Gotta Travel On: A View of the American Road from Bob Dylan's Rolling Thunder Revue, 1975

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https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-sf1j-bd95

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GOTTA TRAVEL ON

A View of the American Road from Bob Dylan's Rolling Thunder Revue, 1975

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of American Studies

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

by

Matthew D. Shine

1992
APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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Approved, May 1992

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I must take this opportunity to credit some friends and colleagues who assisted in the completion of this work. Most of all I would like to express my thanks to my thesis advisor, Dale Cockrell. If I remember correctly, it was he who suggested exploring the image of the road in American music, and his constant support, encouragement and timely criticism are very much appreciated. He forever assured me that I was indeed making progress despite my convictions to the contrary. I particularly thank him for putting me back on track when things became a little bit hairy back in the fall of 1991, and for his comments and criticisms on subsequent drafts. Also coming to my rescue in the fall was Bob Gross, who, like Dale, will certainly recognize some of his words here. His aid then and his critique of the next draft helped keep me focused on the topic at hand.

Also deserving thanks are Dave Cox, Rich Gorham, Stew Hannah and Jasmine Ferrer for their assorted objective readings, road trips and listening, and to my parents who hounded me throughout for my own good.
ABSTRACT

In 1975 Bob Dylan embarked upon a much-publicized monthlong tour of the northeastern United States and southeastern Canada. Labelled the Rolling Thunder Revue, and including other popular music stars as Joan Baez and Roger McGuinn, the tour comprised concerts in primarily small arenas, unannounced but for handbills and radio publicity shortly beforehand. Throughout the tour Dylan attempted to limit public access to the troupe using heavy security, out-of-the-way accommodations and tight restrictions on media coverage. The concerts themselves, often employing such commedia dell’arte devices as costumes and masks, in addition to the secrecy surrounding the tour, the small arenas, and the cast of performers all generated much discussion among observers of the Revue as to Dylan’s motivations.

Although many lauded Dylan for his originality in assembling such a tour, Rolling Thunder has roots in Bob Dylan’s interpretations of American myths about the road. For most of the country’s history, the road has represented an avenue to personal prosperity and security. In the twentieth century, however, this has changed somewhat as a result of the Depression and later the affluence of the 1950s. Events in each decade helped to define the American road as its own cultural space in contrast to the settled community, and through its portrayal in certain popular media, a place to experience an "authentic," real life. From the thirties came the idea that there was a "real America" to be found out on the road. The road as its own space became pronounced with the combination of youth, affluence and the automobile in the fifties. As Jack Kerouac describes it in On the Road, it became virtually its own world.

Bob Dylan was well versed in both the thirties interpretation of the road and the fifties romance with motion. On the Rolling Thunder Revue he attempted to create a community of the road based in these ideals.
GOTTA TRAVEL ON

A View of the American Road from
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INTRODUCTION

When in the summer of 1975 Bob Dylan and Bobby Neuwirth began speaking of Dylan's plans for what Neuwirth dubbed "the first existential tour," they were greeted by not a little skepticism from their compatriots, the press, and the public. The Rolling Thunder Revue, as it came to be known, seemed unprecedented in the rock music world, particularly that of the 1970s. Major rock tours were for hockey rinks and stadiums, like Dylan's previous 1974 tour with the Band. The tour that Dylan and Neuwirth now envisioned, with a pop music giant like Dylan and an entourage of upwards of forty musicians, managers, and other miscellaneous friends and associates playing unannounced concerts in tiny venues was considered preposterous. While calling the idea at best impractical, however, most observers did concede a certain originality to its secretive, spontaneous, vagabond character.

The Rolling Thunder Revue was born out of Dylan's personal readings of American myths. In American myth, the road appears to offer virtually unlimited opportunity to escape (or temporarily outrun) one's circumstances, and unique opportunities for discovery, personal identity, and community. From the first moment that F. Scott Fitzgerald's Dutch sailors glimpsed the fresh green breast of the New

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World, America was seen as a land of almost infinite promise, and the road led to the realization of Americans’ dreams. For any American, the belief was that prosperity awaited just down the road. Indeed, if this was the case for much of American history, it came to an abrupt and rather visible halt on October 29, 1929. With the Depression, Americans saw their world seemingly falling apart. Eastern intellectuals, inherently distrustful of modern America to begin with, set out to chronicle that downfall in print and on film. Instead, they found a remarkably resilient people coping with economic hardship without losing their sanity, particularly among some of the Depression’s hardest-hit and most visible victims, the Okies on the road in California. An idea emerged that there was a "real America" somewhere out on the road, and, in addition, that the road was a space apart and no longer just the stretch to travel between two communities. People now actually lived on the road. Augmenting this idea that the road comprised its own space was the prosperity of the 1950s; the automobile and a modern highway system facilitated easy interaction between the increasingly distinct worlds of the road and settled community. Despite their permeable borders, however, Jack Kerouac describes how the priorities of those two worlds could become so different as to be completely incompatible. Kerouac offers the suggestion that the people like him, like Dean Moriarty, the beatified, could, in fact, be the inheritors of the real America sought in the 1930s. In contrast to that decade, however, by the 1950s the chief virtue was motion rather than resilience or perhaps even community; power lay in the ability to keep moving. No longer was the life on the road a badge of disenfranchisement, but just the opposite.
Bob Dylan knew these myths well. After discovering folk music, he had invented himself as an heir to Depression bard Woody Guthrie, and from that start had absorbed the leftist/populist vision, forged in the 1930’s, of a real America existing somewhere out on the road. Onto that image he added his own generation’s romantic vision of the lonely rebel seeking salvation in perpetual motion, drawn from and exemplified by the 1950s Beats. Refracting these themes through his own experiences as a shooting star in the mid-sixties, followed by an ultimately dispiriting withdrawal from the public eye into family life, Dylan embraced an ideal of the road drawing deeply from his 1930s and 1950s influences, as well as the older dream of happiness. Events on the Rolling Thunder tour help to clearly illustrate Dylan’s expectations of The Road, which are not uncommon ones in the American popular imagination, and some of the actual realities and limitations of life on the road.
CHAPTER I
IN SEARCH OF THE REAL AMERICA IN THE 1930S

...we ramble and we roam
And the highway is our home,
It’s a never-ending highway
For the dust bowl refugees.

Woody Guthrie, "Dust Bowl Refugee"\(^1\)

As the Rolling Thunder Revue took off from New York for its dress rehearsals and first shows in Plymouth, Massachusetts, Allen Ginsberg pronounced them "on a voyage to reclaim America." Ginsberg’s statement may be taken as hyperbole, for it is almost taken for granted in modern America that the "real America" is in another place or time, lost or forgotten. Furthermore, it was well known to participants and audience alike that Rolling Thunder, like most rock tours, had no destination and by definition would spend the majority of its time on the road. So, then, if it was looking for America, the Revue would have to find it on the road.

Belief that America might be re-located on the road is a relatively new and radical development in the way that Americans regard themselves and their country, because for most of American history, nobody was aware that America was missing or needed to be reclaimed. Even if one was looking for America, there was little feeling

that it would be found on the road: America, if anywhere, would be in the communities the road connected. In a country where "the pursuit of happiness" is considered a virtual birthright, the road was just a conduit to the seemingly endless continent extending westwards, teeming with promise. There was an inherent power in the freedom to keep going down that road searching for the end of the rainbow.

The cataclysm of the Depression changed some ideas about America, and its relationship with the road, a relationship that was further altered by the prosperity of the fifties. The road became its own place on the margins, distinct from the settled community, and a certain power and romantic allure came to rest in simply being able to stay in motion, not necessarily in search of anything in particular.

That America was something lost and to be sought out gained widespread currency during the Depression. Amidst that disaster, the idea arose that somewhere down the road, or on the road, the "real America" could be found, and, ironically, it was even worth sacrificing apparent comfort to find. The grail of the "real America" is one of the many legacies of the Depression, and is the product of three rather disparate groups: young, urban left-wing intellectuals, the US government and Dust Bowl migrants in California. Through the efforts of two, and the patient endurance of the other, says Frederick Lewis Allen, "The nineteen-thirties were a golden age of literary sociology. America had discovered itself to be a fascinating subject for exploration, dissection, and horrified but hopeful contemplation."\(^2\) In starker terms, "intellectuals

who'd sneered at small-town America throughout the cynical 1920's were awestruck by its resilience now,\(^3\) and saw its formerly quaint customs and folkways as art, and fonts of creativity.

This was a backdoor and inadvertent realization, for many of the chroniclers who headed out on the road and into the field were expecting, perhaps even hoping, to find just the opposite. In the midst of such a catastrophe as the Depression they could hardly hope to find inspiration.

These people were a relatively small group; they generally were young, political radicals of varying degrees, and New Yorkers. As Allen states, "The new mood (of social evangelism) was most widespread in New York.... It was more widespread among the young and rising- and frequently jobless- intellectuals than among the older and better-established."\(^4\) Though they were often unemployed, they were usually better off than a good many of their countrymen and they were driven by equal parts guilt and social conscience. Richard Pells describes their feelings by saying that "as long as people remained jobless and hungry, the very occupation of writing seemed ineffectual, pointless, and even parasitical."\(^5\) To assuage these feelings and at the same time reaffirm their own worth, "They wanted (art) to have a

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\(^4\) Allen, p. 253.

social function, to illuminate the social scene, to bring its darkest places clearly into view.⁶ But these artists and writers were also afraid for the America they had always known seemed to be falling apart.

Guilt and fear were not the only spurs to action. Some leftists, too, had ideological reasons driving them in search of America. In 1935, the American Communist Party experienced a brief lull in the internecine squabbles and factionalism that had plagued it for years. Under Earl Browder and his Popular Front, the Party made a concerted effort to form alliances with other "progressive" groups and to fight fascism. Browder's rallying call declared that "Communism is twentieth century Americanism," leaving his minions to ascertain just what "Americanism" was and how to bring it to the largest number of people possible. Toward this end, relates Joe Klein, "They studied the country and its people and its past and came to be captivated by the color and diversity of it all in the same intense way that they experienced everything else." Their enthusiasm was infectious, for the awareness, and appreciation (if not enjoyment) of American folk art and folk subcultures in general "swept across the political and cultural spectrum."⁷ One of the more important bands in that political spectrum was the United States Government, which through the Works Progress and Farm Security Administrations funded artists and writers to simply produce art for and representative of America.

⁶Allen, p. 252.

⁷Klein, p. 149.
So, in the name of the WPA, their own politics or both, a large number of writers and other intellectuals put aside their now-frivolous pursuits to observe and record the phenomenon of the Depression through journalism and documentaries, to "experience the country,"\(^8\) in the process "hoping merely to record the experience of a nation in upheaval." They wanted to connect with ordinary people, "as though they might find solace in the discovery that writers shared with the average man a common feeling of bewilderment and despair."\(^9\)

Such a connection appeared to serve three main purposes for the guilty intellectuals, not the least of which to utilize their talents toward social change by showing off the "America" they found. Secondly, as they documented, they connected themselves to the diverse body of America, learning its land, its regions and people, and its values. Traveling was something of a pioneer adventure, in which they could discover their own country, and in doing so discover themselves as Americans. Viewing America in a different light made them look at themselves differently; now instead of disaffection with America and thus themselves as Americans, they felt pride in the so-called American spirit. Finally, journalism, with its emphasis on the real and concrete ordered a very fragmented world. Ideals could find basis in verifiable people,

\(^8\)Ibid., p. 149.

\(^9\)Pells, p. 195-96.
places, and events and those adhering to such ideals could know exactly where they stood and who they were.\textsuperscript{10}

At the outset, optimism did not always run high. Many of these writers and intellectuals felt betrayed and dispossessed by the American system and accordingly began their travels with the assumption that as a result of the Depression the masses would likewise be radicalized and, furthermore, in revolt. Much to their surprise, however, reality often held quite the opposite. Instead of rebelling against a system that had taken their lives away, "the middle class lowered its standard of living, the workers prowled the hiring halls, and the farmers prayed for rain to end the drought and nourish next year's crop"\textsuperscript{11} and amidst this, said Sherwood Anderson, "the amazing thing to be observed is that there is so very little bitterness."\textsuperscript{12} Such a reaction was an unexpected and gratifying find.

In the absence of bitterness, they found a resilient, down but unbeaten people. Although their radical images of a country in revolt went unfulfilled, what they found seemed to make them almost giddy. There were no \textit{How the Other Half Lives} or \textit{Jungles} here, hardly politics even, just stories of people. Through the documentaries, Americans realized that they, and particularly those most affected by the Depression, "were surviving... without going completely haywire," and more to their credit, "only

\textsuperscript{10}\textit{Ibid.,} p. 196-7; 201.

\textsuperscript{11}\textit{Ibid.,} p. 198.

\textsuperscript{12}\textit{Ibid.,} p. 198.
an extraordinary people could suffer such hard times so extraordinarily."\(^{13}\) As this
dawned upon them, the intellectuals' "documentaries" that had been launched with "the
sad stories of failure that soon began to sound the same"\(^{14}\) ended as homages to the
American character: one of the journalists' chief aims from the beginning was a strict
objectivity. As Pells explains it,

[w]hat began as an effort to find out where the country
had gone wrong frequently ended as a celebration of all
that seemed right. The technique of exposure and
criticism gradually gave way to a song of admiration. In
essence, most of the documentaries were rarely models of
political or ideological analysis, nor were they
indictments of the national character; rather, they read
like road maps for the exploration of America. Their real
subject was not failure but hope, not outrage but patience,
not bewilderment but faith, not death but survival.
Despite his cynicism and gloomy pronouncements about
the coming of fascism, James Rorty was actually
consoled by his trip; 'I had rediscovered for myself a
most beautiful land, and a most vital, creative, and
spiritually unsubdued people.' The central experience of
the depression years, as Rorty and others recorded it, was
neither social change nor economic collapse, but simple
human endurance.\(^{15}\)

The Okies in California provided one of the most fertile veins of this American
spirit that the journalists discovered. The Okie experience seemed to have everything
that they were celebrating on its side, justice, democratic values, determination, and

\(^{13}\)Klein, p. 149.

\(^{14}\)Pells, p. 196.

\(^{15}\)Ibid., p. 199.
wisdom in the face of seemingly overwhelming odds. Theirs was the good fight, and the WPA and other documentarists set about enshrining it in the national lore.

White settlement of the plains states, particularly Oklahoma and west Texas, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries introduced agriculture to a region possessed of very thin, fragile topsoil and receiving little rainfall. Nevertheless, farming did take hold and along with periodic oil booms in the teens and twenties, the region did pretty well. Soon, however, rather unsound agricultural practices and oil industry pollution took its toll. On Armistice Day 1933, a great black cloud of dust rolled down the plains from South Dakota on through Oklahoma and Texas, turning the sky black and burying everything in its path. To many, it was like a visitation from God: unexpected, awesome and awful. Dirt farmers were having a difficult enough time as it was fending off mortgage holders as their lands produced less and less, and the dust storms blew away what little they had left including the dirt.

The thought of farming their lands now was irrelevant. Topsoil was gone and the midwest was in the midst of a drought. Dust filled the air, causing "dust pneumonia" and choking livestock; almost anything would be better than starving in the new desert. Lured by stories hawking California as a land where they could find work and perhaps even farm again, these Oklahoma and West Texas farmers packed up and headed west along Route 66 any way they could. Unfortunately, "to the vast majority of the refugees the promised land proved to be a place of new and cruel tragedy."16

16Allen, p. 203.
Fertile land coupled with huge landowners made for a booming, modern agricultural industry in California. It was a cozy little world; the wealthy landowners controlled local and state politics and thereby kept their workforce of migrant Mexicans, Japanese and Filipinos in line. The influx of torrents of Okies upset the status quo.

Swelling the ranks of the migrant workforce, the Okies increased job competition and unemployment. So many idle, dispossessed and angry people visible and often begging made the native middle-class Californians angry and resentful: the Okies were seen as a threat. Enhancing this apparent threat was that these migrants were white Americans, and did not endure abuse and exploitation so submissively as the old migrants did. Indeed, these Okies talked of organizing and striking, and sometimes did. A strike, though, threatened the grower's profits and the lives of those under the growers' influence—the "real Californians." So rather than acquiesce to the workers' demands for fair labor practices and living wages, Allen relates, Californians responded with "anti-picketing ordinances" and enforced their power with "armed deputies dislodging the migrants from their pitiful camps [and] violence by bands of vigilantes." To the settled, middle-class Californians, "these ragged families were not fellow-citizens who had suffered in a great American disaster but dirty, ignorant, superstitious outlanders, failures at life, easy dupes for 'red' agitators." The general attitude was that "This engulfing tide of discontent must be kept moving" before it could cause real damage.17

The violent resentment the migrants faced, coupled with the nature of migrant work forced Okies into a life on the road. For survival they had to follow the harvest and were welcome in precious few communities along their travels, and so the road essentially became their home. Instead of breaking their spirits, the hardship pulled them closer together; the road seemed to have a purifying effect on the soul. Examples of this phenomenon include the preacher Casy and Ma Joad in John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*. Life in the Salinas migrant community does not embitter Casy. On the contrary, his experience there compels him to vow that from then on, "I’m gonna be near folks. I ain’t gonna try to teach ’em nothing. I’m gonna try to learn." Ma makes the most powerful testimony to the resilience and dignity of the "people," though, as she tells Tom quite simply that "We keep a-comin’. We’re the people that live. They ain’t gonna wipe us out. Why, we’re the people- we go on.”

This saga of the Okies and farm owners made for great copy. The Communist Party enjoyed perhaps its finest hour in America, as it seized the opportunity to put its doctrines to work as they attempted to organized the Okies; it was a classic workers’ struggle against greedy capitalism. Though their outlook was not so explicitly political, for the WPA, FSA and other documentarists the situation was similarly clear-cut. It seemed to distill the Depression to its essence and reaffirm a vision that they held of America. The Okies were seen as rural, hard working, humble, dignified and just, all of which qualities characterized the America of the intellectual mind.

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What these journalists were portraying and mythologizing, then, was not always a complete picture, a circumstance attributable to both their own desires to see a certain ideal of America confirmed, and for governmental propaganda purposes of much the same nature. As Joe Klein points out, for example, "Among the 270,000 photographs taken of America during the Depression... very few showed people groveling, choking with hunger, or covered with filth."\(^{19}\) That side of the experience undoubtedly existed, but it was one that the chroniclers chose not to record.

Understandably so, for not so appealing were the suicides, broken homes and broken men, the explosions of pent-up frustrations. The Okies tried not to show them to the cameras and pens to keep their dignity; the journalists and novelists avoided them because they did not affirm the mythology they were building. There was a certain selectivity of vision at work on the part of the intellectuals, in that they could see what they wanted and had the freedom to leave when they had had enough. They had transportation and the harvest was not their livelihood; on the contrary, they received a regular stipend from the government. The result, in the official chronicles, then, was a picture of the gritty triumph of the American spirit, the "real" America, with the blemishes airbrushed out.

The Okies themselves played a small part in this when able. They were, after all, people with a certain amount of pride, and these photographers and writers sent around by nobody less than their own government were catching them at their lowest moment of misery trapped out on California's roads. It was almost offensive, but

\(^{19}\)Klein, p. 150-151.
nonetheless, the "migrants scavenged their last shreds of dignity for the cameras, straightened themselves up and stared proudly into the lenses."20 The pride and defiance they were able to summon up was enough to validate the mythology built by their chroniclers; in the photos, they became famous men to be praised.

Though he did not come from a farming background, Woody Guthrie was a born and bred Oklahoman; he saw and experienced his share of hard times through Oklahoma’s oil and land booms and busts of the first few decades of the twentieth century. His 1943 semi-autobiographical Bound For Glory is an example of another trend that emerged out of the depression complementing the intellectual’s rediscovery of "America," the "proletarian" novel, which was very similar to the documentary in that it dealt with much the same issues as the journalists— "a preoccupation with the factual details of modern life, an emphasis on the function and relationship of groups and classes, an interest in social types and external events"21-- only in an ostensibly fictional medium. Like the documentarists’ work, what may have begun as a politically motivated endeavor more often turned into a celebration of people and, as in the case of many novels, personal identity (of which being an American played an integral part). Bound For Glory,22 for example, has tremendous political

20Ibid., p. 114.


22Woody Guthrie, Bound For Glory (New York, Plume), p. 276.
possibilities, considering the locales it encompasses, its subject matter, and Woody Guthrie's own strongly populist/leftist political leanings.

Instead of deeply exploring the issues raised in his dealings with dispossessed migrant workers, the irritable hobos riding the freights and the vigilantes he encounters, Woody expends far more effort in creating a romantic identity as an itinerant musician, distinguishing himself from the workers he deals with and their situation. This happens most graphically in Bound For Glory's penultimate chapter. Woody shows that he is not a worker, but a musician, as he tells the boss, "I play music for a livin'. I don't have to pick your dam apricots for my livin'! Just these other people. That's their only way of eatin'!" He allies himself with the workers, but minutes later in the same conversation when the supervisor beckons him to sign up to work and receive credit at the company store, Woody states "I'm not with these people . . . . I was just hitchin' . . . . I sing in saloons for a livin'."23

Through the family that he is with, Woody does depict the unfair labor practices of the growers and the generous resilience and nobility of the people. Indeed, he depends upon them for his livelihood, as he points out that "I'll sing anywhere's they'll stand an' listen. An' they'll see to it that I don't starve out."24 Still, he is among them, singing to and with them, drawing them together, but not of them. And in telling of his story among them, experiencing what of their lives he

23Ibid., p. 276.

24Ibid., p. 287.
does experience, he is only political in the most subtle of ways. He makes his point through the story, not directly; his musings as he passes through Los Angeles about orchard signs prohibiting unauthorized picking or eating represent his most critical commentary. As a part of no specific group, then, Woody Guthrie tries to portray himself as a member of all: the migrants, the hoboes, the sailors and down and outs in the saloons. The music he plays pulls them all together. In light of this, what is most important about *Bound For Glory* is that it is essentially an individual venture. It is an assertion by Woody Guthrie of who he thinks he is and what he stands for: a statement of self as an American living on the road, and by association the America he writes of. As the journalists did, the proletarian novelist showed difficult circumstances being overcome.

Woody Guthrie associates himself with a panoply of Americans in *Bound For Glory*, drawing the different people together behind his own wandering minstrel. Woody, though, was a born and bred Oklahoman and it was with his own people that he felt the deepest connection. Documentarists and journalists (including Guthrie, in *Bound For Glory*) eulogized the Okie plight on the road from the outside with paeans to resilience, ingenuity, folk democracy and American spirit. Woody knew these people intimately though, and expressed their feelings in song, particularly in his collection of *Dust Bowl Ballads*.26

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25Ibid., p. 223.

26*Woody Guthrie, Dust Bowl Ballads* (Rounder CD 1040, 1988); originally released by RCA Victor, 1940.
The resilience of the Okies is evident in Ballads like "Dust Can’t Kill Me" and the epic seven minute, seventeen verse "Tom Joad." But while they are not arranged in such a manner on record, the sentiments voiced in the Ballads change noticeably as the locations move from Oklahoma during the "worst of the dust storms that ever did fill the sky" to the roads in California, where "I ain’t got no home in this world anymore." Between Oklahoma and California, the defiance of "dust can’t kill me" is replaced by the pathos of "will I always be a dust bowl refugee?"

Despite the fact that they convey the marginality and difficulty of the Okies’ life on the road without glamorizing it, Dust Bowl Ballads nevertheless play an important role in the newly emerging perception of the American road. They clearly show the road as its own cultural space though not necessarily a desirable one. Furthermore, there is a romanticism in the sadness and disillusionment of Ballads like "I Ain’t Got No Home" and "Dust Bowl Refugee"; Woody’s songs are simply delivered and rawly plaintive, and not conciliatory.

Coupled with Bound For Glory, Dust Bowl Ballads portray Woody Guthrie as a romantic loner, shambling along the American road living a "real" life through his

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27Ibid. "The Great Dust Storm."

28Ibid. "I Ain’t Got No Home."

29Ibid. "Dust Can’t Kill Me."

30Ibid. "Dust Bowl Refugee."
ingenuity and music. While Guthrie was not terribly well known in the 1930s and '40s, when he produced the vast majority of his work, the drawing power of this character and his influence would be profound a generation later. Woody Guthrie's literary and musical legacy is likely as influential, if not more so, as any WPA documentary on the idea of the "real America" existing out on the road.

One of the interesting effects of the selective mythology created by these journalists and Woody Guthrie is that they rendered the "real" America a virtually unfindable ideal. On the one hand, while these accounts were not patronizing, Okies were not generally writing and their chroniclers' documentaries reflected a certain distance from their subjects. They were observing the "real" America, but were not a part of it, not Okies, not country folk. Not even Woody Guthrie, who could distill the experience into song, was "real" because while Oklahoman by birth he spent his life as a broadcaster, writer and entertainer in Los Angeles and then a resident man of the people in leftist circles in New York. In turn, that told their audience, primarily people like themselves, that they were not part of the "real" America, which lay somewhere out there, down the road. America was something they had to go out and look for. Conversely, as the intellectuals were holding out the road occupied by the Okies as folk democracy's laboratory, the Okies wanted only to settle down and live normal lives again. Shunned and chased from every community they entered, the road was not their estate of choice. And even if they did find the road life at all desirable, the relative harmony amongst the down and out portrayed in The Grapes of Wrath or Bound For Glory was fantastic.
Perhaps adding to the elusiveness of this "real America" is the very small number of people involved in its creation, which Frederick Allen illustrates. First of all, the archetypal Joads, the "unhappy wanderers of the West," in Allen's words, "were only a small minority of the farmers of the United States." \(^{31}\) And as for the initiators of the search, the "communist intellectuals" were "numerically... hardly important" despite their forming "the heart of the literary revolt against the America that had been." \(^{32}\) Driving home the numerical insignificance of the social commentators, and also their audience, Allen states that while the audience for the writers and artists "numbered in the thousands, another public numbering eighty-five millions each week was at the movies watching... [the] gods and goddesses of Hollywood disport themselves in a dreamland." \(^{33}\)

Everyone involved, then, was marginal in some sense, the Okies probably the most of all. But although they did not have much say in the romanticization of their plight or the society that heard about it, they and their brethren of forced wanderers help to illustrate one of the characteristics of the distinctive community of the road as opposed to that of a settled folk. It is a reality that has remained a constant, both inhibiting and perpetuating the romantic myth of the road. It is a rather straightforward proposition, that despite the route to the "real" America, the road is a

\(^{31}\)Allen, p. 203.

\(^{32}\)Ibid., p. 260.

\(^{33}\)Ibid., p. 280.
dangerous, marginal place. Woody Guthrie, one of the champions of life on the road in America, makes this clear in the very first chapter of *Bound For Glory*. In a crowded boxcar, a great brawl breaks loose among "the troubled, tangled, messed-up men." After he escapes to the car’s roof, Woody estimates there are thirty-six men involved, men who are "Hotter than a depot stove. Madder than nine hundred dollars. Arguing worse than a tree full of crows. Messed up. Mixed-up, screwed-up people. A crazy boxcar on a wild track. Headed sixty miles an hour in a big cloud of poison dust due straight to nowhere." The heat, the anger and arguing- and perhaps boredom- seem to explode without warning; what begins as feeble assertions of pride escalates to a bottle thrown, and finally a brawl. This is far from the folk democracy and quiet, determined cooperation venerated by the WPA’s documentarists, it tends closer to violent chaos and savagery.

Warren Susman reiterates the volatility and barely concealed mayhem that Guthrie hints at in writing:

> The 1930’s had its forced wanderers, its vagabonds, its tramps. Indeed, such ‘marginal men’ became the subjects of a literature that has emerged as a special legacy of the period. Such marginality is not to be desired or accepted voluntarily; life on the road is not romanticized, nor is it any source of any genuine pleasure or special wisdom. It is not a journey that ends in discovery or explanation. There is little to suggest the appeal of any particular ideology (even anarchism, so popular in the literature of marginal men in previous periods, is almost strikingly absent). Seldom can the wanderer find alleviation of distress and anxiety by adherence to a group or a

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community of any lasting kind. Marginal men do not participate in any culture, real or imagined... among the marginal men we find those corruptions of games of which Caillois speaks; here is the violence (sometimes personal, sometimes social, but generally in the end without meaning), the alienation, the drunkenness, the unacceptable and antisocial forms of 'play.' Even the strike takes on this aspect; it seems almost a perversion of sport without purpose or meaning, since it is usually lost or blunted. It can provide, for the moment, common purpose and brotherhood, the suggested beginnings of a pattern of belief or a way of life... but such common action is too easily dissolved, and the individual marginal man is on the road again, the road to nowhere. He has no commitments and no culture.\(^\text{35}\)

Susman articulates a view of the road as a marginal and very dangerous place which dates back far beyond 1930s America, but the realities he describes were eclipsed by that decade's mythology of the "real America." Between Woody Guthrie and the WPA/FSA documentarists, the legacy of the 1930s is a fundamental change in America's perception of the road. Whereas once it was a conduit, populated only by highwaymen and other outsiders like gypsies, the road of the 1930s became a cultural space of its own, where normal people actually lived. There, the traveler could discover the real America, and could explore his own roots as an American and his relationship with that America.

\(^{35}\)Warren Susman, *Culture as History*, p. 171.
Sometime in his late teens, Bob Dylan discovered and became obsessed with Woody Guthrie. Woody's influence on him was profound, but before Dylan ever was a folksinger or Woody Guthrie acolyte, Robert Zimmerman was a child of the 1950s. He was an admirer of the outcasts of the 1950s popular culture, from the pioneers of rock and roll like Buddy Holly and Elvis Presley, to actors James Dean and Marlon Brando. Even his name is a reflection of this background, inspired as much by Dylan Thomas as by TV western hero Matt Dillon.

The 1950s was a considerably different decade than the ones preceding it. Prosperity and affluence were the hallmarks, as GNP rose 250 percent between 1945 and 1960. Most Americans, understandably, preferred not to dwell upon the Depression, and saw little reason to tell their baby-boom children about it. What effect the stories would have had is debatable; perhaps of greater import is the protectiveness it exemplifies. Parents saw no reason to subject their children to what they faced, preferring to give those kids comforts they had not had. It was a trend that did not escape notice, as William Chafe notes an unnamed "observer" stating that "Suburban parents and teachers are prone to do for youth rather than to spur youth to

do for itself. Too zealously we shield our children from a knowledge of the realities of life. The generation that survived the Depression and World War II held the belief that they had pulled through by their own hard work, and earned a certain badge of identity. Their children, though, so zealously shielded from the realities of life, had no such trials by fire to forge their own identities. Not forced to work, as their parents had, in suburbia’s filiocracy children had their wants and needs well provided for.

Without an identity coming from work or a trying experience and markedly conformist suburban middle-class life very inhibiting to expressions of individuality, some young people went out searching for escape and a chance to make their mark. As the road provided an escape from seemingly useless lives for Depression intellectuals, so it provided fifties rebels with an escape from the rigid, stultifying pretension of affluent life. While the road has been a means of escape forever, the escape it represented in the fifties was impacted in interesting ways by its cultural context. One of the effects of removing the Depression experience from common discourse was that it caused the road as a cultural space to be romanticized more popularly than it had been. Woody Guthrie, the journalists of the Depression and hobo lore portrayed the road as the source of a purity of spirit and life, people and experience there were essential and real and free, uninhibited by the settled

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2Chafe, p. 123.

3Ibid., p. 123.
community's constricting artificial norms. Each end of the road promised those communities, thus to get out and stay on the road became the objective. No destination was necessary.

The searchers are usually depicted in the popular media of the period as few and deviant, but although they were almost unvaryingly regarded as threatening by adults, a younger generation was attracted to the excitement and vitality they emanated. That men like Elvis Presley, Marlon Brando and James Dean evoked so much excitement and fascination in so many young people despite the derision they incurred from elders indicates that youth were searching for role models outside of, or opposed to, the world of their parents. While most did not actually pursue such dreams, a significant number of the young could experience vicariously through these figures their own fantasies of escape from ennui and see their own feelings of angst vindicated.

The Wild One, starring Brando in the title role, stands apart from other prominent "youth" pictures of the era like Blackboard Jungle and Rebel Without a Cause in that it does not only depict expressions of adolescent culture, but combines them with an actual, physical escape out on the road. The Black Rebel Motorcycle Club in The Wild One is decidedly not a group of intellectuals, and they are not so much on a search for America as they comprise a group of disaffected young men on a search for identity, in opposition to the culture at large. "Hey Johnny, what're you rebelling against?" asks a woman in the bar. "What do you got?" Brando answers.

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The expression of rebellion they engage in is rather primitive, a senseless, undirected fight and destruction of a small town. As the situation in the town escalates, it is more and more apparent that the gang's actions are more a manifestation of herd behavior and a cry for attention than anything else. Like the vagabonds and wanderers of the thirties described by Susman, they inarticulately lash out in violence, "drunkenness, [and] unacceptable and antisocial forms of 'play'."

The Wild One is introduced as a warning to communities, presumably to deal with such toughs as Johnny and his gang as soon as they enter town. A far more benign portrayal of youth in search of excitement and escape on the road came from CBS television's Route 66. In it, two young men from "radically different backgrounds," Todd Stiles (Martin Milner) and Buzz Murdock (George Maharis, later replaced by Glenn Corbett as Linc Case) buy a car and set out "destinationless" on America's famed East-West highway "in search of adventure."5 As they traveled and tried to "find themselves," they became "involve[d] in and attempt[ing] to solve the problems of others."6 Because this problem-solving necessitates adaptation and some assimilation to each particular situation and location, Route 66 differs substantially from The Wild One, where the Black Rebels define themselves by their otherness.


Despite the distinctions between the two, however, The Wild One and Route 66 introduce some important points about the role and place of the road as it emerged from the Depression into the fifties. To the relatively constant function of the road as a means of escape to better opportunities was added a conception of the road as a playground, where few were after the spiritual experience of the real America, but only kicks and excitement. This is the case in The Wild One, where the Black Rebels Motorcycle Club is a gang that convenes and rides on weekends. For all the townspeople or moviegoer knows, they could be investment bankers from Monday to Friday but on the weekend the road is their playground. The economic prosperity of Organization Man postwar America provided young people with extra time and its accompanying angst and boredom, yet also some cash, automobiles and an excellent new superhighway system. They had the freedom to move, to leave behind their normal lives to look for excitement on the road, pursue it, and return home with relative ease. In doing so, they could in addition experiment with their identities amongst peers, becoming toughs or virtually anything else they pleased, as a means of letting off steam or finding themselves as individuals. Affluence allowed them the opportunity to escape, return, and escape again, without the worry of having to find acceptance or work at the end of the road. In affluent America, the road was a rather safe place, which enhanced its romantic image of freedom. The invitation to "come get your kicks on Route 66" is a long way in just a few years from Woody Guthrie’s

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7Robert Troop, "Route 66" (1946).
plaint of "goin' down that road with troubles on my mind" in his "66 Highway Blues."\textsuperscript{8}

So in addition the idea that lingered in the popular conscience from the thirties that the "real" America was out on the road, the road also came to represent a call to adventure. These conceptions are somewhat similar, in fact. Central to each is an element of discovery, a search for an elusive "authenticity." The Depression artists hit the road to find themselves as Americans, fifties youth looked to the road to discover their individuality. One essential difference between the two, though, is that the fifties is marked by an element of passivity. Thirties documentarists set out with a particular idea and intent, but the Black Rebels do no such thing: it appears that they look for things to happen to them; unthinking spontaneity rules their adventures.

Characterizing this unthinking spontaneity further, sometimes even to the point of complete passivity is Jack Kerouac. Whereas Brando was a taciturn and brooding hero, Jack Kerouac "had the gift to capture it on paper"\textsuperscript{9} and gave voice to the call of the open road as an escape valve from consensus America. Two years after The Wild One lit American movie screens, Kerouac published On the Road,\textsuperscript{10} the thinly veiled story of his own travels across the continent in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

\textsuperscript{8}Lomax, p. 62-63.


\textsuperscript{10}Jack Kerouac, On the Road (New York: Signet, 1957).
Though not as young, Kerouac's Sal Paradise, like the young men depicted in The Wild One, is a beneficiary of American postwar affluence in that the GI Bill financing his education also provides him with most of his traveling funds. (In an interesting contrast to the Okies of the thirties, who worked with the desperate hope that they could someday settle down off the road, the only times Kerouac does work is when he needs money to keep traveling.) Like the documentarists of the Depression, Kerouac yearned to find the real America. He was deeply moved by Thomas Wolfe, whose "passages about the 'weathers' of America... made [Kerouac] 'want to prowl, and roam, and see the real America that was there and had never been uttered.'" Thus, Kerouac sets off on the road in search of adventure and experience, as if by simply setting out it will come to him. But for Jack Kerouac, the road develops so as not only to signify escape and adventure, but indeed, "the road is life," and to stay on the road is to stave off death. As On the Road progresses, the road gradually becomes its own world distinguished from and often contrary to settled life.

Initially, Sal Paradise (Kerouac) is not necessarily drawn to the road, but to the sea. On the Road begins with him readying to go to San Francisco in order to ship out on a freighter. As a writer he was looking for experience to write about; in New York "everything was dead," and "life hanging around the campus had reached the

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12Kerouac, p. 175.

13Ibid., p. 5.
completion of its cycle and was stultified."\textsuperscript{14} Also stultifying, he reveals, were his friends in New York, who "were in the negative, nightmare position of putting down society and giving their tired bookish or political or psychoanalytical reasons."\textsuperscript{15} As a breath of fresh air, in comes Dean Moriarty, racing through life, undeniably "real" and a new American saint of the west. Dean's charisma draws Paradise to visit him and the rest of their compatriots in Denver on the way to San Francisco. The contrast of Dean, in whom "I could hear a new call and see a new horizon," and the New York crowd is enough to push Paradise into fulfilling a longtime dream of seeing the country. He begins his journey confident that "Somewhere along the line I knew there'd be girls, visions, everything; somewhere along the line the pearl would be handed to me."\textsuperscript{16}

Significantly, when Kerouac writes of the new call and new horizon Dean Moriarty represents, he qualifies it saying it was something he could "believe...at my young age." That is at the beginning of his life on the road, but as that life continues, the west seems to lose its charm, and virtually every stop begins to resemble New York in a very basic way: the landscape is pervaded by sadness and conflict. Gradually, Sal and Dean are rather hostilely disengaged from settled life until they

\textsuperscript{14}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 10.

\textsuperscript{15}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 11.

\textsuperscript{16}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 11.
find solace only in perpetual motion on the road. Such a life is ultimately unsatisfying, though, and Sal Paradise pulls himself off the road.

The first part of On the Road sets up the basic concept of the road as an escape from boredom and conflict to adventure. To meet Dean and their friends in Denver, Sal Paradise proceeds across the country on buses and in bummed rides. He is drunk with the freedom and new experience, so much so that he feels himself turning into a new person as he crosses into the west. His excitement and anticipation is childlike as he crosses into Colorado and imagines "myself in a Denver bar that night, with all the gang, and in their eyes I would be strange and ragged and like the Prophet who has walked across the land to bring the dark Word, and the only Word I had was 'Wow!'"

Paradise does have a good time in Denver for a while, but soon the theme of the chapter emerges. He is not a good houseguest, and he subtly gives the impression that he wears out his welcome in a number of homes. Soon, "Everything seemed to be collapsing" and as it did, "I was itching to get on to San Francisco."

At each of his next stops, in San Francisco with his friend Remi Boncoeur and in Sabinal with a Mexican girl and her family, the situation is similar. "Everything was falling apart," this time, he writes. "My stay in San Francisco was coming to an

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17 Ibid., p. 16.

18 Ibid., p. 32.

19 Ibid., p. 47.
end."\textsuperscript{20} So as he had in Denver, Paradise escapes on a bus to Los Angeles with the intention of returning to New York. Instead, he meets and is instantly infatuated with Terry, a Mexican girl. But because of their very different expectations of life and Terry's own domestic situation, once again "Everything was collapsing."\textsuperscript{21} After a sad parting, Paradise finally returns to New York.

As the arrangements at his waystations fall apart or collapse, Paradise hits the road in the belief that his experience will be better at the following stop, or even the next time he stops in the same place. He expresses this as the Denver segment comes to a close. On his final night, "I walked around the sad honkytonks of Curtis Street, seeing in the distance beyond the glittering street was darkness, and beyond the darkness the West. I had to go."\textsuperscript{22} Despite the sadness he sees in Denver and the promise he expects further west, his departure from Denver is positive: "The bus rolled out of the storied, eager Denver streets. 'By God, I gotta come back and see what else will happen!' I promised."\textsuperscript{23}

Through Part One, the excitement of new experience on the road and the promise of the west is enough sustenance for Sal Paradise. The road and motion mean

\textsuperscript{20}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 66.

\textsuperscript{21}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 83.

\textsuperscript{22}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 49.

\textsuperscript{23}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 50.
discovery. In Part Two, though, the road takes on the aspect of refuge, motion becomes necessary because if Paradise and Dean Moriarty were to stop, they themselves might fall apart.

This is evident in two very similar scenes. At the beginning of Part Two, Carlo Marx looks at Dean and asks, "What is the meaning of this journey to New York?... I mean, man, whither goest thou? Whither goest thou, America, in thy shiny car in the night?" Dean, the perpetually wound spring, can only flabbergastedly repeat the question. Sal is struck dumb, recalling that "We sat and didn't know what to say; there was nothing to talk about anymore. The only thing to do was go."24 Such questions cause confusion, so when Sal is invited to Old Bull Lee's outside New Orleans, it is a signal for "leaving confusion and nonsense behind and performing our one and noble function of the time, move."25 Their motion is a crutch: as long as they keep moving, they need not, nor have time, to consider the franticness of their lives.

The escape is successful for a while, but Bull Lee, like Carlo Marx, asks Dean "to sit quiet a minute and tell me what you're doing crossing the country like this." At least this time Dean can muster a response, albeit a weak one: "Dean could only blush and say, 'Ah, well, you know how it is.'" In response to questions about other

24Ibid., p. 99.

25Ibid., p. 111.
friends, Paradise explains that they, too, are unanswerable because "we didn’t know anything about ourselves."26

Paradise, though, still holds out hope that he will find some meaning in the experiences awaiting him down the road. He refuses to allow himself to be discouraged "when all the golden land’s ahead of you and all kinds of unforeseen events wait lurking to surprise you and make you glad you’re alive to see."27 Although he seems to remain as sure of the promise of the road as he was in Part One, he is not without his own questions. At the beginning of Part Two, he debates about heading out again, observing that "This can’t go on all the time- all this franticness and jumping around. We’ve got to go someplace, find something."28 But such concern is temporary, for as he and Dean set out, Paradise marvels that they "suddenly saw the whole country like an oyster for us to open; and the pearl was there, the pearl was there."29 Twice repeating the invocation of Part One’s pearl image, however, indicates that Paradise either believes his words strongly, or that on the other hand, he needs some convincing. Later, while driving down "the holy road" with the others in the car asleep, he echoes Carlo, asking himself "What was I doing?

26Ibid., p. 121.

27Ibid., p. 112.

28Ibid., p. 97.

29Ibid., p. 114.
Where was I going?" Ultimately, he faithfully cedes the answers to fate, concluding that "I'd soon find out."30

Scenes "falling apart" and the questions put to Dean and Sal introduce a tension between the traveler and the settled, the home and the road. In Part Three, that is revealed as not simply tension but a definite incompatibility: the world of the road and the world of the settled community do not mix. This is hinted at when Dean’s call to the road sabotages Paradise’s relationship with a woman named Lucille,31 and is driven home in a Denver living room. Dean is expelled from the "gang," and Sal follows him, hope still alive.

Throughout the story, Dean’s peripatetic lifestyle has been "antagonizing people away from him by degrees."32 All of his commitments are short-lived and tenuous; his life is motion. Once, that life and the message Dean carried seemed truly transcendent, in "earlier days in Denver when Dean had everybody sit in the dark with the girls and just talked, and talked, and talked, with a voice that was once hypnotic and strange and was said to make the girls come across by sheer force of persuasion

30Ibid., p. 115.

31Ibid., p. 97.

32Ibid., p. 129.
and the content of what he said. Those disciples had moved away from him after sating themselves with his message, and settled down.

At this point, Dean, who can never settle down, is excoriated for that and his inability to deal with circumstances of his own making. From Denver he is heading east again, and as Galatea Dunkel asks him, "what do you think you are going to accomplish by that? Camille [Dean’s wife of the moment] has to stay home and mind the baby now that you’re gone... and she never wants to see you again." And whereas earlier in life Dean "would have talked his way out, he now fell silent himself." No longer can he connect with these people, or they connect with him. Galatea speaks for the group to Sal soon after Dean leaves that "the sooner he’s dead the better," but for all intents and purposes he is dead to them already and vice versa. Dean, the man of the open road, is expelled from conventional society.

Yet instead of signalling a death knell, it frees Dean completely. As Sal looks out the window at him leaving, he sees Dean "alone in the doorway, digging the street. Bitterness, recriminations, advice, morality, sadness- everything was behind him, and ahead of him was the ragged and ecstatic joy of pure being." After this point, it is Dean and Sal alone, purged from any social circle but that of themselves and those who can keep up with them on the road. "You and I, Sal," Dean says, "we’d dig the whole world... because, man, the road must eventually lead to the whole

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33 Ibid., p. 160.

34 Ibid., p. 160-161.
world."  

Later, Dean delineates his sense of purpose: "Sal, we gotta go and never stop going till we get there." To Sal’s question as to exactly where that is, Dean answers "I don’t know but we gotta go." The road, in fact, is their whole world, and at least for Dean, a destination is irrelevant as long as they can stay in motion. In the company of Dean, motion becomes the experience, for "With frantic Dean I was rushing through the world without a chance to see it." The remainder of Part Three and Part Four are spent literally on the road, Three traversing the United States and Four going to Mexico.

While the first three parts of On the Road establish the road as its own space, Part Four’s trip to Mexico comments upon the life in that space, recalling Susman’s observation that communities of the road "can provide, for the moment, common purpose and brotherhood, the suggested beginnings of a pattern of belief or a way of life... but such common action is too easily dissolved."

As with most of their journeys together, Dean leads the way. He is headed to Mexico to obtain a divorce from one of his wives, with Sal along for the ride open to whatever the trip has in store. "I was having a wonderful time," Sal says, "and the

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36 Ibid., p. 196.
37 Ibid., p. 170.
whole world opened up before me because I had no dreams."\(^{38}\) The trip to Mexico City is full of adventure and excitement, getting there is their common purpose. But in Mexico City, Sal becomes ill and is confined to bed. Dean, however, having secured his divorce papers, will not wait. "Gotta get back to my life," he says in parting over the sickbed. "Wish I could stay with you."\(^ {39}\) The desertion ultimately drives Dean and Sal apart, and makes the point that the friendships and connections to others made on the road are indeed temporary. As an attachment to the road inhibits commitments with settled folks, so it is likewise incompatible with anything more than momentary bonding in a common purpose. Sal discovers that what had seemed like youthful exuberance and impetuousness in Dean was really just selfishness. In reality, though, it is what he bargained for when he "only went along for the ride."\(^ {40}\) Motion, nothing else, is the overriding virtue.

Although the passivity inherent in "only going along for the ride" ultimately backfires when the ride leaves him in a time of need, the road Kerouac draws in his story has a very romantic appeal. It is a refuge from a threatening world that people like Sal Paradise feel little control over and want no part of. "Nothing in this lousy world is my fault, don’t you see that?" he exhorts Dean at one point. "I don’t want it

\(^{38}\)Ibid., p. 211.

\(^{39}\)Ibid., p. 248.

\(^{40}\)Ibid., p. 107.
to be and it can’t be and it won’t be. Most of all, that world and its responsibilities are confusing and overwhelming. Early in Part Two, as he is pulled between the call of the road and his relationship with Lucille Paradise expresses this, feeling that "my affair with Lucille wouldn’t last much longer" because "She wanted me to be her way." Lucille and people like her "would never understand me because I like too many things and get all confused and hung-up running from one falling star to another until I drop.... I had nothing to offer anyone except my own confusion." The road offered flight from that confusion, if only through physical motion. And in the escape, it also promised excitement. Sal Paradise is a rather passive character throughout On the Road, yet he certainly runs into his share of adventure and "experience." And it is not even necessary to have a pied piper like Dean Moriarty to follow, as Paradise’s first journeys alone in Part One illustrate. Get on the road, and excitement, "real life," will come. It might be sad, romantic, giddily exhilarating, difficult, but never dull or artificial. And even though Kerouac’s allegiance to Dean’s lead inhibits him from taking full advantage of it, the life of the road renders the individual’s destiny to his own discretion.

Kerouac, like the intellectuals of the thirties, sounded the call to the road as a member of a minority, and Kerouac acknowledges such. Kerouac describes that minority as "rising from the underground, the sordid hipsters of America, a new beat

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41 Ibid., p. 176.

42 Ibid., p. 104.
generation that I was slowly joining." He reiterates this expression upon the occasion of Dean's expulsion, with interesting implications. Dean "was BEAT," he writes "the root, the soul of Beatific." "Beat," then, takes on two meanings. On the one hand, the beat generation is downtrodden, as he puts it, "underground." But by associating the term with "beatific"-blessed- he imbues that generation with a nobility, a holy downtroddenness. America, too, is called blessed. Putting the two ideas together makes the point that if these "sordid hipsters," searching and on the outside, are blessed, also, then they could be the "real" Americans.

One of the principal differences between the fifties and thirties, though, was that by the fifties, the Americans who had survived the Depression and won the war were the establishment and had no doubts that they were indeed, the real Americans. Their way of life, prosperous beyond their dreams, proved it. The consensus was America, and those on the outside were not. Both this sentiment and the proliferation of American car culture in the 1950s once again changed the road in American imagination.

As The Wild One and On the Road are stories of juvenile delinquents and beatniks respectively, the road they occupy was the domain of marginal people. These people, including even the young men on Route 66, were no longer part of the real America in the popular mind despite Kerouac's possible insinuations, but this only

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43 Ibid., p. 46.

44 Ibid., p. 161.
enhances their appeal as romantic outsiders. Whether a "real America" or not, there is an immediacy and realness surrounding the space of the road and those who love there. In the same way that there is a raw honesty in Evans and Agee's *Famous Men* and Woody Guthrie's *Ballads*, there is also nothing artificial in Kerouac's prose or Brando's brood.

That Kerouac, Brando's Johnny, and the boys on *Route 66* so valued motion is a direct result of the automobile's influence in the 1950's. The automobile traveling along the ever-growing superhighway network offered an unprecedented opportunity to close great distances in relatively little time, thus precipitating the creation of bedroom communities as well as roadside vendors like diners, motels and shopping centers. Essentially, whereas once the road went to the town, with the proliferation of the automobile the town came to the road. And in diminishing the physical distances between locations, the automobile helped to close cultural differences between people by bringing them into closer contact: hence the arrival and assimilation of Todd Stiles and Buzz Murdock is not all that implausible. For anyone on the road looking for adventure and escape or to discover a real America, the phenomenon of the automobile rendered the task difficult; the world increasingly looked the same at each stop. Thus, the premium came to rest on destinationless motion in itself and the ability to stay on the road, for it ultimately led nowhere.

The apparent honesty, angst and searching projected by these men on the road attracted and inspired youth who perhaps felt similarly out of place in 1950s America. It created a new community of the road, this time of often self-styled spiritual, rather
than economic, outcasts looking for something more than what they saw in suburbia.

The search was easily undertaken thanks to the automobile, for it provided the means to stay in motion while also permitting the less adventurous to get home in time for dinner. The road meant escape, but now there no destination. Though ideas of a "real America" lingered hazily, at the close of the 1950s, the romance of the road lay in pure motion and escape.
CHAPTER III

FINDING HIS WAY BACK HOME: BOB DYLAN, DINKYTOWN TO TOUR '74

"I’m still very patriotic to the highway."
-Dylan, 1966

In his 1950s childhood, Bob Dylan chafed against the strictures and ennui of his life in Hibbing, Minnesota. Developing his own identity and attempting to assert himself, he tended toward the images of James Dean and Marlon Brando with leather and jeans, and even a motorcycle when he was fifteen. Despite the stories he would tell of his youth later on, it does not appear that he went anywhere in particular: he and his pal John Bucklen just enjoyed the speed and possibilities.

His other slightly disreputable passion was music. "Since [he] was ten, eleven or twelve... all that interested" him was being a singer. Originally a fan of Hank Williams, Hank Snow, and the blues he was able to pick up on late-night radio from Shreveport, he was infected by the rock and roll bug in his teens. He fronted an assortment of high school rock and roll bands, but "lead singers would always come in and take my bands." In any case, the result was usually the astonishment and derision of his peers and elders; rock and roll had not yet found much acceptance in the Iron

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Range in the mid- to late- fifties. He remained undaunted in his musical pursuits, but soon gravitated toward folk music after hearing "the Kingston Trio or Odetta or someone like that."³

Dylan’s interest in folk music began at about the time he began at the University of Minnesota in the fall of 1959. School life, he quickly figured out, was not for him, and he spent most of his time in Dinkytown, Minneapolis’s bohemian district where "most of everybody... you had the feeling that they’d just been kicked out of something. It was outside... never was 'main stream' or 'the thing to do' in any sense."⁴ He was drawn to the folk music enclave in Dinkytown by the slightly subversive messages he heard in the music and saw in the people who listened to it, and by the myth of Woody Guthrie. Guthrie was well known in these circles, "And when I heard Woody Guthrie, that was it, it was all over."⁵ Dylan was intrigued by little bits of information he picked up and the voice he heard on old records; Woody Guthrie "really struck me as an interesting character."⁶ When a professor friend loaned him Woody’s Bound For Glory, it was a revelation.


⁴Crowe, p. 5.

⁵Loder, p. 18.

⁶Ibid., p. 18.
From that point, and for the next couple of years, Bob Dylan not only sang Woody's songs, but assumed his persona, talking like him, dressing like him, even letting his hair grow to resemble Woody's, and creating a rambling personal history to match. Indeed, until his background was studiously researched in the mid-sixties, Dylan gave various and often conflicting accounts of his early life. One of the more widely circulated had him running away from home repeatedly between the ages of 10 and 18, seeing a Woody Guthrie concert in Carmel, California, and then riding freight trains and singing with the older man.

Clinton Heylin points out a very interesting aspect of Dylan's self-recreation in Woody's image. Dave Whitaker, a friend whose "role, as far as Bob was concerned... [was] turning him on to the world of books," knew, and let Dylan know, that the Woody Guthrie of Bound For Glory was a literary creation. Dylan was very interested in Woody, to be sure, but the persona in Bound For Glory was his role model. "What really appealed to Dylan, says Heylin, "was the figure Guthrie painted of himself in Bound For Glory, a mythological figure. As Whitaker himself said, the story of Bound For Glory is 'the story of these folksingers and how you could earn your living going from place to place.'" One of Woody's central themes in song and prose was individual empowerment, and that was a powerful message for a kid who seemed to be an outsider, like Bob Dylan.

Dylan's unabated desire to be a singer and his fixation with Guthrie pointed him in only one direction, east to New York. New York was the center of the

recording industry, the major leagues of folk music to Dinkytown's comparative backwater, and Woody Guthrie was in a New Jersey hospital incapacitated since 1955 by Huntington's chorea.

In early 1960 he arrived, during one of the coldest winters of the century. He made his way to Greenwich Village, and continued the musical learning process he had begun in Minnesota, turning up everywhere, playing alone or with whomsoever he could. And he met Woody. The two formed a friendship; Dylan visited Guthrie once unannounced in the hospital and played the latter's songs for him, and from then on entertained him at a nearby home on weekends along with a bevy of other friends and aspiring singers caught up in the Guthrie myth. Dylan, as the fates would have it, became one of Woody's favorites for his renditions of the songs and for his performance in general. (Ironically, Woody's comment about "the boy" was "that boy's got a voice. Maybe he won't make it with his writing, but he can sing it. He can really sing it."8)

Through these "hootenannies" centering around Guthrie Dylan learned a great deal of new music from the others, and perhaps more importantly, fell into a crowd that included one of the few folksingers approaching Guthrie's class, Woody's old pal Pete Seeger. It was through Seeger at Sing Out! and Irwin Silber at Broadside magazines and the friendly competition they fostered amongst the community of young songwriters that Dylan developed his own unique voice. He never lost his

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admiration for Woody, but in the Village folk community, Bob Dylan gained the confidence to leave the Woody act behind.

It was a small, vibrant community in the Village in the early sixties, "outsiders," too, as in Dinkytown. Seeger was the godfather, but many of the remaining idealist intellectuals from Communist and folk-protest movement of the thirties and forties were still around. After being decimated by the HUAC hearings, they had retreated underground but were slowly rising again, with the revival of folk music and topical song. The intellectual atmosphere surrounding the folk community in the late 1950s with its non-mainstream allure of having "just been kicked out of something" attracted young people, usually college students who were just curious or really aiming to escape consensus America, to the folk revival's most visible and inclusive events, hootenannies. There, mingling with people their own age as well as the old guard, they "drew a strong sense of solidarity" from participation or "just recognizing that they were among similar-minded people." But in addition to furnishing a forum for music and ideas, the hootenanny, (in Irwin Silber's words), communicated "a sense of the real America." That had the effect of further marginalizing and tightening the group, as "these musicians and this audience found themselves in the enviable/unenviable position of being outsiders, who believed that they were really the insiders, because they felt deeply that they knew the real meaning of America."9

One of the major components of this "meaning of America" conveyed at the hootenanny was the legend of Woody Guthrie. As Bob Dylan had, many young people exploring the folk revival gravitated to Bound For Glory's image of Woody, the romantic outsider rambling America's roads, living life on his own terms and singing the truth, an image perpetuated by those older folks like Pete Seeger who had actually known and traveled with Woody. The musical legacy Woody left further enhances his and his road's reputation: the road, the place that produced and sustained Woody Guthrie was where the real America was to be found.

At the same time that they absorbed the gospel of Woody Guthrie, however, the young people in these Dinkytown and Greenwich Village enclaves were reading the poetry and literature of fifties Beats like Jack Kerouac: the gospel of motion. Although he was deeply influenced by Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan's most profound lyrical statements concerning the road clearly derive from the power his generation ascribed to motion. Indeed, these songs are not so much about the road as they are about a need to move. In contrast to Kerouac, who asserted that "the road is life," Dylan took the perspective that stagnation equalled death. His life, his creativity, fed on motion.

Early in his career, Dylan often utilized the theme of rambling he picked up from Guthrie and his folk and blues influences. It is seldom seen, though, following 1965 when it is replaced by a shiftlessness and expressed moral uncertainty. A restlessness and tension characterizes many songs from this period following his break from the folk-protest movement, evidenced by "Like a Rolling Stone"'s repeated
refrain of "no direction home." Dylan uses a motif of intellectual and physical motion; life lies in moving and changing whereas death is in stagnation. But at the same time that he dreads stopping, Dylan also displays a need for community. Unlike On the Road's ultimate conclusion, then, Dylan implies that community and motion are not necessarily antithetical. This is apparent in Highway 61 Revisited's "Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues," the song about "when you're lost in the rain in Juarez" amid scenes of desolation and despondency. Not only lost, but stuck and left behind, as the last verse drives home:

I started out on burgundy
But soon hit the harder stuff
Everybody said they'd stand behind me
When the game got rough
But the joke was on me
There was nobody even there to call my bluff
I'm going back to New York City
I do believe I've had enough

The despair, then, is ultimately not from Juarez, but that in being left stuck behind, there is no one to "call his bluff," to challenge him.

Furthermore, after intimating that "we sit here stranded, though we're all doing our best to deny it," in Blonde on Blonde's "Visions of Johanna," Dylan then solidifies the idea on with "Memphis Blues Again"'s central question as to whether "this can really be the end/ To be stuck inside of Mobile with the Memphis blues again?"

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Dylan's songs seem to indicate a morbid fear of being "stranded" or "stuck," physically or creatively.

As Bob Dylan emerged as a major figure in the mid-sixties, a major obstacle he felt inhibiting his creative motion took the form of roles that were bestowed upon him by others, as he steadily maintained that he was only a singer. Even when he could stay in perpetual motion, which he did do with an intensive touring schedule, he still could not escape the demands made upon him: they only became more taxing and harder to outrun. Rather than burn out, then, Dylan stepped off the road after the completion of his Blonde on Blonde album in 1966 and retreated to his house Woodstock, New York. On July 29 that summer, while riding his motorcycle Dylan suffered an accident of some sort or another. Reports are vague as to what, if anything, actually occurred.11 Whatever the case, Dylan went into seclusion.

To put it rather cynically, it was a very convenient time for Dylan come up with any excuse that would remove him from the public eye. A motorcycle accident, with attendant horror stories of disfigurement and brain damage that Dylan, Grossman, and others perpetuated with silence, provided good cover. By 1966, Dylan had overextended himself in the commitments that he and Grossman scheduled. To maintain his pace of life, Dylan had for a couple of years been abusing his body with

"chemicals which doctors had prescribed for entertainers and athletes"\textsuperscript{12} and lack of sleep, and at the time of his retreat was working on a book, editing film footage that would emerge as \textit{Eat the Document} in 1967, and putting together a special for ABC-TV. Additionally, Albert Grossman had booked him for a "daunting fall schedule of [sixty-four] concerts,"\textsuperscript{13} in venues larger than Dylan had ever played before, like Shea Stadium and the Yale Bowl.\textsuperscript{14} Perhaps more important than anything, he felt that he had reached a creative pinnacle with \textit{Blonde on Blonde}, needed time to think and furthermore was newly married. Thus, having been living "one foot on the highway and one foot in the grave,"\textsuperscript{15} Dylan relocated to escape onerous responsibilities, to rest and "dry out,"\textsuperscript{16} to gain a fresh creative perspective, and to spend time with his wife and family.

Ironically, as time went on, Dylan found himself in the creative stagnation he had expressed deep fear of just a short time before. By secluding himself and slowing himself down, Dylan seems to have isolated himself from a major source of his creativity: the provocation, company and blindingly fast-paced life he had led. Once

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12}Heylin, p. 170.
\item \textsuperscript{13}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 173.
\item \textsuperscript{14}Williams, p. 220.
\item \textsuperscript{15}Dylan, "Hero Blues," 1974 version.
\item \textsuperscript{16}Shelton, p. 429.
\end{itemize}
he hit his stride in the early sixties, Dylan followed no crowd, but even so appeared to need some reference point, a spur to induce his creativity. When he came to New York, it was other members of the folk community; later it became resistance to the expectations that accompanied his rise to stardom. In Woodstock he was free of it all; he had even severed his ties to the demanding Albert Grossman. While the Band kept him company in Woodstock for a while, they eventually left to record and perform in their own right, leaving Dylan alone with his family and a creative block.

Dylan was torn in opposing directions. He enjoyed his life as a family man, yet it was at the expense of his creative life. Not only did he no longer have anyone pushing him to produce, but his muse had deserted him: "as if operated by a tap, the songwriting stream was turned off in 1968."17 In the midst of his confusion, Dylan reconsidered his decision to cease live performance and initiated a series of fitful attempts to rouse his creativity.

Bob Spitz calls Dylan’s relationship to performing an "addiction,"18 and while none of his other biographers uses such strong language, it does appear that after some months away, he very much wanted to be back before an audience. He played a short set with the Band backing him at the Woody Guthrie Memorial concert in January 1968, and about a year and a half later in August 1969 played at the Isle of Wight

17 Ibid., p. 192.

18 Ibid., p. 421.
music festival. Going in, Dylan "called the Isle of Wight a warm-up for future American tours."¹⁹

In England, though, Dylan "found himself in a situation that he could not fully control."²⁰ What he anticipated to be a relatively small show ballooned beyond any expectations. When the British public learned that Dylan would be playing, an estimated two hundred thousand fans descended upon Wight, fueled press reports promising a three-hour set by Dylan and the Band, during which they would be joined by all manner of luminaries, including the Beatles and Rolling Stones. This was all purely hopeful speculation; Dylan had no part in the buildup.

Both fans and Dylan were disappointed. Fans felt let down because their hopes went unfulfilled. While Dylan played for an hour, giving in George Harrison's words "a brilliant performance," John Lennon pointed out the real problem: "everyone was expecting a Godot, a Jesus, to appear."²¹

For Dylan's part, his expectations were not met either. He accepted an invitation to Wight "to get away from it all and to give myself a chance to break back in,"²² and left vowing not to return to England, because "they make too much of

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¹⁹Shelton, p. 470.

²⁰Ibid., p. 470.

²¹Ibid., p. 469.

²²Heylin, p. 199.
singers over there."23 His tentative step back into public performance and onto the road showed him still hostage to other peoples’ expectations. Wight appealed to him because it allowed him to escape Woodstock and the music and arts festival held there that year in large part due to his own presence in the area. At Wight, though, he encountered the same pressures. If Wight could indeed be seen as a "warm-up for future American tours," Dylan preferred to stay off the road.

With live performance again not an option, Dylan sought to wake his creative spirit by relocating his family a number of times, even going so far as to return to MacDougal Street in the Village where he tried to recapture the "New York atmosphere"24 in which he had produced his best work. Finally in 1973 the Dylan clan moved to Malibu, California. There, Dylan was able to hang out and play music with old friends like keyboardist Barry Goldberg and Byrds guitarist Roger McGuinn and Barry Goldberg. Most importantly, Dylan reconnected with Robbie Robertson and the Band. As they jammed, "all of a sudden [a tour] seemed to really make sense;"25 reunion with old friends like McGuinn and the Band seems to have given Bob Dylan the inspiration to take the initiative in his career again. Although they were now three thousand miles west, the Band rekindled that "New York atmosphere."

23Shelton, p. 470.

24Heylin, p. 195.

This rejuvenation was gratifying enough to overcome memories of Wight, for it prompted him to return to live performance. A tour, as he well knew, meant compromising some of his autonomy by putting his hand in again with promoters and all the people he would later lament "had a piece of the action" and "his own idea about what the tour was about." But it also meant getting back out onstage. And if "hating every moment" of all the outside matters was worth that opportunity, Dylan must have wanted to get back very badly.

Tour '74 is generally regarded as a critical and commercial success; it re-established Bob Dylan as a major figure in popular music. Rolling Stone's Ben Fong-Torres wrote that Dylan looked like a "healthy, confident man," delivering "a riveting twelve-year retrospective of musical poses and lyric voices conducted with forceful assurance and heartfelt pride." The Chicago Tribune, after the first show at the Stadium began its review by saying "Bob Dylan, praise him, is back." Backed

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26Ibid., p. 235.

27Various Critics, "Live! The Greatest Performances" (Rolling Stone 4 June 1987), p. 86.

28Spitz, p. 428.
by the Band, he gave "brilliant performance[s]"\textsuperscript{29} that left audiences "dazed and somewhat out of breath."\textsuperscript{30}

Out of the spotlight, however, "it became apparent that [Dylan] was pushing himself through the tour, almost willing himself to complete it." In 1978 he admitted that he "hated every moment" of the Tour '74. "From the first moment I walked out on stage at the opening concert," Dylan revealed, "I knew that going through with the tour would be the hardest thing I had ever done."\textsuperscript{31}

The two pictures, one of success and the other of frustration, are not necessarily antithetical. There is reason to believe that Dylan and the Band were as exciting, and excited, as tour chroniclers describe. After all, Dylan has never been a terribly good actor on stage when it came to his feelings. He can be a chameleon when it comes to roles and poses, but he never pretends emotionally. If he is in a vicious, offensive mood, the audience quickly finds out, likewise when he is indifferent. So when Spitz says that "Dylan grew more relaxed [and] regained his old confidence on stage, often straddling the mike, legs thrown astride, in the manner of

\textsuperscript{29}Shelton, p. 501.

\textsuperscript{30}Spitz, p. 429.

\textsuperscript{31}Heylin, p. 235.
Elvis or Gene Vincent," Dylan probably was having a genuinely good time onstage.32

Offstage, Dylan called Tour '74 "the hardest thing I had ever done" because "the problem was that everyone had his own idea about what the tour was about. Everybody had a piece of the action. The publicity people. The promoters. I had no control over what was going on."33 On stage, where he was the clear leader, he appears to have enjoyed himself, but the matters that were out of his hands reminded him too much of reasons for which he had quit performing in the first place eight years earlier.

With its onstage success and backstage exasperation, Tour '74 was "an inevitable chapter in the Bob Dylan story," a necessary step for Dylan in his career leading up to Rolling Thunder. Dylan "wanted to prove that he wasn't washed-up, and he wanted to perform."34 The Band's supportive backing on Tour '74 allowed Dylan to get his legs back under him as a performer, and to do so in a rather controlled setting, since it was only his third appearance since his 1966 tour with the Band.

Getting himself back into performing shape required a certain trade-off, though. To be taken seriously, Dylan had to make clear that the tour was "part of a creative

32Spitz, p. 429.

33Heylin, p. 235.

34Spitz, p. 421.
renaissance, [and] not merely an attempt to cash in on an already burgeoning sixties
nostalgia,\textsuperscript{35} for he had not produced an album of new material in about three years.
(Towards this end, \textit{Planet Waves}, recorded with the Band during rehearsals for the
tour, would be released in January.) At the same time, though, the energy that flowed
between Dylan and the Band in their previous collaborations had to be altered
somewhat on \textsc{Tour '74}. They had to reach a balance, ushering Dylan's material into
the seventies without sounding dated, while at the same time rendering that material as
close to its original form as possible, because, after all, a bill of Bob Dylan backed by
the Band inevitably caused fans to recall the earlier tours and the Dylan of the sixties.

After eight years, too, the business of rock touring had changed significantly.
As Bob Spitz explains, "Concerts were no longer the respectful recitals that
characterized Bob's previous tours. They were mass media events that required
stadiums and arenas to meet the demand.... Playing great music had become only a
part of the overall presentation. Fans expected...their money's worth.\textsuperscript{36} So, if Dylan
were to come out and attempt to replicate his previous performances, not only would
he have presented a very dull, dated show by seventies standards, but he would also
virtually admit that he and his music could not make the transition onto the new
decade. Dylan needed to evoke the crowd's passions again, not engage their
sympathies and nostalgia.

\textsuperscript{35}Heylin, p. 231.

\textsuperscript{36}Spitz, p. 420.
Thus there were some serious expectations accompanying Dylan and the Band out onto the road, and it is these that Dylan so chafed against. Throughout his career he has rebelled against roles he never asked for, but was excoriated for shedding: protest singer, youth spokesman, sage of a generation. "I try my best to be just like I am," he said in "Maggie's Farm", "but everybody wants you to be just like them."

Now, in order to reestablish himself as a vital performer again in his own mind and the public's, he had to reassume the mantle of Bob Dylan, popular culture hero, the very image he fought by escaping to Woodstock eight years earlier. But it was a calculated risk: all Dylan needed to do was satisfy himself that he could still perform, to regain confidence, and to delineate his priorities as to what he wanted from a tour and the road. Any roles acquired in the process could be dispensed with easily enough once he hit his stride.

So, then, despite hating the backstage haggling that was considered necessary on such a tour, Dylan must have proved to himself that he still could perform and furthermore still enjoyed performing enough to end the last show in Los Angeles by saying "See ya next year." Next year would bring the Rolling Thunder Revue.
CHAPTER IV

AN EXISTENTIAL TOUR: THE ROLLING THUNDER REVUE, 1975

Though not quite at the amphetamine pace of 1964-66, Tour '74 reintroduced Dylan to life as a traveling musician. Robbie Robertson called the tour "a kind of step into the past,"¹ and it was, what with the expectations it aroused and its allowing Dylan to get back on the road as a member of a musical community. But it was also an important step into the future too. The motorcycle crash of 1966 is a pivotal event in Dylan's life and career, and Tour '74 is no less significant. The crash pulled him off the road, and Tour '74 set him back upon it.

To be a musician was all that Bob Dylan ever wanted, from his high school yearbook ambition to be a member of Little Richard's band to his later emulation of Woody Guthrie. The satisfaction of finding out that he could still do it encouraged him and distanced him further from his life as a family man. Although Tour '74 was not "a tour where a bunch of guys get together and say 'Let's go out an play'" but instead in response to "great demand,"² it was comparatively better than being laid up in Woodstock or Malibu. But upon completion of the tour in February, Dylan settled

²Ibid., p. 234.
back in Malibu with Sara and the kids for the rest of the winter. While little is known
publicly, at about this time Bob and Sara began having grave problems in their
marriage.

In April Dylan headed back to New York, this time alone. Sometime that
month, he ran into old friend Phil Ochs. Ochs' career was decidedly on the downturn
and he was wracked by alcoholism, but he retained the idealism inspiring his Ain't
a'Marching Anymore recordings of ten years earlier. In 1975, the Marxist regime of
Salvador Allende had been overthrown in Chile, and Ochs was organizing a benefit on
Allende's behalf. He was having trouble, though, selling tickets: such a mix of
politics and music seemed anachronistic. In any case, he convinced Dylan to show up
and perform.

Dylan, having "arrived for the show well ahead of time, and passed the hours
drinking wine" with friends present, gave a "virtually legless," "excruciating"
performance.3 Dylan was so drunk, Van Ronk had to whisper the words to "Blowin'
in the Wind" in his ear as they played the finale.4 What is most important about the
Friends of Chile Benefit, however, is the fact that Dylan was a guest. "What a relief
it had been not to be a spokesman or a prophet, but just Bob again," Spitz writes.
"Just one of the guys who had gotten good and drunk and jammed with some
friends.... A throwback to those wonderful, innocent days on the Street" in the early

3Ibid., p. 238.

sixties. On stage with Ochs, Pete Seeger and Van Ronk, Dylan was free of the roles that were bestowed upon him, and was able to just play music.

A similar situation occurred almost a year later in San Francisco. To raise money for San Francisco schools suffering from budget shortfalls, promoter Bill Graham staged a SNACK (Students Need Athletic and Cultural Kicks) benefit in Golden Gate Park. Dylan, first only rumored to appear, took the stage for a half-hour set of originals and old favorites with Neil Young and a few members each of the Band and Doobie Brothers. With these heavyweights and other performers like the Grateful Dead and Santana on hand, Dylan again could revel in the luxury of not being a spokesman or prophet. At SNACK, those roles were willingly assumed by Marlon Brando and Joan Baez.

Indeed, the Friends of Chile and SNACK benefits in contrast to the constraints he worked under during Tour '74 must have reminded Dylan of the artistic freedom relative obscurity affords. Working in such informal circumstances, Dylan as an artist was free to pursue his own vision and also work with others with others without overshadowing them. Despite the politics Ochs and Baez represented in contrast to his own indifference, "Dylan was wrestling with his longing for community." A

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5Ibid., p. 437-438.

community, like the one he was a member of in the early sixties afforded him with a measure of obscurity, "the one great blessing people are not thankful enough for."\textsuperscript{7}

Sara accompanied Dylan at SNACK, but shortly thereafter he took off for France alone. While there, "sitting in a donkey cart" Dylan had a vision. "It flashed on me that I was gonna go back to America and do what it is that I do."\textsuperscript{8} Upon returning to America in June, Dylan moved into the MacDougal Street apartment he had lived in a decade before, and began to frequent Greenwich Village for the first time since the early years. Rolling Thunder was rumbling in the distance.

The Village had changed in the intervening years. While it had hit a low in the early seventies, it seemed to be rejuvenating somewhat with performers like Patti Smith, Steve Forbert and Rob Stoner. When word leaked out that Bob Dylan was in the neighborhood haunting the old joints like The Other End, it added to the excitement. The scene that Dylan longed for, that community of musicians, was reforming. "The scene was what Bob Dylan really missed," states Bob Spitz. "He craved the hands-on excitement of the old days- listening to live music, hanging out with other musicians, jamming until dawn, cruising the clubs where performers tried out their new material and fed off each other's enthusiasm. That was where he felt

\textsuperscript{7}Craig McGregor, ed., \textit{Bob Dylan: The Early Years} (New York: DaCapo, 1990), p. 139.

\textsuperscript{8}Heylin, p. 251.
most comfortable."

Into this new scene in the Village drifted old running mates like Bobby Neuwirth and Jack Elliott, and differences were patched up; when Dylan had his accident in 1966 he left behind with his commitments not a few friendships gone sour.

Dylan never chased any of them; the scene just gradually coalesced. Neuwirth and Elliott, in particular, were welcome figures, for although Dylan enjoyed hanging out with new people, he was more comfortable with the old crowd. They knew him before he was a star, and offered little of the deference the newer musicians would. Unlike in the earlier years, though, the old crowd had separate lives, with their own families, responsibilities commitments. They would not complain, but were quite not so eager as Dylan to recapture the spark of times past.

Somewhere during that summer of 1975 Dylan came up with what seemed like the perfect solution: a constantly moving, self-promoted and self-contained tour with revolving personnel, making surprise appearances in small clubs. It would be almost like its own little world; a musical community would always be there when he, or any other performer, needed it.

Actually, the idea was not really new to him. He had brought up the concept of a railroad-borne road show back on the mid-sixties tours with the Band. From those discussions Robbie Robertson recalled that Dylan had "always wanted to have that kind of Gypsy caravan situation happening where it was loose and different people could get up and do different things at different times and nothing would be

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9 Spitz, p. 449.
out of place."\textsuperscript{10} He spoke of the same sort of thing to Maria Muldaur in 1972. "Wouldn’t it be great if we got a train and put a revue together that would travel across the country?" he asked her unexpectedly, and ruminated on a number of musicians that could be included, adding that he would "pattern it after a circus- just arrive in town and set up and do the show."\textsuperscript{11}

The source for these fantasies lay perhaps in the early rock and roll shows of the fifties that Dylan had seen in Hibbing as a teen. In that era tours were packages with up to ten acts traveling together, sharing a band and often the stage, and rotating as headliners for a month’s journey. The fun those performers seemed to have together helped draw Dylan to music, and it was one of his greatest joys as a musician.\textsuperscript{12} He had gotten away from it, but in 1975 saw a chance to jump back in and keep it going not for only a month, but for ever. "We were all very close," Dylan explained. "We had this fire going ten years ago and now we’ve got it burning again."\textsuperscript{13}

The key was to keep it burning and this was the right time to try. Dylan had found the scene that he really belonged in, the music scene, and he wanted to preserve

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{10}Heylin, p. 264.
\item \textsuperscript{11}Spitz, p. 459-460.
\item \textsuperscript{12}Ibid., p. 460.
\item \textsuperscript{13}Shelton, p. 521.
\end{itemize}
it. He started his campaign early one morning, or very late one night depending upon perspective, in July at the ear of Faris Bouhafa, a Columbia Records A&R man. "See all these people, the musicians?" Dylan said. "I want to take all of them in a bus and go all over the northeast part of the country and we're gonna go to colleges and we're not gonna tell anyone we're coming." Bouhafa, considering the hour and circumstances, just listened as Dylan continued. "We're gonna sell all the tickets ourselves- we'll print our own tickets- and we're gonna arrive in town and call up the college radio stations and tell 'em 'We're gonna play tonight, announce it on your station,' and that's all the publicity we'll do. We'll do the show, then pack up and hit some other town. All unannounced." And then, perhaps remembering his experience on Tour '74, he concluded "No one's gonna make any money off this thing or have any control over us."14

Bouhafa was not inclined to take the plans seriously, but Dylan soberly confronted him about them at a recording session the following evening. Bouhafa dodged and noted the competition Dylan would tour against. "We're gonna have so many great performers on this tour that no one else is gonna compete with it," Dylan cut him off, and proceeded to tell Bouhafa exactly what he had in mind, which was a little bit more elaborate than the previous night's idea. Now he was not confining himself to the northeast, or to any time period. Dylan was describing a roadshow that would never stop. After citing some prospective performers, he explained that "We don't always have to have the same people. It can be like- I'll start it off with some

14Spitz, p. 458.
of my friends. Go for three weeks or so. Then maybe I'll take a rest.... I know I can get someone like Eric Clapton to fill in while I'm gone. He'd love to get involved. Then, when everything's straight, I'll fly back to wherever in the country the tour happens to be and join up with it again." With such an arrangement, Dylan could perform at will without needing to make a commitment, and with the imagined cast of stars stepping in at their own random whim, he would not be at center stage. Its constant travel and personnel shifts would ensure a perpetually fresh and dynamic musical community. "What I want," continued Dylan, looking to the future, is to have a sort of traveling carnival that would eventually have its own tents and railroad cars. Something like Ringling Bros. does, only with musicians and their families."\textsuperscript{15}

Bouhafa met with little luck at Columbia finding backing for the Montezuma Revue, as it was then dubbed. In fact, CBS officials returned his detailed memo back calling the plans "bullshit" and predicting that "this will never happen."\textsuperscript{16} Bouhafa thought all was lost, but at this point Bobby Neuwirth entered the picture and saved the day.

Neuwirth was performing at The Other End in the Village, but was unaware that Dylan was in town as he and Dylan had an acrimonious falling out in the sixties and were not in touch. Bouhafa ran into Neuwirth shortly after the Montezuma Revue

\textsuperscript{15}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 459.

\textsuperscript{16}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 467.
proposal was vetoed by CBS personnel, and as they spoke, they avoided the subject of Bob Dylan and Neuwirth's absence over the past few years.

Dylan, meanwhile, was putting together his *Desire* album. The recording sessions were arduous, but finally Dylan got what he thought he wanted on tape. He was tentative, though, and going into the mixing sessions, and Bouhafa knew that the bad news he bore about the tour could easily throw things into disarray. Considering that, it is very curious that he took the chance of asking Neuwirth along. Bouhafa felt Neuwirth would not mind burying the hatchet, but it was impossible to predict what could happen when the two men got together.

Bouhafa's gamble paid off. Dylan and Neuwirth acted as if nothing had happened. "Ten minutes" after walking in, relates Bouhafa, "Neuwirth was running the session." 17 From there, Neuwirth took over as master of ceremonies in the Village scene, and he shared Dylan's enthusiasm for the Revue. That CBS would not back it became irrelevant, now that Neuwirth and Dylan were together and plotting. Indeed, it was better that CBS refused, because now Rolling Thunder would be beholden to no one but the performers.

Dylan and Neuwirth went about planning. To handle the logistics they called Lou Kemp, a friend of Dylan's from Minnesota who could be trusted implicitly with the secrecy they sought to cultivate. Jacques Levy, the off-Broadway playwright of *Oh! Calcutta!* fame and with whom Dylan had written many of the songs for *Desire*.

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became the stage director responsible for shuttling all the different acts on and off the stage smoothly.

As for the musicians, Dylan and Neuwirth started out with the team that had completed *Desire* as a core. Bassist Rob Stoner, violinist Scarlett Rivera and drummer Howie Wyeth had figured that they were Dylan’s new band, having done the album and then backed him at a televised tribute to CBS talent scout John Hammond. They were surprised, though, as others- Steve Soles, David Mansfield, Mick Ronson, Luther Rix, Cindy Bullens, Ronee Blakeley and T-Bone Burnett- seemed to drift in to their rehearsals, ostensibly just to jam. Bigger names came in, too, as time wore on. Joan Baez, Jack Elliott and Roger McGuinn all came by to visit. "We’re up there jamming," recalled Stoner, "and it turns out what we’re really doing is rehearsing."18

The planners were not so secretive with the other headliners, but nevertheless assembling the troupe was a haphazard, spontaneous process. "We’d go out at night and run into people and we’d just invite them," said Kemp. As a result, what "started out with a relatively small group... ended up with a caravan."19 Jack Elliott was one of the people Dylan and Neuwirth had on their list from the beginning. He had played something of a godfather’s role for them early in the sixties; Ramblin’ Jack was the first of the sixties ragged vagabond folksingers, had actually known and performed with Woody Guthrie, and he helped the younger folkniks along. Elliott was "the one

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18Heylin, p. 264-265.

19Ibid., p. 265.
who taught us all," according to Neuwirth.²⁰ Often it was without so much as a thank-you, for "Very early on, Bobby [Dylan] appropriated Jack's vocal style, his stage persona, his repertory, and his closest friends without giving any credit where it was due." Furthermore, old debt or not, Elliott's "cowboy-errant life-style, conducted out of a jerry-built trailer home, paralleled the Revue's vagabond ideology."²¹ Dylan had not seen Elliott in seven years, but one night at The Other End he approached Elliott with a proposition to go out together and "play for the people." Elliott responded, "Let's go!"²²

Allen Ginsberg joined in similar fashion. "I hadn't seen Dylan in about four years," Ginsberg told Peter Chowka in New Age Journal. "He just called me up at 4 a.m. and said: 'What're you writing? Sing it to me on the phone.'" Apparently satisfied, Dylan said "OK, let's go out on the road."²³ In the original plans, Ginsberg was to give a reading as a part of the show. Although this was excised due to time constraints, he stayed along as a bard of the tour. He performed the task well, composing some poems and speaking at length about the tour to anyone who would listen.

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²⁰Shelton, p. 521.

²¹Spitz, p. 472.

²²Shelton, p. 522.

²³Ibid., p. 525.
Ginsberg was a trusted friend; Elliott was a figure that would take some of the spotlight off of Dylan, as would Roger McGuinn. Ronée Blakeley, fresh off her success in Nashville, would help too, but Dylan still needed a headliner approaching his own magnitude, a foil who could keep up with him onstage and challenge him. He turned to Joan Baez, calling on her with but a week to spare before launch. She was planning to go out on her own that November, but found the opportunity and challenge of Rolling Thunder "irresistible."²⁴

The troupe assembled at the Gramercy Park Hotel in New York for a week of rehearsals. After a dry run at a birthday party for Gerde’s Folk City proprietor Mike Porco on October 26, the caravan took off for Falmouth, Massachusetts. Dylan’s grand visions of July were tempered somewhat; the itinerary called for thirty-one shows beginning October 30 in Plymouth, Massachusetts and culminating December 7 at Madison Square Garden. And without any backing but their own, the idea of playing solely small clubs and arenas had to be compromised. Some larger venues, like the Civic Center in Providence and the Forum in Montreal, had to be added. This move (or concession to reality) engendered some criticism from people who had become fixated on the small-theater vision, but Dylan simply explained that while "We’re gonna play any place we can.... we also have a lot of expenses to meet."²⁵

²⁴Ibid., p. 522.

²⁵Heylin, p. 275.
Shows in larger arenas and the money they meant served a further purpose. Whatever other visions for the tour that Dylan entertained, 1974 painting lessons with Norman Raeben reawakened in him a desire to make a movie. Though only nebulously realized, he knew that the idea he had in mind could never be made in the conventional manner. He decided to pursue the movie idea on Rolling Thunder utilizing the troupe as his cast and his receipts to support a film crew.\[26\] To assist in putting together scenes he looked to Sam Shepard, who very quickly found his role to be superfluous to Dylan's inscrutable vision. Although Renaldo and Clara, the film that emerged to general puzzlement and little viewing in 1978, can hardly be said to be representative of the tour, the process of putting it together and its influence of Dylan's behavior on Rolling Thunder provides insight into Dylan's expectations for this unique tour and the road itself.

So as the main tour bus, dubbed "Phydeaux," set off for its "rambling, tumbling tour of the Northeast, with film cameras capturing it all,"\[27\] the motivations, reasons and values of the Rolling Thunder Revue were almost as disparate as the performers, some of whom undoubtedly saw it as just a great gig. Dylan vaguely spoke of looking for "inspiration." Among the commentators who observed Rolling Thunder's machinations, though, some thought it simply an elaborate publicity stunt to publicize the impending release of Desire. Others looked to Desire's centerpiece, Dylan's

\[26\]Ibid., p. 272.

\[27\]Shelton, p. 522.
current single "Hurricane," for clues, deciding that Dylan was on the road to bring attention to middleweight boxer Ruben "Hurricane" Carter’s dubious 1966 murder conviction and present incarceration. By far one of the most popular theories was that with Baez, Ginsberg and McGuinn all on the same bill with Dylan, Rolling Thunder represented an attempt to "embody the lost idealism of the sixties."\textsuperscript{28} Ginsberg, at least, seemed to feel this, as he "saw the tour as a reaffirmation of what was actually achieved in the sixties."\textsuperscript{29} Shelton agrees, saying that "what the 1970’s needed, Dylan saw, was another shot of that singular 1960’s zeal."\textsuperscript{30}

As it turned out, Dylan seldom addressed the subject of Hurricane Carter on the tour, and only minimally showcased his songs from \textit{Desire} by integrating them into the rest of his catalogue. But while Spitz rejects outright that Rolling Thunder was an attempt to recapture some of the fire of the sixties and asserts unequivocally that its purpose was "fun, fun, fun" and "companionship,\textsuperscript{31} the two ideas are actually well intertwined.

Even a cursory glance at the Rolling Thunder roster reveals that although Dylan could be said to be doing well creatively and professionally, this was a largely

\textsuperscript{28}Spitz, p. 479.

\textsuperscript{29}Shelton, p. 532.

\textsuperscript{30}Ibid., p. 516.

\textsuperscript{31}Spitz, p. 481.
group of nobodies or relics who appeared to be on the downsides of their careers. Of
the more contemporary artists, Mick Ronson was best known as a sideman to David
Bowie whose own solo career had fizzled, and Dylan purportedly discovered Scarlett
Rivera playing her violin on the street. More to the point, McGuinn, Ginsberg, Elliott,
and even Baez, did not make a smooth transition into the seventies; the fragmentary
and increasingly lugubrious rock world left them behind "alone- and lost," missing the
old "lifestyle of liberties and esprit-de-corps." The same could be said of Dylan;
for at least five years he tried to reconnect himself with that lost world, when "my life
was very simple. It consisted of hanging around with a certain crowd and writing
songs," back before he was saddled with "the burden of the Bob Dylan myth for a
long time."

As the companionship that the principals of the Rolling Thunder Revue shared
was rooted in a certain time period, so the tour was, in a sense, an attempt to
reconjure at least one aspect of that era. Of course, Dylan’s legendary abuse of Joan
Baez and general cruelty to all were forgotten, along with Baez’s self-righteousness
and McGuinn’s self-promotion. Compared to the less hospitable world they were in, it
seemed like an Eden, that time when their Greenwich Village folk-music clan was the
hippest of the land.

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32Ibid., p. 481.

33Shelton, p. 525.
As they pulled together for this companionship, they were searching for themselves. Many careers on Rolling Thunder were adrift, and they were looking to ground themselves at least somewhere in their bewildering environment. Perhaps for the movie, perhaps for melodrama or perhaps because he was just as lost, Dylan planned some odd stops for the caravan: Plymouth Rock and the Mayflower, the last Shaker community in America, Jack Kerouac's grave, an Indian reservation, along with all the small, nondescript towns they would play. Sam Shepard noted this in his Rolling Thunder Logbook, musing that "Rolling Thunder is searching for something.... Trying to make connections. To find some kind of landmarks along the way. It's not just another concert tour," he went on, "but more like a pilgrimage. We’re looking for ourselves in everything.... Trying to locate ourselves on the map. In time and space."34

The associations of starting in Plymouth, Massachusetts at the onset of the bicentennial were lost on nobody, especially after Ginsberg proclaimed that they had "embarked on a voyage to reclaim America."35

Bob Dylan appears to have embarked on the Rolling Thunder Revue with a vision equally informed by Woody Guthrie and Jack Kerouac. The life of the road is the real America, where the individual is sovereign and unencumbered by the roles and commitments imposed by settled life. Dylan decided that his identity, like Bound


35Shelton p. 524.
For Glory's Woody Guthrie, was foremost that of a musician, and he embarked on Rolling Thunder to pursue that vision with a sustainable community that could understand that identity. In order to keep that power over his role and identity, it was necessary to stay in motion and on the road. Less metaphysically, staying in motion also was an escape from his rapidly deteriorating marriage.

Rolling Thunder was far more revolutionary at that recording session in July when Dylan imparted his vision to Faris Bouhafa, but for the month that Rolling Thunder was on the road Dylan did his best to create a community of the road apart from the communities they would visit. On the road they could be different people. "What you did on the road was your business," as the saying goes. This is really no news for a rock and roll tour, and more than not it relates to sexual matters, which Bob Spitz takes care to point out was the case on Rolling Thunder, but much of what Susman says of the vagabonds of the thirties would fit well also. The band on the road, particularly this jerry-built one on Rolling Thunder, is a very temporary, volatile community united for one goal, the show, and often share little else. The overarching conceptual theory Dylan seems to have had in mind, though, was more noble. His handling of the troupe appears to be an attempt to create a community sharing one focus, music, and attempting to connect with their essential selves and their audience through it. Under this scenario, when Ginsberg declared them off to reclaim America, he referred to them reclaiming themselves and a spiritual connection

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36 Spitz, p. 482.
between people; truly, as Neuwirth described, an existential tour. "I pray," said Dylan in a solemn moment on the tour, "we realize soon we are all of one soul."\textsuperscript{37}

It is not quite so fantastic a concept as it seems. Throughout his career, one of the major problems that Bob Dylan has dealt with is identity, or, rather, the identities and roles that people imposed upon him. He often complained that fans were after things that he simply did not have to give, looking to him for prophesy or even his soul. For himself, he said once in the sixties that "I am my songs." It's all in the songs, he would say, but if the listener did not get it, it was the listener's problem. Dylan did not feel responsible to explain. "Definition destroys,"\textsuperscript{38} he said in 1976, and the anonymity he cultivated on Rolling Thunder by not even appearing on the bill for many of the surprise concerts left no one time to develop any expectations for him. Therefore, the songs and their delivery would be his strongest statement of self.

This idea also helps to explain the name of the tour. In typically abstruse fashion, Dylan maintained that he looked to the sky once (maybe it was in France) "and heard a boom. Then boom, boom, boom, rolling from west to east. I figured that should be the name." Shelton, however, reveals that Dylan "appeared pleased when someone told him that to American Indians, rolling thunder means speaking truth."\textsuperscript{39}

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{37}] Shelton, p. 524.
\item[\textsuperscript{38}] Ibid., p. 521.
\item[\textsuperscript{39}] Ibid., p. 524.
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As for the method of looking for America coming down from the thirties to Rolling Thunder, they certainly were not out to "get down with the common folk."\(^{40}\) Lou Kemp and his staff booked the Revue's lodgings in "consistently lame""motels that are miles from anywhere"\(^{41}\) In addition, security was extraordinarily tight during the tour, being called, for example, a "goon squad" by the \textit{Niagara Gazette}.\(^{42}\) Dylan even tried to control media access to both the shows and the troupe throughout the tour.

If Sam Shepard's account is any indication, the isolation was decidedly effective, at the very least in altering his perceptions:

After a while, the "cutoffness" of it starts to take its toll.... This constant "strike and retreat" style really starts to work on your psyche.... The "world out there" takes on a strange unreality, as though it's all being played in a different ballpark, in another league. You either feel above it or below it or way off to the side of it, but never a part of it.... You find yourself expanding to the smell of arrogant power or deflating to total depression.... Anything just to get the taste back of "normal everyday life."\(^{43}\)

\(^{40}\)Spitz, p. 479.

\(^{41}\)Shepard, p. 153, 82.

\(^{42}\)Shelton, p. 531.

\(^{43}\)Shepard, p. 82.
Shepard finally is able to escape for a short time; simply getting hold of a car is enough to send "a great lurch of independence surging through me." Unfortunately he has "no destination in mind" and after a while finds him asking himself "Now what?" and returning.44 Despite his bouts with road sickness, though, Shepard does acknowledge that "just the mobility" of the tour, the "gypsy life... brings the pulse of high adventure," and to know that they are not "stuck" in the Howard Johnson's they stop at for breakfast "is a great liberation."45

Although the desperation Shepard feels was probably not unique to him on the Revue, he likely found it most acute. At one point he terms himself "a backstage parasite,"46 for virtually everyone on the tour had a function, except for Sam Shepard. He was asked along to help script this film Dylan wanted to put together, but from the moment Dylan met him and informed him that "None of this has to connect," he had a problem.47 Shepard "soon found his supposed role to be largely redundant," for "even before they left Plymouth, it became apparent that the film

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44Ibid., p. 151-152.


46Ibid., p. 135.

47Ibid., p. 11.
would be largely, indeed primarily, improvised." Shepard was left to give what input he could, although he never did figure what Dylan intended.

The rest of the troupe, except for Ginsberg, who also seemed to have a vision for the film (whether it was the same as Dylan’s is unknown), indulged Dylan in his movie idea; it did not require much effort and could be fun. The basic scheme was commedia dell’arte: Dylan would propose a theme, a leading bit of dialog, or characters for the actors to improvise on. The only assignment beyond this was to carry those roles out to their "logical conclusions." He was working the premise that somehow, this role playing within the community of the Revue, would lead to "truth and beauty."

Dylan envisioned the very loosely-structured role playing to function like songs on an improvisational stage. Under a very flexible framework, the players could express all of their feelings and invest themselves in the part, minus inhibitions. The freedom inherent in the commedia dell’arte gave them the opportunity to open themselves up completely, to be themselves without worry of reprisal. Ironically, in one of the most vivid scenes to emerge from the Rolling Thunder theater not Dylan but Joan Baez proves to be the most adept performer under the format. Recounted by

48 Heylin, p. 269-270

49 Ibid., p. 274.

50 Shelton, p. 532.
Shepard, Baez engaged Dylan in one of these ad-libbed, ostensibly fictitious vignettes for film that cuts very close to reality, making Dylan visibly uncomfortable:

...suddenly Baez unfolds in her white visionary elegance and the whole air gets zipped. Here is where the pure chance of things has taken the upper hand and turned out better than anything we could have planned out in advance. Joan plants herself at on end of the bar with Dylan at the opposite end. She bears down on him through her black eyes. Dylan twitches slightly, orders another brandy, and grins at the situation sideways. The cameras are rolling for sure. Joan plunges straight into it.

"Why did you always lie?"
"I never lied. That was the other guy."
"You’re lying now."

The cameras are crackling. Everyone’s tiptoeing heavily, doing pantomime slaps on his knees at the outrageousness of this moment. Joan presses on.

"You were always calling me up and lying to me."
"Aw, come off it. You think everything’s bullshit."

Now I’ll admit, there’s some things that are definite bullshit but not everything."

"Stop lying, Bobby. You want them to turn off the cameras, don’t you?"

"What ever happened to that boyfriend of yours?"
"Don’t change the subject."
"I’m making conversation."

Baez beams at him, white teeth flashing over the top of Mama’s blue necklace.

"What would’ve happened if we’d got married, Bob?"

"I married the woman I love."
"And I married the man I though I loved."

This is either turning into the worst melodrama on earth or the best head to head confessional ever put on film. Dylan is dancing around, soaked in brandy, doing his best to dodge Baez kidney punches. She just stands there, planted, hoisting one-liners at him like cherry bombs. Producers are wincing in the background. Musicians are tittering. Cameras are doing double time.

"Didn’t you used to play the guitar?"
"No, that was the other guy."
"What other guy, Bob?"
"That little short guy. I forget his name."
"Oh, you mean that little Jewish brat from Minnesota? His name was Zimmerman."
"Yeah."
"Why'd you change your mind, Bob?"
"Just for a change."
"Do you still play the guitar?"
"Yeah. Every once in a while. We've got a road show."
"Oh, yeah, I heard about that. What's it called? Rumbling something?"
"Something like that."
"Where are you playing?"
"Little places. Just around."

Shepard ends the segment by saying that "This stuff wouldn’t be going on without a camera around. Not like this anyway." Shepard attributes the "worst melodrama on earth or the best head to head confessional" to the presence of the camera, and, of course, that is a major factor. But scenes such as this one are analogous to living on the road. When there, as in front of the camera, there is nothing to lose: one may escape by stepping out of the camera’s range, or by moving along down the road when events become overbearing. And from those various situations, the person on the road, on Rolling Thunder, on Route 66 can eventually find their own identity and "reality."

Another strategy for this existential journey to elicit "truth and beauty" used props, or, rather, locations, some filmed, some not. Ginsberg and Dylan made a trip to Jack Kerouac’s grave in Lowell, Massachusetts; the whole Revue travelled to a

51 Shepard, p. 70.
Tuscarora Indian town near Buffalo, to the Mayflower, Plymouth Rock, a Shaker Village, mansions at Newport. It was as if by simply stopping at these places they would find some sort of inspiration, make a connection to their past as Americans. While lambasting the Shakers for "preserving an idealized morality of the past", Shepard explains that Rolling Thunder is "sniffing through the past for pieces of evidence that could lead us to a truer picture of the present. How did we arrive at where we are now?"\textsuperscript{52}

With such questions hanging in the air and occupying some members of the troupe, the central aspect of the Rolling Thunder Revue was the music. In the same way that the commedia dell'arte shaped the offstage vignettes, so it informed the concerts.

Although Rolling Thunder was trumpeted as "different every night," there was some structure to the proceedings. There had to be, for there were up to eight acts using the stage at every show, and the original dress rehearsal in Plymouth lasted eight hours. With his task to garner "maximum effect" that would "not look staged" and "it appear like it was a spontaneous evening,"\textsuperscript{53} Jacques Levy pared things down to a more manageable four hours or so. The final result was a tightly choreographed affair that accommodated guests like Joni Mitchell, Arlo Guthrie and Robbie Robertson in addition to the usual shifts and incidentals that would inevitably arise.

\textsuperscript{52}Ibid., p. 157.

\textsuperscript{53}Heylin, p. 267.
In keeping with the scheduling, musicians' performances seldom varied. Dylan played much the same set every night, limiting variations to key, tempo or his delivery. The real spontaneity and pleasure in performance, though, derived from the commedia dell'arte themes Dylan was exploiting. Here, of course, the stock roles were musicians, the performance framework the songs. Most of the musicians enjoyed it; Scarlett Rivera, for one, commented that "I feel this incredible freedom to express or to represent whatever feeling, whatever thought, whatever symbolism and actually carry it out." Thus despite using the same material nightly, the show could be "different, spontaneous and of the moment" each show. In such an atmosphere, many of the players felt "almost a belief that they could redefine themselves."54

They were assisted in their role-playing by the most talked-about innovation on the Revue, the use of whiteface and masks. The whiteface seemed to begin innocently enough on Halloween in Plymouth, on Rolling Thunder's second night. Even though the previous night had gone very well, there was still some tension in the air. Susie Ronson, wife of Revue guitarist Mick and tour hairdresser, decided to let the troupe do their own makeup. They took full advantage opportunity that night, and from then on made liberal use of the makeup and "elaborate disguises" on stage.55

Dylan said that the purpose of the makeup was to help people far from the stage to see his face better. Possibly, but that explanation does not account for his

54Ibid., p. 275.

55Spitz, p. 487.
employment of masks, the most notable of which was his appearance wearing a facsimile of himself which left the audience "wondering if this is actually him or not."56 Neither does it explain his use of costume changes. The true reason behind the use of such props may appear in an exchange with a heckler in Lowell, Massachusetts. To taunting about the mask he wore that night, Dylan riposted that "the meaning is in the words."57 The introduction of the masks and makeup, then, supplemented the commedia dell’arte, and worked in tandem with Dylan’s desire to put his words and performance at the forefront, prominent enough to outshine the other roles he was being asked to fill by the audience.

The tactics’ effectiveness must be questioned, however, because the masks and costumes garnered much attention, potentially detracting from the attention paid the music. Much of the notice that Rolling Thunder did attract regard matters unrelated to the performances themselves. The secrecy cloaking the tour; Hurricane Carter; Dylan’s other new material; the small arenas; a bill with Joan Baez, all intrigued anyone remotely interested. Rolling Stone, frustrated that their reporter had given Dylan editorial control over his stories, concluded that Rolling Thunder’ purpose was to make money, pure and simple. They reported that audiences in the larger venues "felt cheated," and checked into receipts. But save Jack Elliott’s admission that indeed

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56Shepard, p. 114.

57Heylin, p. 274.
he did "want some fuckin' money" so he could buy the boat he'd wanted "since I was fourteen years old," *Rolling Stone* came up empty handed.58

By the time Rolling Thunder concluded in a benefit for Ruben Carter's defense at Madison Square Garden on December 7, most observers tended to share *Rolling Stone*’s reluctant assessment that it was "one of the more satisfying musical presentations to come down the pike in some time."59 Even Dylan critics, like Nik Cohn of *New York* magazine acknowledged that the "vagabond clown" worked intensely, hindered by "no poetical postures" as he "rasped and roared, [and] burned."60 And where it counted, in the audiences in Bangor and Lowell, in Plymouth and Augusta, in the "small halls in the depths of a state that the government officially terms a 'depressed area'" the Rolling Thunder Revue played to rave reviews.61 Dylan was feeding off the energy of his audience, and they were connecting right back with him. "Only when he was nervous, when he performed in an undeceptive setting and the adrenaline burned through his veins did he lock into the energy level set by the audience."62 That dynamic produced his best performances.

58 Spitz, p. 492.

59 Ibid., p. 492.

60 Shelton, p. 534.


62 Spitz, p. 488.
Ginsberg called the process alchemy, but it may also be seen as the fulfillment of his vow to reclaim America. On stage, Dylan's and the band's roles stripped songs to their essences, while in the audience, with no expectations absorbed it, reclaimed it. Woody Guthrie said he wanted to be "the man who showed you something you already know," and Dylan did just that. When he was saddled with roles he never asked for, he could not help but arouse controversy when he did not play them. But when he freed himself from those roles, as he tried and sometimes succeeded in doing on Rolling Thunder, he connected, and "create[d] a mythic atmosphere out of the land around us. The land we walk on every day and never see until someone shows it to us."\textsuperscript{63}

\textsuperscript{63}Shepard, p. 62.
CONCLUSION

Done laid around done stayed around
This old town too long
And it seems like I’ve gotta travel on...¹

Whilst he was exposing the "mythic atmosphere out of the land around us" on Rolling Thunder, Dylan was also reconnecting with himself and retaking control of his life. He entered his own mythic landscape of the road believing in the purifying effect it promised, to rediscover his creativity and self. "He seemed to have found a sense of time and place in the community which constituted Rolling Thunder,"² and the road was the only place that he could accomplish that, for every settled situation in his experience, even his family, entailed repressive roles muffling his songs, his soul. As they were for Dean Moriarty, the two worlds were mutually incompatible for Bob Dylan, as his wife Sara probably articulated best by saying that "I have no real function here. Back home I have the kids, and other things, but there's really nothing for me to do here."³ He recalled the last time he could be his songs, his young adulthood in the Village, and went about assembling a facsimile of that world. Again, the road was the only place that old world could be recreated, because it removed the ─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────

¹Paul Clayton, Larry Ehrlich, Dave Lazar and Tom Six, "Gotta Travel On (Done Laid Around)," 1958. A frequent set closer on Rolling Thunder; originally performed by the Weavers.


participants from their "normal every day life." And furthermore, communities of the road are almost by definition temporary, united for a fleeting purpose. They break up, move on before roles become inhibitive and the mythic landscape is obscured.

As a result of the roles that his songs seems to invite, Dylan really does, then, derive a certain power from the ability to keep moving. If he moves fast enough, he can avoid being categorized or pigeonholed. The less he lingers physically, the longer the songs stay. But staying in motion is not only a defensive measure. Without encumbrances or commitments, Dylan can feel free to pursue his own whims, to change his songs. Even as the Night of the Hurricane, Rolling Thunder’s last show wound up, Dylan implored Shepard to go out again with him. Nowhere in particular, just to get out on the road. It is a credo that Dylan has not let go of; since that time he has kept a heavy performance schedule and since 1988 been on the Never-Ending Tour.

Dylan’s particular reading of myths surrounding the road and the vision he carried to the Rolling Thunder Revue exemplify a common American ideal of the road. A combination of developments of the thirties and fifties, this outlook holds that to find the "real America," and even to find one’s self, the individual must get on the road and travel; to get on the road is to enter a purifying, almost mystical cultural space.

That real America, though, is virtually unfindable. It began as the idealization of a very small group, by a small group. In the years since the Depression, the myth of the real America on the road has become a hazy ideal. The real America is for all
intents and purposes undefined; all the seeker knows for sure is that it does not seem to include his own environment. Few take the time to figure out exactly what they are searching for. With no well formulated idea, the search has the potential to become endless: at every stop there arise doubts concerning the possibility of something better further on.

Yet even if deliberation is undertaken, technological development has rendered the search that much more difficult. The automobile and modern highway, in particular, have contributed greatly to a homogenization of American culture by closing physical distances and thus regional cultural differences between Americans. Thus, whereas once even a very simple dream of taking to the road in the pursuit of happiness may have yielded success, the homogenization of American culture wrought in large part by the automobile and highway promises much the same at each end of the road and at the stops in between.

At the same time it was drawing the ends of the road closer together, the automobile was also transforming the road into its own cultural place as distinguished from those communities. Once roads took their identities from their use, destination, or nearby topography. In the automobile era, however, often the opposite is true. Roads are numbered and isolated from the communities they pass. Further, in contrast to previous times, communities are identified by the roads passing them instead of vice versa. The road has further been isolated from the settled community by the businesses that have clustered along the highway to serve travellers. With places to eat, sleep and even take recreation, a traveller need never leave the road.
Amidst these developments, one element of the road experience has remained constant; indeed, the road's isolation has helped to facilitate self-discovery. The road is a different cultural space, where the individual can experiment with identity free of the strictures of settled life. Despite the increasing sameness of each end of the road, the road can still show the traveler new sights, people and sides to one's self. The road offers the opportunity to step out of the familiar and into unknown territory. And if nothing else, the road in the automobile era promises the exhilaration of physical motion.

Through it all, the dream of America has remained alive: the same dream of America's promise that drove Fitzgerald's sailors remains strong in the American psyche. About that dream, Greil Marcus states that "America is a trap," because "its promises and dreams, all mixed up as love and politics and landscape, are too much to escape. It is as if to be an American is to ask for too much."4 The America of myth promises grand spoils, but in reality cannot deliver. Expectations of happiness and fulfillment are simply too high.

The ideal of the road encapsulated by Bob Dylan's vision for Rolling Thunder may be seen as an attempt by Americans to reconcile the dream of America with reality. There is no longer any frontier in which to pursue the dream; Americans can no longer light out for the territory. With nothing promising at the end of the road, the road itself and motion on it have become the desired escape. The persistence of

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the idea of a "real America" informing the thirties, the fifties and the Rolling Thunder Revue indicates the strength of belief in the dream.

Marcus goes on to state that American "culture finds its tension and its life within the borders of the glimmer and the dying away, in attempts to come to terms with the betrayal without giving up on the promise." The American road is the region where the glimmer is most visible. It is the means by which to escape the dying away; no matter where one is, there is always a road out with the real America beckoning in the distance.

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5Marcus, p. 34
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