

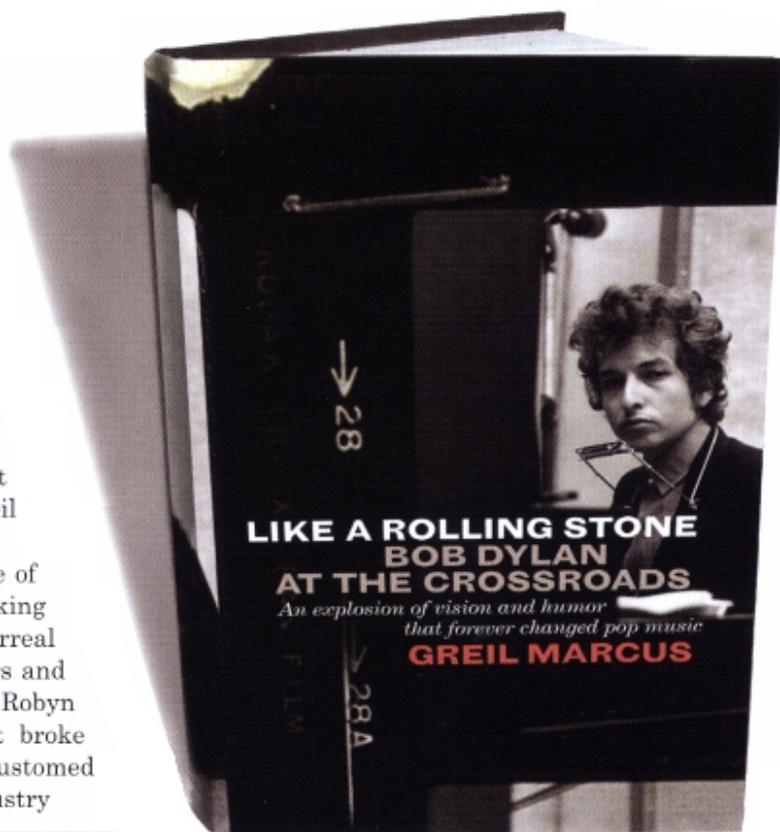
Like A Rolling Stone: Bob Dylan at the Crossroads

Greil Marcus (Public Affairs, \$25.00)

Review by Kevin C. Madigan

A chrome horse, a diplomat, a princess on a steeple, Napoleon in rags, jugglers and clowns and tricks and precious gifts. The true meaning of Bob Dylan's landmark song "Like a Rolling Stone" has eluded many for the past four decades, and now the respected music historian Greil Marcus has devoted an entire book to the subject.

Dylan considered it the best song he ever wrote, in spite of being, as he described it, "all about my steady hatred." Clocking in at over six minutes, rife with scathing lyrics filled with surreal imagery, the song has been dissected by numerous scholars and pundits, and everyone from Jimi Hendrix to the Turtles to Robyn Hitchcock to even the Rolling Stones has covered it. It broke barriers and shook up a music industry that had grown accustomed to merrily churning out innocuous little pop ditties, an industry



woefully unprepared for this radical and sudden departure from the status quo.

Greil has delved before into the muddy waters of Dylan's oeuvre, having written a compelling account of the recording sessions that came to be known as the "Basement Tapes" (*The Old Weird America: The World of Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes*, a book originally titled *Invisible Republic*). This time, he goes deep into the culture of the time—1965—and places the song and its genesis within the context of the Watts riots, Lyndon Johnson, Vietnam, the Civil Rights movement, the Ku Klux Klan, the Newport Folk Festival and the Beatles.

Occasionally, though, the author gets a bit too wound up in verbosity, as in this passage: "Like A Rolling Stone" was not a record. It was an event: not the event of its commercial release, or even the event made when it reached the public at large, but event of the drama generated by the performance itself. And it was as such an event that it joined the other events that made its time."

Dylan had his own motives for composing it: "I found myself writing this song, this story, this long piece of vomit, twenty pages long," he explained at the time, "and out of it I took "Like a Rolling Stone" and made it as a single. And I'd

never written anything like that before."

Record producer Phil Spector, who was then at the height of his success, called "Like a Rolling Stone" his favorite song, while suggesting that it could be improved considerably by giving the arrangement his famous "wall of sound" treatment.

Marcus' passion for his subject is evident. He writes: "When drummer Bobby Gregg brought his stick down for the opening noise of the six-minute single, the sound—a kind of announcement, then a void of silence, then a rising fanfare, then a song—fixed a moment when all those caught up in modern music found themselves engaged in a running battle for a prize no one bothered to name: the greatest record ever made."

The best part of this fascinating book is a take-by-take account of what went on in the New York studio as the song was being constructed. "There was no sheet music," said organist Al Kooper of the sessions. "It was totally by ear, totally disorganized...it just happened." The song almost didn't happen at all. Dylan had developed a habit of discarding a song if it didn't materialize with the band quickly enough or if the musicians fumbled their parts once too often. The

song would then be dropped from the session and consigned to oblivion, never to be heard of again. Over two days of recording sessions (June 15th & 16th, 1965) there were a total of 20 takes, and it was take four of 15 on the second day that turned out to be the master take, though all were unaware of it.

Marcus concludes: "(the song) is a triumph of craft, inspiration, will, and intent; regardless of all those things, it was also an accident. Listening now, you hear most of all how much the song resists the musicians and the singer...circling around the song like hunters surrounding an animal that has escaped them a dozen times, they caught it." ♣

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