibid., 312.

¹³⁴ Greil Marcus, "Self Portrait No. 25," *Rolling Stone Magazine*, July 23, 1970, 16.

¹³⁵ Quoted in Heylin, *Behind the Shades Revisited*, 313.

brew of Americana. At the same time he never divested himself of his infatuation with the apocalypse. If anything his interest only intensified in the years subsequent to these albums. So if *Nashville Skyline* worked as an inversion of *John Wesley Harding*, it did so only briefly, and only under the specific circumstances of Dylan's retreat from the world and embrace of his married life. When those things were removed, he was back in it again, back on that same journey, still unsure if it was headed towards "Lincoln County Road or Armageddon."¹³⁶

Of the two themes identified here, Dylan's brush with country music has surely been the most influential. Once he opened the door, others were free to walk through. Divisions between music styles have always been fluid. There are those artists who exult in the conventions of their genre and who insist on a type of purity in its articulation that others find confining. The purist approach is perhaps best typified by the behavior of a drunken Charlie Rich during the 1975 Country Music Awards. The previous year Rich had been voted the Entertainer of the Year, and so was present to bestow that same honor on the next year's winner. But when he opened the envelope he stopped when he saw the name John Denver. Instead of announcing the result he stepped back and lit the envelope on fire.¹³⁷ Since that time the world of country music has suffered numerous invasions from the larger world of popular music. The boundaries of music styles are only sensible insofar as they are useful to the artist and the audience. For musicians like Dylan, they remain things to be played with and then to be ignored if they become a hindrance. Folk music was his first love, country music simply an extension of that love. In time Dylan

¹³⁶ Dylan, "Señor (Tales of Yankee Power)," *Lyrics*, 390.

¹³⁷ Colin Escott, "Charlie Rich," in *The Encyclopedia of Country Music*, ed. Paul Kingsbury (New York: Oxford University Press), 442-3.

may be seen, not as a musician who wrote a couple of country albums, but as one who most fully expressed the possibilities of American roots music. As he himself recalled, “I was always with the traditional song.”¹³⁸ As an artist, Dylan has exhibited that rare combination of a unique and identifiable voice, and also the gift of being able to write songs that sound as though they are covers of songs written long ago. *John Wesley Harding* and *Nashville Skyline* embody these two extremes. In them Dylan created country songs both deeply personal and surprisingly universal, and he did so in a manner compelling enough to bring the rest of us along with him.

¹³⁸ Shelton, *No Direction Home*, 399.

Works Cited

Primary Sources

Allen, Lynne. "Interview with an Icon." *Trouser Press*. June 1979.

Billboard Magazine. 1965-1973

Christgau, Robert. "Rock 'n' Revolution." *Village Voice*. July 1969.

Cohen, John and Happy Traum. "Conversations with Bob Dylan." *Sing Out!* Oct/Nov 1968. 14-20.

Cott, Jonathan. *Bob Dylan: The Essential Interviews*. New York: Wenner Books, 2006.

Dylan, Bob. *Blood on the Tracks*. Columbia Records, 1975.

---. *Chronicles: Vol. I*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004.

---. *Desire*. Columbia Records, 1976.

---. *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*. Columbia Records, 1963.

---. *John Wesley Harding*. Columbia Records, 1967.

---. "A Message." <<http://www.corliss-lamont.org/dylan.htm>>

---. *Nashville Skyline*. Columbia Records, 1969.

---. *Lyrics: 1962-2001*. New York: Simon and Shuster, 2001.

---. *Slow Train Coming*. Columbia Records, 1979.

---. "Speech Given Before the National Emergency Civil Liberties Committee," New York, December 13, 1963, <<http://www.corliss-lamont.org/dylan.htm>>

---. *Street Legal*. Columbia Records, 1978.

- . *Time Out of Mind*. Columbia Records, 1979.
- . *The Times They Are a-Changin.* ' Columbia Records, 1964.
- . *Bootleg Series Vol. 9 – The Witmark Demos: 1962 – 196.*, Columbia Records, 2010.
- “Dylan’s Country Pie.” *Newsweek*. April 14, 1969.
- Eliot, T.S. “Philip Massinger.” *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*. New York: Mariner Books, 1975.
- Flippo, Chet. “Nashville Drummer Kenny Buttree Dead at 59.” *Country Music Television News*. Sept.. 13, 2004. <cmt.com> (April 23, 2010).
- Ginsberg, Allen. *Howl and Other Poems*. Berkeley: City Lights, 2001.
- Hardin, John Wesley. *The Life of John Wesley Hardin as Written by Himself*. 3rd Ed. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977.
- Lindsay, Hal. “How Obama Prepped World for Antichrist.” *World Net Daily*. August 1, 2008.
- . *The Late Great Planet Earth*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1970.
- Loder, Kurt. “Review of *Saved*.” *Rolling Stone Magazine*. September 18, 1980, <<http://www.rollingstone.com/music/albumreviews/saved-19800918>.> Accessed April 12, 2011.
- . *The Late Great Planet Earth*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1972.
- Malone, Bill C. and David Stricklin, *Southern Music/American Music*. 2nd Ed. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2003.
- Marcus, Greil. “Review of John Wesley Harding.” *Rolling Stone Magazine*. May 1968.
- . “Self Portrait No. 25.” *Rolling Stone Magazine*. July 23, 1970. 16-18.
- Miller. “Bob Dylan,” *Witness* 2. Summer/Fall 1988.
- Mills, Gordon. “Review of John Wesley Harding.” *Rolling Stone Magazine*. Feb 24, 1968. 21-22.
- Nelson, Paul. “Nashville Skyline: Bob Dylan.” *Rolling Stone Magazine*. May 31, 1969.

53.

No Direction Home: Bob Dylan. Directed by Martin Scorsese. Paramount, Sept 20, 2005.

“Recordings: Back to the Roots.” *Time Magazine*. Album Review. April 11, 1969.

Rosenbaum, Ron. “Interview.” *Playboy*. March 1978.

Saal, Hubert. “Dylan is Back.” *Newsweek* 71. February 16, 1968: 92-93.

“Statistical information about casualties of the Vietnam War.” *National Archives*.
<http://www.archives.gov>.

St. Augustine. *City of God*. Trans. Demetrius Zema and Gerald Walsh. Ed. Vernon J. Bourke. New York: Imagine Books, 1958.

Wenner, Jann. “Country Music Goes to the Heart of Dylan Songs.” *Rolling Stone Magazine*. May 1968. 1, 14.

Younger than that Now: The Collected Interviews with Bob Dylan. New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2004.

Secondary Sources

Ankeny, Jason. “Biography of Charlie McCoy.” Allmusic, n.d. <allmusic.com> (April 23, 2010).

Dettmar, Kevin. *The Cambridge Companion to Bob Dylan*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Doggett, Peter. *Are You Ready for the Country: Elvis, Dylan, Parsons and the Roots of Country Rock*. New York: Penguin Books, 2000.

Gilmour, Michael. *The Gospel According to Bob Dylan: The Old, Old Story for Modern Times*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011.

---. *Tangled Up in the Bible: Bob Dylan & Scripture*. New York: Continuum, 2004.

Harris, Craig. “Biography of Pete Drake.” Allmusic.com, n.d. <allmusic.com> (April 23, 2010).

Heylin, Clinton. *Bob Dylan: Behind the Shades Revisited*. New York: HarperCollins, 2001.

- Bob Dylan: The Recording Sessions, 1960-1994*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1997.
- . *Revolution in the Air: The Songs of Bob Dylan, 1957-1973*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2009.
- . *Still on the Road: The Songs of Bob Dylan, 1974-2006*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2010.
- Karnow, Stanley. *Vietnam: A History*. 2nd Ed. New York: Penguin, 1997.
- Kingsbury, Paul, ed. *The Encyclopedia of Country Music: The Ultimate Guide to the Music*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Malone, Bill. *Don't Get Above Your Raisin': Country Music and the Southern Working Class*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006.
- McGregor, Craig. *Bob Dylan: The Early Years: A Retrospective*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1990.
- Perlstein, Rick. *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus*. New York: Nation Books, 2001.
- Ricks, Christopher. *Dylan's Visions of Sin*. New York: Ecco, 2005.
- Riley, Tim. *Hard Rain: A Dylan Commentary*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1999.
- Rogovoy, Seth. *Bob Dylan: Prophet, Mystic, Poet*. New York: Scribner, 2009.
- Santoro, Gene. *Highway 61 Revisited: The Tangled Roots of American Jazz, Blues, Rock, and Country Music*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Robert Shelton. *No Direction Home: The Life and Music of Bob Dylan*. New York: Beech Tree Books, 1986.
- Shumway, David R. "Bob Dylan as Cultural Icon." *The Cambridge Companion to Bob Dylan*, Ed. Kevin J.H. Dettmar. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Sounes, Howard. *Down the Highway: The Life of Bob Dylan*. New York: Grove Press, 2001.
- Swift, Jonathan. "The Battle of the Books." *A Modest Proposal and Other Works*. New York: Dover Publications, 1996.
- Varesi, Anthony. *The Bob Dylan Albums: A Critical Study*. New York: Guernica Editions, 2002.

Vernezze, Peter and Carl Porter, eds. *Bob Dylan and Philosophy*. New York: Open Court, 2005.

Wilenz, Sean. *Bob Dylan in America*. New York: Doubleday, 2010.

Young, Marilyn Blatt. *The Vietnam Wars: 1945-1990*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1991.

VITA

Adam Clay Griffey was born and raised in the Carolinas. He holds degrees in English and History from Berea College and Appalachian State University. He began Ph.D. studies in English Literature in the Fall of 2011 at the University of South Carolina – Columbia.