

Can This Really Be The End?

Or...

How a Definitive Dylan Boxed Set Became Just Another Motley Collection of Studio Outtakes

by Clinton Heylin

In November 1985 Columbia Records issued a five album/three-CD retrospective of Bob Dylan's career titled *Biograph*. It came at a time when Dylan's commercial standing was in marked decline. His June release, *Empire Burlesque*, had become only the second Dylan studio album since *Another Side Of Bob Dylan* (1964) to fail to dent the Top 30. *Biograph* was a cornucopia of important unreleased songs, tired resurrections of official "classics" spanning Dylan's 25 year career and the odd smattering of live highlights from the peak Dylan tours of 1966, 1975 and 1981.

Yet wrapped up in a chunky box, complete with Dylan's own ruminations on a kaleidoscopic career and even an observation or two on the songs included on this retrospective (a la Neil Young's *Decade*), this Instant Bob Dylan Record Collection became

only the second such boxed set to crack the *Billboard* Top 50 (the other was the eight album *Elvis Aron Presley*). Indeed, it peaked at the same chart position as *Empire Burlesque* (#33) and remained on the charts some five weeks longer—an astonishing achievement given the set's relative expense and the fact that it featured only 16 previously unreleased recordings among its 53 cuts.

If Dylan had previously been responsible for some of the most important innovations in rock music, never had he so unconsciously inspired a revolution as he did with *Biograph*. Sure, there had been boxed set retrospectives before *Biograph*, though corporate mentality generally seemed to require the artist to be dead before such exercises could be considered. But it was this compilation which spawned a flood of similar anthologies, which has meant the nearly complete repackaging of rock 'n' roll's brief history.

Partially, *Biograph* was merely a fluke. The fact is that only through a series of miscalculations and poor marketing decisions was the set released at the onslaught of the CD revolution, which undoubtedly played a large part in its success. With a then 72-minute limit on CD playing time, compared with 40 or 50 minutes on vinyl (the limit to be able to obtain a reasonable sonic return) *Biograph* on CD cost only marginally more than the vinyl version.

Ironically, the set was never planned with CD in mind. Its compiler, Jeff Rosen, had attempted to group material together by album side, based on some loose criteria (acoustic, cranked up R&R, love songs, etc.), à la Japanese Sony's 1978 three-album Dylan compilation, *Masterpieces*. Such a sense of coherence was lost on the CD, as indeed were two tracks pulled at the last minute in order to squeeze the 53 songs onto





three CD's ("Medicine Sunday" — the one-verse prototype for "Temporary Like Achilles" — and "If You Gotta Go, Go Now", the latter of which is now featured on the *Bootleg Series Volumes 1-3* Dylan boxed set).

Biograph had first been discussed as a possible release as far back as March 1983, when Dave Marsh was commissioned to write sleeve notes for the set. Indeed, the set as released, except for the addition of a demo of "Forever Young" and the two deletions mentioned above, corresponded exactly to the version then devised. It would have been released in the fall of 1984 were it not for the late decision to issue a leaden and shambolic representation of Dylan's 1984 European tour, *Real Live*, instead.

If *Biograph* was not originally conceived with CD in mind, Columbia's next major boxed set project certainly was—the long-awaited Springsteen live anthology, *Live 1975-85*. Like *Biograph*, *Live 1975-85* was released shortly before Christmas, presumably to exploit the larger spending power of the consumer at this traditionally generous time of the year. Likewise, it was confined to three CD's or five like-priced albums. The hysteria which surrounded the much-hyped release of the Springsteen live set, which seemed to reflect the scale of his legendary marathon performances, actually prompted Columbia to massively overestimate the set's sales potential.

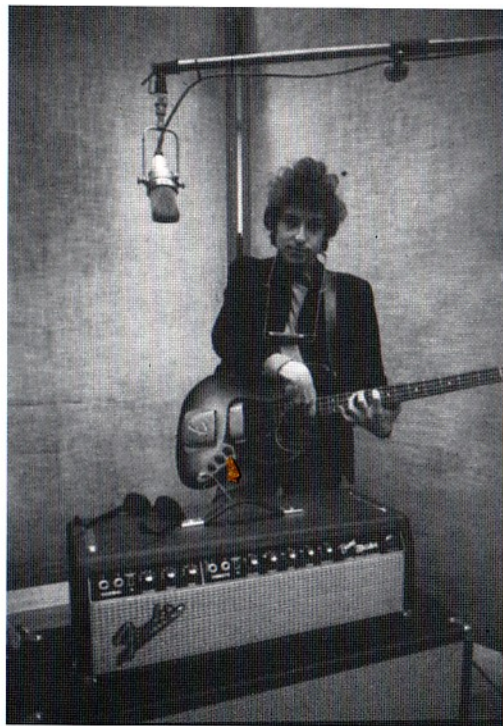
Unlike the Dylan set, which was the sort of instant retrospective of a major artist's career that would continue to sell consistently (as indeed it has), *Live 1975-85* may have been a set awaited with proverbial bated breath by Springsteen's hardcore fans and the new legions which wanted a souvenir of Springsteen à la the *Born In The U.S.A.* Tour but it was hardly likely to appeal to the casual purchaser who wanted a fair retrospective of the man's career (in the studio *or* live).

The average *Live 1975-85* buyer's profile was therefore almost entirely composed of fans who would stand in line on day one eager to transfer the Springsteen live experience from stage to apartment or condo. But the long-term potential of the set was extremely limited, especially when the first spate of reviews all noted the limitations of a set which had neutered any serious representation of Springsteen's peak touring years (1975-78). There seemed instead to be an avarice to represent the *Born In The U.S.A.* tour on an unwarranted and unrepresentative scale, thus ensuring that these willing new legions were not dissuaded from parting with their hard-earned cash when they saw 10-minute covers of Animals songs.

Live 1975-85, by spring 1987, was commonly marked down as low as half-price simply to shift the huge number of units Columbia—the greatest victim of its own hype—had inadvertently pressed up. Columbia did, however, learn one important lesson from its experience with *Live 1975-85*: vinyl was truly dead. Even the fact that it had pressed fewer vinyl copies of the set than cassette or CD—the first such occasion—did not prevent a vast mountain of returned or remaindered vinyl box sets.

And so to 1990, and Columbia's return to pre-eminence in the boxed set stakes. In the interim the other major labels had come to realize that a substantial current commercial profile was not necessary in order to sell large numbers of boxed sets. Thus Atlantic, for example, managed to garner both considerable plaudits and healthy sales for the superb three-CD *Otis Redding Story* in 1987 (for which compiler Rob Bowman was nominated for a Grammy), though Redding fell into a more traditional subject matter for boxed sets, i.e. he was dead. In fact, all that was seemingly required for such a set was a halfway decent span of time (say, a decade) when artist X was a creative force. Thus David Bowie (*Sound & Vision*), the Rolling Stones (the shameful *Singles*





Collection from London), Eric Clapton (*Crossroads*), and the Band (*To Kingdom Come*) have all had their own anthologies roll off the presses with encouraging sales.

In December 1989, the premier CD newsletter, *ICE* (International CD Exchange), announced: "Robert Johnson Tribute Leads New CBS Blues Line." The plan was a double-CD of all extant Johnson recordings, including alternate takes, a la RCA's Presley Sun Sessions, to launch a new blues reissue series and to also launch a new image for the label.

While Columbia worked on its first foray into the blues mass-market CD set, it simultaneously began to upgrade its image in terms of its CD reissues of back catalog, damage by such debacles as having to master one of the most revered albums in its back catalog, *Blonde On Blonde*, four times and release it three times before getting the full album on CD, and still using a tape several generations down from either the stereo or mono masters used for the original vinyl releases. Columbia also desired a renewed assault on the CD retrospective market it pioneered back in 1985. As the first paragraph of *ICE*'S lead story in its May 1990 issue said, "CBS continues to make serious strides in improving its catalog reissue program on CD, which was stung by criticism throughout most of the 80's for its lack of creativity. Upcoming special projects due later this year include a single-disc Hollies collection, a double-CD retrospective on Poco, a triple-CD ELO package and probably a four-CD Byrds boxed set. Sources promise that each will be special in terms of packaging, sound quality and rare tracks."

The four-CD self-titled Byrds retrospective and the two-CD Robert Johnson really launched Columbia's new image — both were packaged in 12- by 6-inch boxed sets

with the prerequisite booklet containing notes, a discography, critical perspective, etc.—that fall. In the euphoria of the plaudits both sets collected (justifiably), Columbia ignored the industry ridicule which greeted the concept of the 12- by 6-inch boxed set. The new sets could not be filed with passe vinyl collections a la *Biograph* (in its 12- by 12-inch box), nor could they sit comfortably with the rows of 6- by 6-inch jewel cases which now lined up next to most hi-fi's through the land.

Columbia also displayed a most worrying misunderstanding of the CD medium with both sets. It is well known that Robert Johnson only recorded two batches of sessions (three in November 1936 and two in June 1937). Of the 41 songs featured on *The Complete Recordings*, 22 were recorded in November 1936, 19 were recorded in June 1937. The logical separation point of the CDs should have been an obvious one between the two batches of sessions. Instead Columbia simply divided the songs down the middle and devised a 20/21 divide, thus leaving two of the November 1936 cuts on the June 1937 CD.

As if this did not smack of a return to Columbia's early inability to deal with the CD medium on its own terms, a far greater disservice was performed on the otherwise exemplary Byrds boxed set. The greatest surprise and most welcomed inclusions on the Byrds set were the long-thought-destroyed Gram Parsons vocal takes of three songs from the *Sweetheart Of The Rodeo* album. Indeed, with the equally welcome inclusion of three excellent *Sweetheart* outtakes and five of the original album's own cuts, it would be fair to consider that the set's compilers had intended to present an alternate (and more successful) version of what is considered the first country-rock album. However, any sense of this "concept" and the history of this crucial period in the Byrds' development has been lost by neatly subdividing these 11 products of the



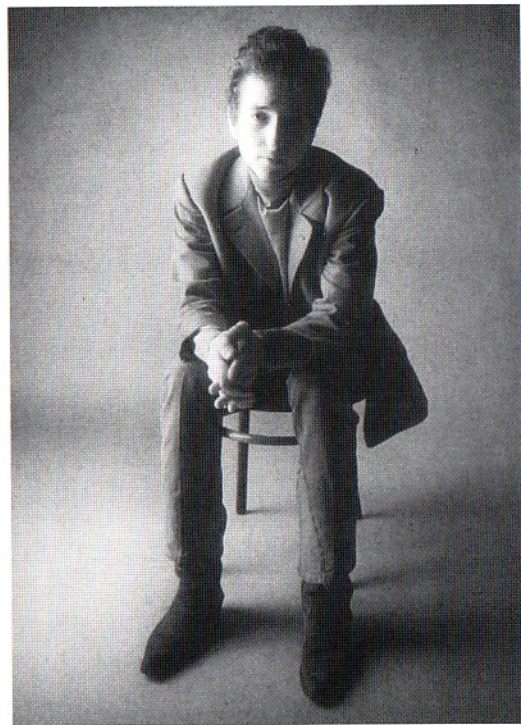
Sweetheart sessions over two CDs (with a six-to-five split). And before Columbia considers arguing that CD running time requirements forced this division, such a position does not bear close examination.

Which finally brings us to Columbia's March release of Bob Dylan's three-CD boxed-set *The Bootleg Series Volumes 1-3 [Rare & Unreleased] 1961-1991*, entirely composed of previously unreleased material. Sadly, this release is the result of some of the most ludicrous and ill-considered thinking that can have been brought to bear on a major artist's work.

Compiler Jeff Rosen was also responsible for the choice of songs on the previous Dylan boxed set, *Biograph*, and is credited as having had a hand in the Byrds boxed set. As an employee of Dylan's music publishing company and one who is in regular contact with some of the most important Dylan collectors in the world, his credentials would seem to be impeccable for compiling a CD set entirely composed of unreleased Dylan recordings.

Or maybe not. When the possibility of a further Dylan boxed set was first reported in the Dylan fanzine, *The Telegraph*, in May 1990, it was suggested that there could be up to 10 albums' worth of unreleased songs issued and that the set was planned to coincide with Dylan's 50th birthday this May. A 10-CD set was never remotely practical and it soon devolved to a four-CD boxed set along the lines of the Byrds box. But still, it was supposed to be "entirely composed of unreleased material."

Now, it is inevitable that the record companies will have soon released chunky retrospectives of all the first-rung artists they have in mind for such sets, and as such the





future seems to lie with either second-rung artists or second-time-around sets for major artists, those who justify a companion set which caters more to the collector's market than the instant record collection variety. The sets to date have been received as mixed blessings by collectors because they—rightly—see them as an expensive way of obtaining only a smattering of unreleased material and a great deal of already available material.

No serious Bowie fan *needs* the bulk of the songs on the three-CD *Sound & Vision*, but that fan is required to purchase it to obtain a handful of unreleased songs which would have been best utilized as extra tracks on the CDs of the relevant album. What most collectors crave are sets which collect the best of an artists unreleased *oeuvre*, particularly when the artist is notorious for leaving some of the very best songs off of their official albums; in Columbia's case, Dylan and Springsteen spring to mind. As such it was hoped that this second Dylan set, *The Bootleg Series*, would offer the collector the sort of set *Biograph* was never going to be.

Sadly, despite the undoubted worth of much that is included on the released version of volume one (to three) of *The Bootleg Series*, it is not the set it should be. When the tentative track listing for the Dylan set filtered out at the beginning of the year, hardcore Dylan fans were delighted that the bulk of extant, worthwhile, unreleased Dylan studio material had been included on the four-CD set. The essential periods in Dylan's unreleased catalog were all well represented—the folk-rock era, the *Blood On The Tracks-Desire* "return to form" and his early '80s trio of "albums that might have been...", i.e., *Shot Of Love*, *Infidels* and *Empire Burlesque*.

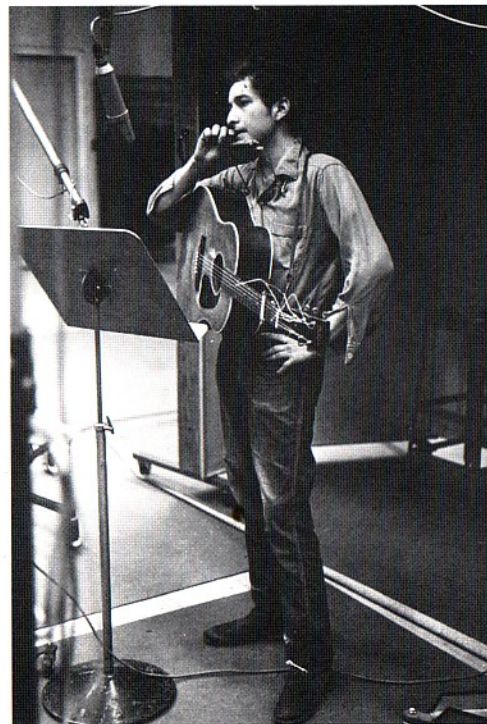
The only major omissions were a trio of essential Dylan compositions from his *Basement Tapes* sessions with the Band ("I'm Not There," "Sign On The Cross" and

"All You Have To Do Is Dream"), a couple of particularly important 1980 demos (the seven-verse "Yonder Comes Sin" and the original "Caribbean Wind") and the *Empire Burlesque* outtake of "Brownsville Girl," originally entitled "New Danville Girl."

Though there was still considerable emphasis on minor songs omitted from Dylan's early albums (which were, quite simply, inferior to the released songs), the four-CD set seemed manna from heaven to Dylan Fans, particularly after the way that Columbia and the Band's Robbie Robertson had so badly represented the *Basement Tapes* on the 1975 double set and considering the lack of adequate unreleased songs or alternate live performances of official songs on 1971's *More Greatest Hits* or 1985's *Biograph*.

It was not to be. As January progressed into February each day seemed to bring details of songs being cut from the set, until finally the compiler came clean. *The Bootleg Series Volumes 1-4* was now *The Bootleg Series Volumes 1-3*. The set was also being rush-released in early March to "coincide" with the presentation of a lifetime achievement award to Dylan at the February Grammy Awards ceremony in New York. No longer a celebration of 50 years on this earth or indeed 30 years on Columbia (though CBS seems to be trying to convince us March 1991 is the anniversary of Dylan's CBS signing, even if it was really October when he made his first recordings for them), *The Bootleg Series* is a boxed set out of time.

Did the marketing minions at Columbia-Sony seriously conceive of a casual purchaser seeing Dylan on the Grammy Awards and then convincing himself he needs a three-CD set of unreleased songs? Even they do not seem entirely convinced by their own illogic as they attempted to re-promote *Biograph* alongside *The Bootleg Series* (also





issued in the ludicrous 12- by 6-inch format). Why have the powers that be decided to issue a three-CD set in preference to four? The reason—that-is-no-reason is apparently the price. Apparently, Sony marketing wisdom is that a three-CD set at just under \$40, rather than a four-CD set at just over \$50, will sell twice as many copies.

If we may reiterate the Sex Pistol's wisdom: *bullocks!* What sort of mentality cannot realize that anyone who is prepared to buy a three-CD set of *wholly unreleased* material by an artist, will be prepared to buy four? If market research says otherwise, market research is pure fantasy. Such thinking betrays people who are missing the point—that this set is meant to represent Dylan's great lost songs and alternate studio performances; that such a set is entirely geared toward the collector and therefore should retain its internal integrity; that collectors are sick and tired of having people with no credibility, or even appreciation of the music, decide for them what they can and cannot hear. As Paul Cable wrote, back in 1978, in his *Dylan: The Unreleased Recordings*, in relation to the amount of bootlegging Dylan has engendered: "With Dylan it could be argued that a record company which omits 'I Shall Be Released' and 'Mighty Quinn' from *The Basement Tapes* albums deserves anything it gets."

So what have Dylan fans lost with the aborting of *Bootleg Series Volume 4*? Well, to paraphrase Mr. Cable, how *can* one feel toward any record company which omits the exquisite "Dink's Blues" (from the December 1961 hotel tape), "I Heard That Lonesome Whistle" (*Freewheelin'* outtake)," "Guess I'm Doing Fine" (Witmark demo 1964), the alternate "It's All Over Now Baby Blue" (January 1965), a previously uncirculated outtake of "Positively Fourth Street," the solo piano version of the sublime "She's Your Lover Now," a *Basement Tapes* outtake titled "Silent Weekend," an alternate slower version of "You're Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go," the





of it all, that they issue three CDs of unreleased Dylan material, including some of Dylan's greatest-ever works (i.e. "Moonshiner," "Farewell Angelina," "She's Your Lover Now," "I Shall Be Released," "Angelina," "Blind Willie McTell," "Foot Of Pride" and the original "When The Night Comes Falling From The Sky"), and all they receive for their troubles is criticisms of their efforts. Such an attitude is symptomatic of the problem, that "any scrap thrown to us should be gratefully accepted." Some, however, may prefer an ethic that goes: If a job's worth doing, it's worth doing well.

[Ed. note: Jeff Rosen and Bob Dylan both declined invitations from *Goldmine* to be interviewed about the new boxed set and this article's allegations.]

1. **BLACK CROSS** —
recorded by Tony Glover in Bonnie Beecher's apartment,
Minneapolis, 22 December, 1961.
2. **I WAS YOUNG WHEN I LEFT HOME** —
recorded by Tony Glover in Bonnie Beecher's apartment,
Minneapolis, 22 December 1961.
3. **BALLAD FOR A FRIEND** —
recorded for Leeds Music as a publisher's demo,
New York, January 1962
4. **HERO BLUES** —
recorded for 'The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan' in Columbia Studios,
New York, 6 December 1962.
5. **WHATCHA GONNA DO?** —
recorded for 'The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan' in Columbia Studios,
New York, 6 December 1962.
6. **TOMORROW IS A LONG TIME** —
recorded for Witmark Music as a publisher's demo,
New York, probably in December 1962.
7. **MILK COW BLUES** —
recorded for 'The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan' in Columbia Studios,
New York, 24 April 1962.





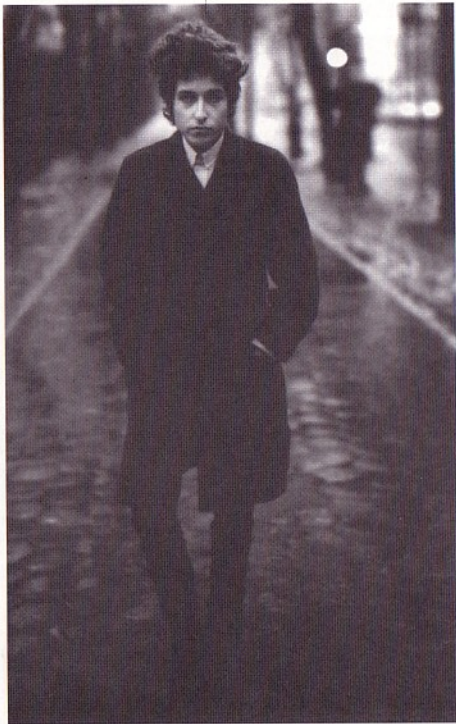
8. ROCKS AND GRAVEL —
this stereo cut was scheduled to appear on the original version of 'The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan'. It was recorded in Columbia Studios, New York, 13 November, 1962.
9. YOU'VE BEEN HIDING TOO LONG —
recorded at the New York Town Hall, 12 April 1963.
10. FAREWELL —
recorded for Witmark Music as a publisher's demo, New York, probably in December 1963.
11. BABY, LET ME FOLLOW YOU DOWN —
recorded for Witmark Music as a publishers demo, New York, probably in January 1964.
12. THAT'S ALRIGHT MAMA/SALLY FREE AND EASY —
recorded for 'Another Side Of Bob Dylan' in Columbia Studios, New York, 9 June 1964.
13. BOB DYLAN'S NEW ORLEANS RAG —
recorded for 'Another Side Of Bob Dylan' in Columbia Studios, New York, 9 June 1964.
14. YOU DON'T HAVE TO DO THAT —
recorded for 'Bringing It All Back Home' in Columbia Studios, New York, 13 January 1965.

15. CAN YOU PLEASE CRAWL OUT YOUR WINDOW —
this take was issued accidentally, in place of 'Positively Fourth Street', on early copies of that 45. It was recorded for 'Highway 61 Revisited' in Columbia Studios, New York, 16 June 1965.
16. DESOLATION ROW —
recorded for 'Highway 61 Revisited' in Columbia Studios, New York, 30 July 1965. This 'electric' version was superceded by the original take.
17. FREEZE OUT —
recorded at Sunset Sound Studios, Los Angeles, 30 November/1 December, 1965.
18. SHE'S YOUR LOVER NOW —
recorded at Columbia Studios, New York, 21 January 1966.
19. SPURIOUSLY SEVENTEEN WINDOWS
(THE PAINTING BY VAN GOGH) —
recorded by Robert Shelton in a Denver hotel room, 12 March 1966.
20. WHAT KIND OF FRIEND IS THIS? —
recorded in a Glasgow hotel room, 18-19 May 1966.
21. ONE TOO MANY MORNINGS —
recorded at The Gaumont Theatre, Sheffield, 16 May 1966.





29. **GOODBYE HOLLY** —
recorded for the soundtrack to 'Pat Garrett And Billy The Kid' at
Columbia Disco Studios, Mexico City, 20 January 1973.
30. **ROCK ME MAMA** —
recorded at the soundtrack sessions for 'Pat Garrett And Billy The Kid' at
Burbank Studios, Burbank, February 1973.
31. **NOBODY 'CEPT YOU** —
recorded for 'Planet Waves' at Village Recorder Studios, Santa Monica, on 2
November 1973.
32. **IDIOT WIND** —
This take was included on the original 'Blood On The Tracks' test pressing. It
was recorded at Columbia A&R Studios, New York, 17 December 1974.
33. **HURRICANE** —
recorded for 'Desire,' this take was subsequently replaced with an October '75
version on legal advice. It was recorded at Columbia Studios,
New York, 30 July 1975.
34. **STOP NOW** —
recorded at the 'Street Legal' sessions at Rundown Studios,
Santa Monica, 2 May 1978.
35. **(YOU TREAT ME LIKE A) STEPCCHILD** —
recorded at the Civic Center, Augusta, Maine, 15 September 1978.



36. TROUBLE IN MIND —
recorded for 'Slow Train Coming' and issued in edited form as a b-side. It was recorded at Muscle Shoals Studios, Sheffield, Alabama, 1-11 May 1979.
37. YONDER COMES SIN —
recorded at Rundown Studios, Santa Monica, October 1980.
38. CARIBBEAN WIND —
recorded at Rundown Studios, Santa Monica, October 1980.
39. DON'T EVER TAKE YOURSELF AWAY —
recorded for 'Shot Of Love' at Clovers Recorder Studio, Los Angeles, April-May 1981.
40. THIEF ON THE CROSS —
recorded at the Saenger Performing Arts Center, New Orleans, 10 November 1981.
41. SWEETHEART LIKE YOU —
recorded for 'Infidels' at Power Station Studios, New York, mid April 1983.
42. SOMEONE'S GOT A HOLD OF MY HEART —
recorded for 'Infidels' at Power Station Studios, New York, April/May 1983.
43. TELL ME —
recorded for 'Infidels' at Power Station Studios, New York, April/May 1983.



44. **JOKERMAN** —
scheduled for inclusion on the original version of 'Infidels'. It was recorded at Power Station Studios, New York, April/May 1983.
45. **BLIND WILLIE MCTELL** —
scheduled for inclusion on the original version of 'Infidels.' It was recorded at Power Station Studios, New York, April/May 1983.
46. **NEW DANVILLE GIRL** —
recorded for 'Empire Burlesque' at Cherokee Studios, Los Angeles, December 1984.
47. **IMPORTANT WORDS** —
scheduled for inclusion on the original version of 'Down In The Groove.' It was recorded at Sunset Sound Studios, Los Angeles, April/May 1987.
48. **DIGNITY** —
recorded for 'Oh Mercy' in Studio On The Move, New Orleans, March/April 1989.
49. **LIKE A SHIP** —
recorded for 'Traveling Wilburys Volume Three' in Wilbury Mountain Studio (sic), Los Angeles, April 1990.
50. **SERIES OF DREAMS** —
recorded for 'Oh Mercy' in Studio On The Move, New Orleans, March/April 1989.



22. **SIGN ON THE CROSS** —
recorded in the basement of 'Big Pink', West Saugerties,
New York in the summer of 1967.
23. **ALL AMERICAN BOY** —
recorded in the basement of 'Big Pink', West Saugerties,
New York, in the summer of 1967.
24. **NOTHING WAS DELIVERED (take 2 w/monologue)** —
recorded in the basement of 'Big Pink', West Saugerties,
New York, in the summer of 1967.
25. **I THREW IT ALL AWAY** —
recorded for 'Self Portrait' in Columbia Studios,
Nashville, June 1969.
26. **HONEY, JUST ALLOW ME ONE MORE CHANCE** —
recorded for 'Self Portrait' in Columbia Studios,
Nashville, June 1969.
27. **WORKING ON A GURU** —
recorded with George Harrison for 'New Morning' in Columbia Studios,
New York, 1 May 1970.
28. **DOWN IN THE FLOOD** —
recorded at The New York Academy Of Music, for The Band's 'Rock Of Ages'
album, on 1 January 1972.

BOB DYLAN

First public appearance: Closet at O'Henry's Squire Shop

Favorite food: Turkish Mervin (a form of eggplant coming from Nebraska)

Favorite clothes: nose guards

Favorite drink: frozen tobacco

Favorite bands/instrumentalists: Corky the Kid (sombros)

Favorite composers: Brown Bumpkin and Sidney Ciggy

Favorite groups: The Fab Clocks

Miscellaneous likes: Trucks with no wheels, french telephones, anything with a stewed prune in the middle.

Miscellaneous dislikes: Hairy firemen, toe-nails, glass Mober forks, birds with ears.

Best friend: Porky the Wild Elephant Shooter

Most thrilling experience: Getting my birthday cake stomped on by Norman Mailer

Taste in music: Sort of peanut butter

Pets: My friend Lampa

Personal Ambition: To be a waitress

Professional ambition: To be a stewardess

