

# THE FLAWED BRILLIANCE OF BOB DYLAN

JOE TREASURE



Ever since he appeared on the New York folk scene, presenting himself as an anonymous exile from a place of no distinct identity – “My name it means nothing, my age it means less, the country I come from it’s called the Midwest” – Bob Dylan has worked to elude definition.

In fact his name was soon going to mean a lot. It already signalled his recognition that a short homespun handle like Buddy Holly or Chuck Berry was required if you wanted to get somewhere in American popular culture. Matt Dillon, the fictional sheriff in a Wild West TV series called *Gunsmoke*, seems to have been the original inspiration before a change of spelling added a reference to the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas.

Soon enough Dylan’s disinclination to be pinned down would cause disillusionment among political followers. For a while he seemed to be the voice of a movement, telling the older generation that their sons and their daughters were beyond their command, but he was disinclined to attend rallies or endorse causes.

He famously offended folk music aficionados who had claimed him as their own when he went electric, responding defiantly to shouts of ‘Judas’ during a concert in England and turning the volume

up. In the late 70s he caused consternation among fans when he declared himself a Christian and took to proselytizing from the stage. And through all these phases he has legitimately claimed the freedom to reinvent his own songs in performance. His



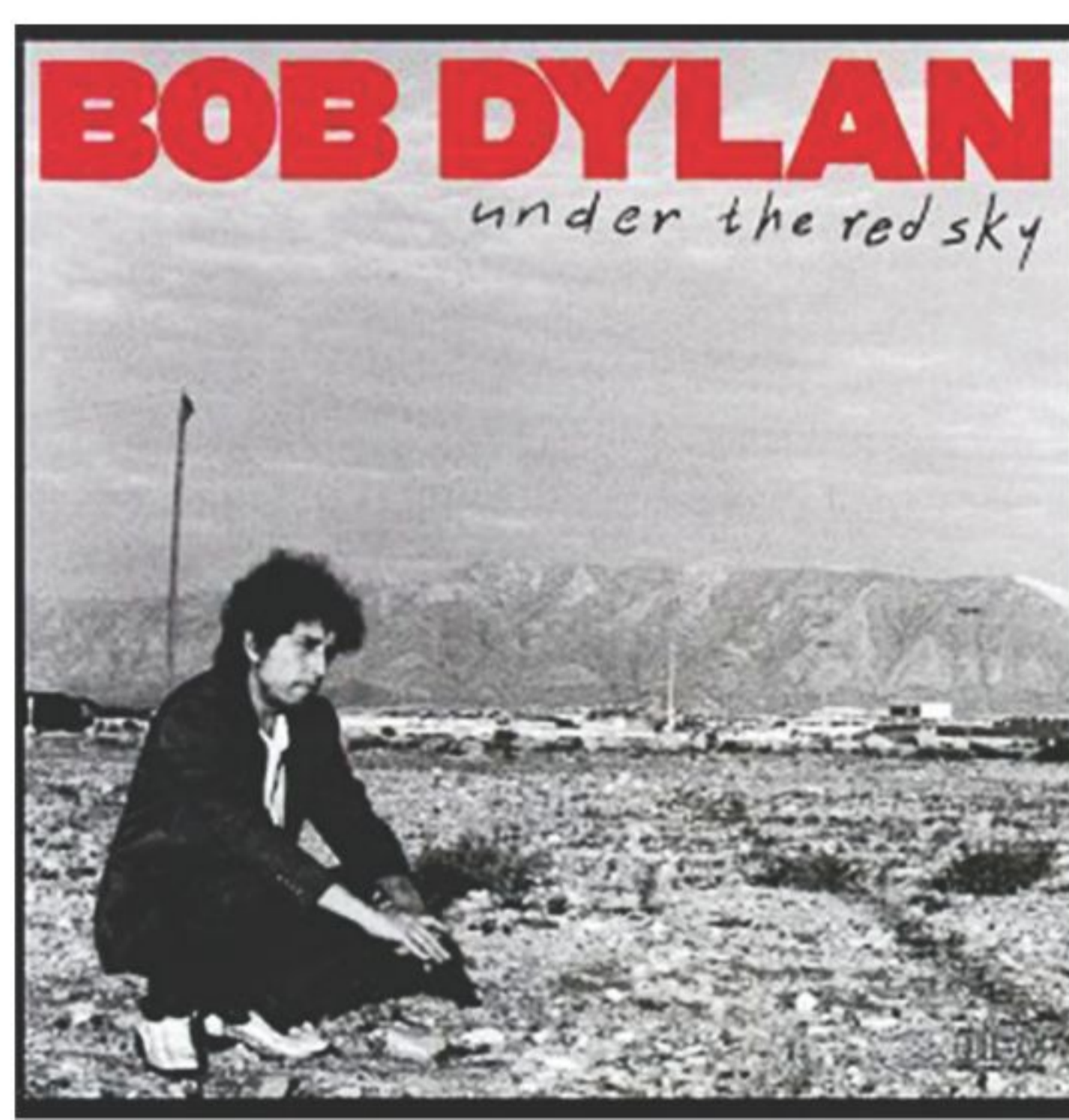
refusal to show deference or even politeness to the Nobel Committee comes as no surprise.

One of Dylan’s qualities is that he has stayed true to his vision, following where it

takes him. Songs like *Highway 61 Revisited* and *Tangled Up In Blue*, in their sweeps of impressionistic narrative, offer more density of meaning and suggestion than most words written to be sung. But when he touches on the interpersonal, Dylan’s vision becomes singularly myopic.

His refusal to be pinned down has shown up in his writing, less attractively, in relation to women. Moving on is what his male characters and alter egos do, usually with more resentment than acceptance: “You just kinda wasted my precious time, but don’t think twice, it’s all right.”

That last phrase appears in the chorus of another song, addressed this time not to a girlfriend but to a mother: *It’s all right, Ma (I’m only bleeding)* and strikes a similarly sour note. Here, in the context of apocalyptic images of eclipses and warfare, we are exhorted not to be owned, not to give up our autonomy to any person or organisation: “To keep it in your mind and not forget that it is not he or she or them or it that you belong to”. But the warning comes in response to the realisation “that somebody thinks they really found you.” The song urges us not simply to take ownership of ourselves, but more weirdly, to remain hidden, to resist the normal human desire to be seen and recognised.



## AND SO THIS LONG EXILE

SHAHID QADRI

Two pieces of *roti* or a red earthen plateful  
And some morsels of salt like little stars  
You didn’t want to give me in the quiet distant terrace –  
Therefore this long exile.

My life turned a prey to dreadful beasts  
And the barrel of your gun aimed at  
Each of my steps.  
Crawling like a reptile in the bush  
I had to search for a safe and solitary refuge –  
Therefore this long exile.

I couldn’t say what I yearned to  
My country and its people –  
Therefore this exile.

In the sanctity of a bright dawn  
Like the eyes of a red cock as if the sun  
My discomfited songs  
Didn’t find the grace yet –  
Therefore this exile.

Our beloved rabbits as white as the river at dawn  
Are wounded and killed by the hounds of  
The flag bearers of religions and they’re doing  
Unrestrained business today  
Our honor, freedom and our own sky have been sold –  
Therefore this long exile.

Obdurate and blind reactionaries are  
Going forward slickly today riding on  
The back of progressiveness –  
Towards the dark-loving medieval times replete with  
Wails and bloodshed – therefore this exile.

I admit I’ve seen the yellow *shalik* birds dancing on  
*Krishnachura* braches during the month of *Boishakh*  
By the waves of the Bay of Bengal I’ve seen  
The moon-shining eyes of ten thousand deer at Hiranpoint  
I’ve seen the agitation of starfish swimming on seawater  
I’ve heard the sound of rain like the kiss of a newly-wed couple  
In the drought of Bengal.

There was a time when  
My heart was sated with the boundless joy of  
Deep friendship and brotherhood  
In the walks of Bengal – in rain and shine, at dawn and dusk  
And we had never-ending amiable days in our life.  
Yet I’ve seen the hands of aristocratic farmers  
Broken down untimely for feebleness  
Extended towards the vacuity of civilisation.  
I’ve seen the despondent map of Bengal  
In the faces of my friends,  
The freedom fighters in the Liberation War  
I’ve seen them silently die  
Therefore this long exile  
I’m in exile eternally both at home and abroad

## SUDHANGSHU WON’T GO

SHAMSUR RAHMAN

From ransacked temples and torched ancestral homestead,  
A self-abnegating voice asks Sudhangshu,  
“Will you go away in the end?” At the end of the day,  
Sudhangshu gropes in the ashes  
Land documents, broken bangles, stunned vermilion cases,  
And scattered strings of glass-beads bearing memories.

The voice says, “Plunderers subdue you,  
Shadows of beastly killers  
Wander around you every day,  
Terrified bats pass days under wings,  
Yet don’t go away, Sudhangshu.”

Azure in the sky hasn’t disappeared yet,  
Decent trees still fly green flags,  
Rivers full to the brim  
Curve waists like slender gypsy girls.  
Leaving this holy land,  
Like a defeated soldier,  
Sudhangshu will never go anywhere

Both the poems are translated from the Bengali:  
MOHAMMAD SHAFIQUL ISLAM