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Bob Dylan and the studio: a performer's confrontations with recording

Unfortunately, due to family illness, I had to withdraw from the Symposium at the last moment. I thank the organisers and participants for their understanding. This is the paper I would have delivered. I welcome any comments, criticisms and suggestions. (K.Negus@gold.ac.uk).

In this paper I want to explore the conference theme - the cultures of recording - through a schematic case study of Bob Dylan's confrontations with recording. I say schematic due to the time I have available and amount of music making Dylan has been engaged in over a long period of time. I've used the term confrontation to highlight the fact that for many musicians, since the earliest days of recording, their attempts to get songs down on cylinder, disk, tape and then in digital media has often been a far more fraught and unsatisfactory experience than the activity of creating or arranging the songs and performing them on a stage.

The frustration of recording is a recurrent theme in writings about Dylan, and I've just finished a book (Negus, 2008) in which I have followed those writers (most notably Williams, 1990, 1992, 2004) who have emphasized Dylan's significance as a performing musician; the way he has continually re-arranged songs in concert, redefining and even undermining the studio recording as definitive artefact. There is much evidence to support the claim that Dylan's most compelling renditions of songs have been in live performance, rather than recorded in the studio. In addition, his experience of recording as a process, and his attitude to his recordings as freestanding artefacts, has usually been ambivalent and frequently dismissive (see Marshall, 2007, for an extended discussion of this issue).

Yet, Bob Dylan has been making recordings in studios since the autumn of 1961. He is one of many popular songwriters of a similar age who has lived through and had to negotiate the changing cultures and practices of recording that have been introduced since the 1960s (many of these changes have been extensively discussed and debated at previous CHARM conferences).

Given the time available, I'm going to jump between four periods during Dylan's recording career. I'm not going to give them equal weight nor coverage, and I'm not going to give a lot of details. The general issues I am thinking about concern how the creativity of one musician has been realised, facilitated and constrained by the changing practices and environments of recording.

I will start with the irregularities and 'imperfections' of his acoustic performances that were recorded in early 1960s. In December 1962 Columbia Records released a bluesy, rockabilly shuffle 'Mixed-Up Confusion', as a single, written by Dylan and featuring a band of guitar, bass, piano and drums. Although Dylan was performing in public as a 'folk' musician with acoustic guitar and harmonica, the decision to release 'Mixed Up Confusion' as a single indicates that neither Dylan nor Columbia assumed that he was restricted to acoustic music. Yet, until *Bringing It All Back Home*, released in March 1965, all of Dylan's recordings were solo, featuring acoustic guitar and occasionally piano.

Most commentaries on Dylan seek to highlight the minimal role played by the producers of his early recordings. Indeed, there are quite a few studies that seek to downplay the significance of producers and production throughout his entire career. Tom Wilson is often quoted: 'You don't think of orthodox recording techniques when you're dealing with him. You have to learn to be as

free on this side of the glass as he is out there' (Irwin, 2008, p113). There is a common theme in studies of Dylan: The role of producers is to capture a fresh performance in a way that allows Dylan to be as relaxed and spontaneous as possible. During the 1960s this meant having few obstructions, and, basically, putting a microphone in front of him, or arranging microphones to follow his movements, and then allowing him to create. Such a scenario fits the image of Dylan as mercurial, spontaneous and awkward and obscures the reflection and deliberation that has informed his studio recordings. Another misleading assumption, certainly peddled by some Dylanologists, is that he has never liked recording more than one or two takes of a song. Yet, available studio records and bootlegs indicate that he has routinely produced a number of takes of songs throughout his entire recording career.

Dylan's casual and spontaneous approach to recording has sometimes been deduced or assumed from the perceived imperfections of recordings. For example, of the album *Another Side of Bob Dylan*, Eyolf Østrem makes this presumption in an often-insightful study that uses formal musical analysis as a means of understanding Dylan's repertoire: 'In several of the songs … it is evident that Dylan hasn't really learnt the chord changes properly before he started recording. … it is difficult to find two verses that are played in the same way. There are lots of temporary solutions' (2008, p141).

Yet, it seems far more plausible to hear this as evidence of the way Dylan actively embraced an aesthetic of irregularity, an orientation that he absorbed from the irregularities of folk ballads (a quality advocated by Pete Seeger) and the blues. It can be heard on recordings when Dylan is just playing acoustic guitar and harmonica, or piano. He will introduce subtle variations in tempo (slowing down, speeding up, seeming to hesitate). He will add additional beats, drop beats and appear to start a verse or chorus slightly early, and sing verses and choruses in slightly different ways. This is apparent in all his early albums and particularly noticeable throughout *Another Side of Bob Dylan*. It is notable on 'My Back Pages', 'Ballad in Plain D' and 'Chimes of Freedom'.

Rather than errors, as evidence that he hasn't learned the songs, I'd say that it is indicative of a quite deliberate aesthetic strategy. This would seem to be further substantiated by the unpublished research of Charles Ford who produced a detailed study of irregularity in Robert Johnson's recorded performances (1998). Ford made a calculation of irregularities in Dylan's songs up to and including 'Subterranean Homesick Blues'. Of 124 songs, 8 are completely irregular, 81 are often slightly irregular and 35 are irregular. It's a quality that those who attempt covers of Dylan's song so often neglect, their versions often sounding strangely rigid.

A further challenge to the idea that he was simply recording spontaneously can be gained by listening to the guitar textures. *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* released in May 1963 displays a richness and range to Dylan's guitar playing. He uses delicate finger picking, varied shades of rhythmic strumming, different tunings (mainly variants on open D) and a range of 'inverted' chord shapes (more typical of folk and delta blues than pop). Right from his earliest recordings Dylan was thinking about tuning and fingering and how this gives a very particular timbre and texture to his songs. In the early 1960s he often used 'dropped' tunings, lowering the pitch of the bottom string from an E to a D or a C, giving an extended and deeper bass resonance. Whilst this gave the albums a distinct feel, it meant that in concert Dylan often had to pause in between songs to retune the guitar. In the early days this allowed for jovial, witty banter with the crowd. As the venues grew larger, it created a pause during which dissatisfied members of the audience could vent their frustrations. It also led him to perform songs live in standard tuning, without the subtle nuances introduced on the studio recordings.

I will now move forward in time to the album *Highway 61 Revisited*, one of his most analysed and acclaimed albums. The first seven tracks on the preceding *Bringing It All Back Home* had featured a band of electric guitars, bass and drums, with Bruce Langhorne's lightly picked electric guitar on the eighth track 'Mr. Tambourine Man' providing a transition to the three closing songs performed on acoustic guitar. This album marks a transition between the acoustic albums and the sonority of *Highway 61Revisisted*, created by a band playing live in the studio (at a time when many of Dylan's contemporaries were overdubbing and creating songs through collage and layering).

Much has been made of the stream of consciousness, unedited and intuitive quality of Dylan's lyrical experiments on this album. Yet, the sound of *Highway 61 Revisited* was as important as the words. The rich musical texture, drawn from 1950s pop, blues and rhythm and blues, is indebted, whether consciously or not, to the dense 'wall of sound' created by producer Phil Spector during the early 1960s. Spector used larger than normal ensembles, combined electric and acoustic instruments, and fed reverberation back into the recording as it was taking place. He immersed and buried individual instruments in an overall texture rather than allowing them to stand out with clarity.

When Dylan fell out with Tom Wilson, who had produced his previous three albums, he had actually suggested Spector as a possible producer. Mark Polizzotti assumes that Dylan was being 'sarcastic' (2006, 78) and Clinton Heylin comments 'what Phil Spector would have made of *Highway 61* I fear to speculate' (2000, 217). Likewise, Colin Irwin writes 'the mind boggles at what sort of album *Highway 61 Revisited* might have become had Spector been installed behind the controls' (2008, p114). This scepticism seems misplaced. First, not long after the album was released, Dylan and Spector became acquainted and spent some time discussing music together. They clearly respected each other's work (Shelton, 1986). Second, Spector went on to produce the best solo work of John Lennon ('Instant Karma', 'Power To The People', *Imagine*, *Some Time in New York City*) and George Harrison (*All Things Must Pass*). Latterly, the production on Bruce Springsteen's *Born In The USA* is hugely indebted to both Spector's wall of sound and Dylan's mid-1960s instrumental textures. There's more than a hint of Spector's recording aesthetic on *Highway 61 Revisited.*

When preparing this talk I considered playing extracts from songs produced by Spector alongside selections from *Highway 61 Revisited*. However, the connections are not straightforward and I don't mean to imply that they are. Spector did not produce John Lennon and make him sound like early 1960s girl groups or the Righteous Brothers. Instead, he brought out certain elements in Lennon's sound and tendencies in his songwriting. It seems reasonable to suppose that Spector would have acted as a facilitator of Dylan's sonic imaginings and I hear Dylan's production on this album as just one example of the many musicians who were influenced by Spector in realising their own distinct sound.

Although Bob Johnson, Columbia staff producer, oversaw the recording of *Highway 61*, from all accounts, Dylan actively directed the recording and mixing the album. As far as I've been able to ascertain, the album was largely recorded live, with minimal overdubs that were used. I hear a similar overall texture to that on many of Spector's productions. It's perhaps less relentless than Spector's wall, more a sea of sound with continual waves, in which the lyrics float in and out as passing images rather than stanzas of verse. The inspired musical gestures of individual musicians frequently rise to the surface - Mike Bloomfield's searing, metallic, electric guitar licks; Paul Griffin's melodic embellishments on piano; Al Kooper's swirling organ; Dylan's characteristic high pitched, insistent harmonica. But it is the overall sonic texture that so often strikes listeners when they first encounter the album: the strummed acoustic guitar with abrasive, electric blues guitar; the acoustic piano playing honky tonk and blues patterns recorded with electric organ playing gospel inspired swirls, stabs and swells; the shuffling train rhythms from the drums with tambourine.

The album contains some of Dylan's most celebrated and performed songs, opening with the release of anger that is 'Like A Rolling Stone', and concluding with the melancholic whimsy of 'Desolation Row'. It features 'Ballad of a Thin Man' which blends Dylan's sarcastic commentary directed at the bewildered Mr. Jones with imagery drawn from Dylan's memories of seeing geeks and freaks at carnivals during the 1950s (inspiration for the song Dylan recounted on stage at Charlotte Coliseum, 19 December 1978). The song is propelled by Dylan's stalking, accusatory piano; pervaded by spooky Wurlitzer-like organ flourishes straight out of suspense or horror movies; and punctuated by touches of trebly and twanging guitar reminiscent of westerns and mysteries. The band are creating a soundtrack to a movie, as much as an arrangement of a song (as they are on many of the tracks on this album). This point can be pursued by listening to 'Ballad of a Thin Man' with Henry Mancini's soundtrack to Blake Edwards' 'Experiment in Terror' from

1962. I hear a sound world arising from a similar set of influences (I'm sure there are many other points of reference that might be found for the music, arrangement and texture of this track).

Here's another typical quote, selected from a musician at the sessions: 'Bob worked really spontaneously and fast and we didn't spend a lot of time looking for the perfect notes, it just had to feel right' (Harvey Brooks quoted in Irwin, 2008, p165). Again, Dylan is thought to be spontaneous because he's not concerned with correcting, overdubbing or editing notes. But, most music making is not about perfect notes anyway (this is surely a perception informed by the anxieties of session musicians). Behind the desire for 'feel' and Dylan's apparent spontaneity, there is a cinematic aesthetic, one that is central to a huge amount of Dylan's records, here realised in sound as well as lyric. Both Wilfrid Mellers (1984) and Robert Shelton (1986) have emphasized the way Dylan's lyric writing has been informed by a 'cinematic imagination'. It has also shaped his approach to musical arrangement and studio production.

I'm now going to take another jump, straight through the aesthetic and technological changes of the 1970s and into to the 1980s; to a moment when the studio had become a major obstacle, impeding Dylan's ability to give form to his songs and musical identity. Contemporary commentators, critics and biographers tend to be unanimous in their judgement that Dylan became increasingly uncertain about the recording process during the 1980s. Biographers point to evidence of self doubt and indecisiveness in the constant changing of producers, album mixes, recorded song arrangements (heard on bootlegs), the increasing number of musicians used in different sessions and the quality of songs that were recorded but not released on albums at the time. *Infidels* (1983) often features in Dylan fan discussions as the album that *could* have been great – if only he'd have included 'Blind Willie McTell', 'Lord Protect My Child' and 'Foot of Pride'. Perhaps he might have added two songs that he'd left off *Shot of Love*; 'Caribbean Wind' and 'Angelina'.

Empire Burlesque (1985) is one of Dylan's most carefully produced albums and includes some of his most emotive vocal performances. It condenses many of Dylan's influences, particularly early soul and gospel blues. The album is given a striking dynamism by punchy sax and horns, the call and response, unison and harmony of female vocals. Yet, many long time Dylan critics hate it because it is, for them, his 'pop' album. Dylan clearly wanted to reach out to a younger audience and he employed Arthur Baker, a renowned soul DJ and producer of hip hop and dance music, to remix the initial tracks. Baker had remixed three of Bruce Springsteen's songs, 'Born in the USA', 'Cover Me' and 'Dancing in the Dark' from *Born in the USA* (released a year earlier) and Dylan was clearly influenced by the sound Springsteen had achieved on this album, along with the success that these remixes had brought him. In certain respects, Dylan was challenging those in his audience who were resistant to change whilst also testing himself as a musician. Yet, in other respects, he seems to have been relinquishing control, ceding responsibility for the final version to an expert in contemporary tastes, appearing to have no sonic vision of his own. It writings about Dylan, the production on this album is often singled out for criticism. And, it does sound dated; particularly the excessive use of gated reverb on the drums. The 'noise gate' creates a stuttering, staccato effect by cutting off the reverberation with an abrupt silence and not allowing the gradual decay to be heard. This is very apparent on 'When The Night Comes Falling From the Sky'.

There is a consensus amongst most critics that Dylan's anxieties and confusion about using the studio came to a head the following year with the album *Knocked out Loaded* (1986). This features over fifty musicians and vocalists recorded at numerous sessions, and incorporates instrumental and vocal textures that include those of trumpet, mandolin, congas, steel drums and children's choirs. An album of just eight songs features six bass guitarists. The album *sounds* confused, pulling in different directions even in the same song. For many, the lone compensation is the epic eleven minute 'Brownsville Girl', co-written with Sam Shepard. Again, this has a distinct, dense, wall of sound production and a cinematic aesthetic (in texture, lyric and vocal), particularly in Dylan's relaxed, semi-spoken 'voice over' delivery which gains a dramatic intensity through some dynamic interplay with the female vocalists.

The critical judgements of Dylan's mid-1980s recordings feed into a familiar narrative that can be found in many biographies: He had become dissatisfied with the way that the studio had become an increasingly austere and clinical environment during the 1980s. It was a confined space, accessed through corporate personnel and security, usually with no daylight, constrained by the intrusive presence of cables, amps, headphones, digital displays, buffers, booths or barriers separating the musicians. With more tracks available, musicians began to routinely record songs by playing their part alone, overdubbing in series rather than performing simultaneously as a dynamic ensemble. Although Dylan recorded like this in 1979 and 1980, quite effectively on *Slow Train Coming* and *Saved*, he had often complained that his songs lost their vitality and character when recorded in this way or when performed too many times in this environment. It's often given as one of the reasons for him embarking on extensive touring from 1988 (the so-called Never Ending Tour).

Daniel Lanois, the producer *Oh Mercy,* was well aware of Dylan's concerns. Lanois had gained a reputation for creating a relaxed informal recording environment and made this album with portable equipment set up in different houses in New Orleans. Lyrically, the songs on *Oh Mercy* are characterised by fatalistic reflections on human foibles and conceits, thwarted dreams, and the painful memory of lost love, with the occasional brief glimpses of hope and self-affirmation. Musically, the album blends Dylan's relaxed singing, the lack of regular drum pulse in most tracks, and the creative application of echo, reverb and delay to the voices and instruments. A pivotal track is the gospel tinged folk hymn 'Ring Them Bells', the song's lyrics echoed by sustained bell-like instrumental tones achieved with echo, delay, repetition, and reverb. This ambience pervades the entire album and can be heard in the decaying piano chords, hanging suspended in mid air before fading into the distance ('Ring Them Bells', 'What Good Am I?') and ringing guitars ('Where Teardrops Fall', 'What Was It You Wanted', 'Most of the Time').

The sound on this album owed a debt to the echo and reverb techniques pioneered at Chess and Sun Records during the 1950s. Peter Doyle has written of how echo allows the environment to answer back and 'suggests at once the possibility of a deep, extended reciprocity between the self and the world, just as it indicates a total imprisonment in selfhood' (2004, 32). It is perhaps no coincidence that the lyrical themes of *Oh Mercy* portray fraught encounters between absorbed self and volatile world ('Political World', 'Most of the Time', 'Ring Them Bells', 'What Good am I', 'What Was It You Wanted?').

When echo and reverb were introduced on film soundtracks and in popular songs, particularly from the 1940s, they were used to convey a sense of twilight, a darkening of space, a dimming of light, or to give the impression of things losing their solidity as they blend into the surroundings, and to conjure the presence of spirits, phantoms, mysteries or a dream like state (Doyle, 2004). If film soundtracks were once again a phantom influence, so too were 1950s blues and country records on which 'echo and reverb effects were increasingly from this time onwards used to suggest shadowy, subterranean, marginal presences' (Doyle, 2004, p39). All of these associations and sentiments seep deeply into the production of *Oh Mercy.* Haunted by phantoms of lost love and spectres of political demagoguery, Dylan appears to inhabit a cavernous emptiness where words, rhythms and notes are set adrift as echoes in the twilight.

On 'Man in the Long Black Coat', the production is once more quite deliberately cinematic. It begins with the sound of crickets and evokes a gothic atmosphere of small town paranoia, with intimations of supernatural presences and grotesque distortions of ordinary life. Dylan peers out from the shadows as a wailing harmonica sound echoes towards the edge of town down deserted darkened streets. A clipped, stalking unequalized bass underpins Dylan's hesitant, nervous clipped vocal delivery. Seeming to be gasping for breath, placing accents on unexpected syllables, his singing encapsulates the mood of strangeness and unease.

Lanois' production allowed Dylan to synchronise and to counterpoint musical and lyrical atmospheres and this was repeated eight years later on *Time Out of Mind*. Again, much of the inspiration for the sound of *Time Out of Mind* came from Dylan's dissatisfaction with the quality of contemporary recordings, and once more recordings made during the 1950s informed its

production. Lanois first recorded musicians playing along with old recordings to try out arrangements and to make demos. He then integrated samples and loops from this into the mix. During the recording sessions Dylan and Lanois used the position of musicians in the room and strategically placed microphones to recreate the sonic perspective found on these old records. As a result, in many of the tracks the drums are far back in the mix, behind the other instruments, much like the production on Buddy Holly's recordings. However, unlike 1950s records, Lanois filled many gaps with drones, percussion, sustained guitar or organ chords. *Time Out of Mind* was mixed to emphasize the mid-range frequencies, with little at the top and bass end (again attempting to approximate a 1950s sound).

Time Out of Mind is notable for the way it contains some of the most unusual vocal treatments to be found on any Dylan album. Overall, the voice has been equalized through various frequencies being boosted or reduced to exaggerate rather than downplay the raspy character of Dylan's voice. In addition, the vocal has been compressed – the contrasts between Dylan singing loudly and softly have been ironed out, making his softer singing sound unnaturally loud alongside the instruments. Throughout much of the album a very quick single 'slap back' echo has been added to the voice – a direct reference to the 1950s recordings of Elvis Presley. The most conspicuous treatment is the slightly flanged vocal on the opening track 'Love Sick'; the compressed vocal and minimal echo giving Dylan's voice a slightly constricted, alienated quality as if sonically evoking his hopeless estrangement from lovers and friends (a theme in the album's lyrics).

Final remarks

In writings about Dylan it is often claimed that the studio is where songs are recorded quickly as spontaneous drafts that are later developed on stage. And it is on the stage where Dylan has continually resolved the enduring tensions between songs as multiple performances and songs as definitive recordings; the stage is where his songs are most living, a challenge to the frozen studio record. It's an argument I have used in my own book on Dylan. Yet, there are many bootleg recordings (or youtube clips) that provide evidence to suggest a slightly different perspective, one that implies little variation in stage performances from night to night, suggesting a parallel tale of Dylan as recording artist. Dylan's recordings endure, and they do so, in part, because they are far from spontaneous drafts. Dylan may not have recorded in conventional ways. He may have appeared casual and sometimes reluctant. But his recordings are informed by distinct social, cultural and musical values, clear aesthetic principles and sonic intentions. And, he has played a significant part in shaping the recordings according to these principles.

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