# Chronicles

***Volume One***

BOB DYLAN

*Simon &Schuster, $24.00 cloth, ISBN 0-7432-2815-4*

Many notable American musicians have succumbed to the memoir urge. Louis Armstrong, Miles Davis, Woody Guthrie, and Ray Charles all published autobiographies—usually aided by a ghostwriter or compiled from interviews and packaged as an "as told to"—and the personal accounts of Sidney Bechet and W.C. Handy, for example, provide an invaluable look at the social and musical circumstances that birthed the modern shaping of roots traditions. But a memoir by Bob Dylan—straight up, no less, with no collaborator or interviewer—must spell trouble, or so one presumes. Dylan's literary and cinematic side projects are notoriously, bemusedly uneven, none more so than his first attempt at a book, the 1966 stream-of-consciousness novel *Tarantula*. Luckily, *Chronicles: Volume One* does not belong in this company. Despite an initially puzzling chronology that skips ahead 9 and 19 years at a time, the book is intelligent, lucid, and highly readable, and contains the best account yet of Dylan's youthful apprenticeship during the Greenwich Village folk boom. The story is by no means comprehensive—those eager for a firsthand take on the booing at Newport in 1965 and other famous events will be disappointed—but even this seems agreeably Dylanesque. There is no Dylan, of course, without mystery and enigma, so how can we ask him to change now?

The book begins with a portrait of Dylan as a young folksinger recently signed to Columbia Records and flashes back through the months after his arrival in New York from Minnesota in January 1961. Dylan's teenage energy and angst are keenly felt in these first 100 pages, as he skillfully renders his excitement and confusion in coming from the dreary, staid Midwest to the cultured downtown blocks of Manhattan. He plays any gig he can find, moving from coffeehouse to coffeehouse and collecting change in his guitar case. Gradually, his inner voice begins to sound:

> *You just don't wake up one day and decide that you need to write songs. Opportunities may come along for you to convert something—something that exists into something that didn't yet. … Now destiny was about to manifest itself. I felt like it was looking right at me and nobody else.*

Turn the page, though, and there is no description of a frantic night spent composing something like "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall," but rather a sudden, unexpected leap forward to 1970 when Dylan was trying to live quietly with his wife and children in Woodstock to escape hostile fans and relentless media attention. Describing the songs that would eventually become *New Morning*, Dylan is candid about the direction of his music in those years, what many consider to be the beginning of a long decline in creative brilliancy.

> *I felt like these songs could blow away in cigar smoke. … That my records were still selling surprised even me. Maybe there were good songs in the grooves and maybe there weren't—who knows? But they weren't the kind where you hear an awful roaring in your head.*

These tensions are not resolved until the late 1980s, the setting for the memoir's fourth chapter. "The previous ten years had left me pretty whitewashed and wasted out professionally," Dylan says, but now he can see the way out of his slump:

> *Instead of being stranded somewhere at the beginning of the story, I was actually in the prelude to the beginning of another one. … It might be interesting to start up again, put myself in the service of the public. I also knew that it would take years to perfect and refine this idiom, but because of my fame and reputation, the opportunity would be there.*

Thanks to these moments, the structure of the book gradually begins to justify itself—the eras chosen correspond roughly to the dawning of Dylan's songwriting sensibility, its subsequent loss, and the attempt, in later years, to reclaim it.

But why skip the works of the 1960s altogether? Maybe he's saving those albums for a future volume of this ongoing project. Generally, though Dylan is eager to record his aspiration and intellectual curiosity, success and satisfaction are nowhere to be found in this book. He writes only about hardship, about searching for a songwriting voice that he is too young to find or too washed up to recover. *Chronicles* depicts in turn a 19-year-old nobody, a 30-year-old icon artistically complacent and embittered with fame, and a middle-aged singer with a mangled hand who knows how to come back but lacks the energy and instinct to do so. If Dylan ever wrote a memorable tune, this memoir won't tell you. *Blood on the Tracks*, perhaps the greatest album recorded in any genre during the 1970s, receives only this cryptic reference:

> *Eventually I would even record an entire album based on Chekhov short stories—critics thought it was autobiographical.*

Other provocative moments of his life are slighted. The visitation of Jesus to his hotel room and the conversion to Christianity in 1978? Not a word. His divorces? Nothing. Dylan clearly covets privacy and, resenting the effects celebrity has had on his life, is reluctant to add anything that could further the already dramatic and hyped "Myth of Bob."

What Dylan *does* reveal, though, is ultimately of greater value than what he conceals, especially the passages in the New York section that anatomize his evolution from folk interpreter to songwriter. Recalling an episode that cannot be found in any biography on Dylan, he writes of days spent in the reading room of the New York Public Library, scrutinizing Civil War-era newspaper clippings:

> *After a while you become aware of nothing but a culture of feeling, of black days, of schism, evil for evil, the common destiny of the human being getting thrown off course. It's all one long funeral song. … The age that I was living in didn't resemble this age, but yet it did in some mysterious and traditional way. Not just a little bit, but a lot. … If you turned the light towards it, you could see the full complexity of human nature. Back there,*

*America was put on the cross, died and was resurrected. ... The godawful truth of that would be the all-encompassing template behind everything that I would write.*

Here Dylan describes the formation of a songwriting aesthetic that would take him 40 years to realize, for it wasn't until 2001's *Love and Theft* that this imagined world came fully to life. An album based on the magpie mode of writing, making lyrical allusions to everyone from Robert Johnson to F. Scott Fitzgerald, set in the Civil War with cameos by George Lewes, Charles Darwin, and others, *Love and Theft* is the apotheosis of that "all-encompassing template," his greatest conjuring of Americana to date. *Chronicles*' ode to the Village and its remembered legends enriches our understanding and appreciation of *Love and Theft* (and vice versa), proving that there is probably more at stake in those songs than simply a thirst for allusion. What better way to honor the heady, passionate days of youth than by sublimating "The Coo Coo Bird"—a standard that Dylan took from *The Anthology of American Folk Music* and incorporated into his 1962 sets—into "High Water," written in 2001?

If Dylan is really, as David Gates recently termed him in *Newsweek* (October 4, 2004), "the most influential cultural figure now alive," one is struck while reading *Chronicles* by how accidental a coronation this was:

*I really was never any more than what I was—a folk musician. … I wasn't a preacher performing miracles. It would have driven anybody mad.*

The book's gentle, straightforward tone atrophies the popular conception of Dylan as an eccentric genius incapable of communicating with anyone but the demons and muses. And if not the best primer of Dylan's life, *Chronicles* is sure to be met with appreciation by most members of the songwriter's following. Those who study anything and everything Dylan have several thousand fresh words to pore over, a new recipe for secret handshakes. And those who have longed instead for a private, intelligent explanation of his art now have, in those pages devoted to the confluence of America's past and present, as good a one as they're ever likely to get. "He who's not busy being born is busy dying," Dylan wrote in his early 20s, and the welcome look at his restless youth and rough middle age afforded by *Chronicles* confirms a few things about the man that we have long suspected. He's a protean and exacting perfectionist who, even in his early 60s, is still coming blessedly of age. ■

---

REVIEWER: **Benjamin Hedin** is on the English faculty of Long Island University and writes widely on American music and literature. He is at work on a novel and is the editor of the recently published *Studio A: The Bob Dylan Reader* (Norton).