



Bob Dylan and Philosophy: It's Alright Ma

Peter J. Vernezze (Editor) , Carl J. Porter (Editor) , James S. Spiegel (Contributor)

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The legions of Bob Dylan fans know that Dylan is not just a great composer, writer, and performer, but a great thinker as well. In *Bob Dylan and Philosophy*, eighteen philosophers analyze Dylan's ethical positions, political commitments, views on gender and sexuality, and his complicated and controversial attitudes toward religion. All phases of Dylan's output are covered, from his early acoustic folk ballads and anthem-like protest songs to his controversial switch to electric guitar to his sometimes puzzling, often profound music of the 1970s and beyond. The book examines different aspects of Dylan's creative thought through a philosophical lens, including personal identity, negative and positive freedom, enlightenment and postmodernism in his social criticism, and the morality of bootlegging. An engaging introduction to deep philosophical truths, the book provides Dylan fans with an opportunity to learn about philosophy while impressing fans of philosophy with the deeper implications of his intellectual achievements.

Bob Dylan and Philosophy: It's Alright Ma Details

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Author : Peter J. Vernezze (Editor) , Carl J. Porter (Editor) , James S. Spiegel (Contributor)

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From Reader Review Bob Dylan and Philosophy: It's Alright Ma for online ebook

Rob the Obscure says

An interesting collection of articles on the philosophical insights embedded in Dylan's lyrics and poetry.

Ed says

I've long been a fan of books with collections of essays around a theme. The public library has shelves full of books in the literary criticism section dealing with the works of famous and lesser known authors. I discovered Nobel laureate Andre Gide through one of these books. I later purchased a fairly fat Norton Anthology that was a collection of essays on Joseph Conrad's story Heart of Darkness. The books can be compared to a curated art show featuring works by different artists, except that in this case the "art" comes in a literary form.

In 2015 I purchased a book of this ilk called Bob Dylan and Philosophy. Published in 2006 by Open Court Press, it has been my current bedtime reading for the past couple weeks or so. I only recently noticed that it is numero 17 in a series called Popular Culture and Philosophy. Other topics in the series include Seinfeld, the Simpsons, The Matrix, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, The Lord of the Rings, Baseball, Woody Allen, the Atkins Diet, Superheroes and the Chronicles of Narnia, among others. The subtitles are clever. The Seinfeld subtitle is A Book About Everything and Nothing. The Superheroes essay is subtitled Truth, Justice and the Socratic Way. In other words, there's a playfulness in their seriousness.

The sixteen essays in this book are served up as if tracks on an album. The first eight are listed as Side 1 in the table of contents. The second set is, naturally, Side 2.

I've not finished yet, but every passage I've read has been solid. The writers, who are listed as The Mongrel Dogs (a reference to a line, or concept, in "My Back Pages") have bios in the back of the book that include playful references to yet other Dylan songs. Francis Beckwith's begins, "ever since he was street legal (he) knew he had to strengthen the things that remain.

Playful as their asides might be, the essays contain seriously rich insights into the philosophical subtext of Dylan's life, drawing from not only his lyrics but also his interviews, his performances and his writings.

The first essay compares Planet Waves to Plato's Symposium. Doug Anderson proposes that the album is essentially a collection of songs with various answers to the question "What is love?"

The second essay examines the existentialism that runs through Dylan's work in an essay titled I Used to Care, but Things Have Changed: Passion and the Absurd in Dylan's Later Work. The author here takes his cues from Kierkegaard and Camus, and deftly extracts the repeated themes of existential philosophers through the past two centuries, echoed in the lyrics of a half century of Dylan. This chapter ends with a summing up that begins, "Dylan looks directly at a world lacking any clear purpose and makes an appeal that is filled with absurd faith in what is still possible. This is what may remain after a person has sounded out the depths of existential despair and come to terms with a finite and sometimes tragic life on the other side. In a universe from which all the stars have been torn down, a human being feels like a stranger. But it is not

impossible to keep on living under such conditions, and Dylan shows us how it might be done."

The third essay in this book focuses on the question "Who Killed Medgar Evers?" As everyone familiar with the song knows, Dylan somewhat absolves the actual killer by saying he was only a pawn in a bigger game. This is not to say Dylan is asking the murderer to go free, but he uses the incident to point to a much more pervasive issue, institutional racism. After introducing the story, writer Avery Kokers points to other "morally charged songs" by Dylan. One of these is the story of a boxer, "Who Killed Davey Moore?" which Kokers calls a companion piece to Only A Pawn.

"Who Killed Davey Moore?" is a song about a boxer who died as a result of blows from his opponent. In the song, the narrator interrogates the suspects, and each declares innocence--the referee, the angry crowd, the gambling man, the sportswriter, and ultimately the man "whose fists laid him low."

It's interesting that in The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll, which appears on the same Side B as Only A Pawn (The Times They Are A-Changing), the one who struck her with his cane is mentioned by name, along with other details of the crime. In this song, Dylan avoids mentioning Byron de la Beckwith so as to spread the blame across to the various politicos and law enforcement agencies that helped foster the culture that produced this act of senseless violence.

It's a powerful essay about a powerful song, one still relevant in our current cultural landscape.

Other themes explored include bootlegging (The Great White Wonder), the meaning of freedom, post-modernism, Christianity and Dylan's gospel influences, the Second Sex, creativity, truth, predestination and free will.

I like the cover copy on the back, which calls Dylan "the Troubador who has given English more phrases than any poet since Shakespeare." Interestingly, when Dylan was selected to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature this past fall, the Shakespeare comparisons were a-plenty.

Much more can be said but we'll close shop here. The book is a penny used or 17 bucks new at Amazon.

[The above review was originally published on my Ennyman's Territory blog.]

Jeff Suwak says

So, my feelings on this book were somewhat complex. I'm giving it 4 stars because I think it did what it intended to do, but the problem is that I didn't like what it intended to do! The fact that I didn't like it, though, is no knock against the writers and editors. I just didn't realize how I'd feel until I actually read the book. So, let me explain this convoluted reasoning and rating.

The book does what it says it's going to do. It examines Dylan's work in a reasonably serious way and filters it through the lens of philosophy. In other words, it takes the implications of Dylan's lyrics and explores them in an intellectual sense. It does that admirably. They did take the artist's work seriously and they treated it respectfully. I was afraid the book might be one of those snarky type affairs where they lance the artist with humor and sarcasm. There is one fault I found in this regard, but I'll go into that after my next point.

The thing is, as I read it, I realized that this kind of high intellectual philosophizing and Dylan's music don't

mix well for me, personally. I love reading Kierkegaard, Camus, Nietzsche, Sartre, on their own terms, but Dylan is different. The beauty of Dylan's music lies in its mystery. That's where the magic comes from. It is the beauty of dreams, not the beauty of science. In a way, I felt like disassembling his words to try to unearth whatever Dylan's worldview might be was sort of cheapening the art for me.

If you read Dylan's earliest interviews, when he was much less distrustful of the media and a little bit more apt to open up, he actually spoke a bit about his view of the role of the artist, and it was precisely to share a Rimbaud-like, transcendent vision. He was not ever trying to communicate a cohesive political or philosophical worldview, and to approach his music from that direction is to miss out on its greater magic. That's the point I think this book largely missed.

Still, as I said, I give it 4 stars because it's not the book's fault that I ended up not wanting to look at Dylan's music in this way. The book does what it says it's going to do, and it does well.

Gerry Beane says

It's very easy to begin to over analyze Dylan. I'm afraid this tome has begun to cross that line. Although there are some interesting insights and some thought provoking analyses, I'm afraid that 'Zimmie' would say that a good deal of it is inflated horse puckie. Still, I am always interested in how far people are willing to go to deconstruct every word or phrase whether it had been originated by Dylan, The Beatles or Pink Floyd. These poet/songwriters offer some of the richest works for these types of efforts and, truth be known, the results can be very entertaining if not always on the mark. NOTE: The opinions expressed above do not necessarily represent those of the website, the authors of the essays or the artist himself.
