

by Brent Wittmeier

BOB DYLAN

CAN A WHITE MAN SING THE BLUES?

Legendary singer/songwriter **Bob Dylan will turn 66 this year**, numbering himself among those whose seemingly neverending careers make them **successful Fossil Rockers**. Using the blues, says Brent Wittmeier, **Dylan can move effortlessly between past and present, violence and sex, and even ecstasy and apocalypse**.

"In Bearden, the spirituals and the blues were a way of life, an artistic affirmation of the meaningfulness of black existence. No black person could escape the reality they expressed.... I, therefore, write about the spirituals and the blues, because I am the blues and my life is a spiritual. Without them, I cannot be.

The Mississippi River, the bloodstream of the blues, also starts up from my neck of the woods. I was never too far away from any of it. It was my place in the universe, always felt like it was in my blood." —James Cone

The blues, as such quotations testify, are about life. Full of suffering and pain, wisdom and frivolity, love and judgment, few genres speak more explicitly about human existence. But any examination of the who's who in the blues today demonstrates that this genre, born in the anguish of segregation in the Mississippi Delta, has partly passed into the hands of white performers and audiences. The above quotations hint at this shift. The first is from James Cone's masterpiece of black theology, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, which speaks of the impossibility of rendering "an authentic interpretation of black music without having shared and participated in the experience that created it." The latter witness is from *Chronicles*, Bob Dylan's memoir which explores how traditional music formed, for him, a "mythical realm made up not with individuals so much as archetypes."

Against demands for lived experience akin to Cone's years on the cusp of the Mississippi Delta, Dylan is a white songwriter from the Midwest who uses the blues as the lyrical and musical backbone of his songs. And as one critic aptly notes of Dylan, "critics and scholars are not quite sure what to call a performer who is not himself a member of the group whose songs he sings." Is Dylan's use of the blues "mastery masked as tribute," to borrow one writer's phrase, "poplore," to use another's, or something altogether different? Is the experiential distance between Cone's upbringing in Bearden, Arkansas, and Dylan's in Duluth, Minnesota too great to bridge?

Although he is an academic, James Cone has never been comfortable with the ivory tower. Cone emerged as a writer in the late 1960s, having completed his graduate education in systematic theology amidst the foment of the Civil Rights movement. And while he toiled over the work of predominantly European theologians, Cone fretted that his professors seemed oblivious to racial issues in American society. As an African-American raised in the segregated south, Cone knew well the theological implications of racism and how 'Christian' churches could inexplicably uphold the status quo.

No wonder, then, that Cone thunders in his first book, *Black Theology and Black Power*. He describes himself as "an angry black man," declares that "Jesus is black, baby," and provokes blacks to assert their humanity against "Whitey" and his "heretical" church. The blackness of Jesus means that Christ is to be identified with oppressed, powerless people. Christianity cannot be understood apart from power and status and racial justice. As Cone elsewhere declares, this is "bad news to all oppressors" who declare freedom while functionally enslaving others.

Coming on the heels of such incendiary words, Cone's *The Spirituals and Blues* explores the subtle protest and theological messages of African-American music. While the spirituals explicitly pick up biblical language, Cone devotes a significant portion of his work to the blues, the graphic and carnal music often deemed unchristian by black churches. To Cone, the blues are the complement of the spirituals, united theologically as an "affirmation of self" which flows from "the same bedrock of experience." And though social protest may not be the most visible aspect of the blues, they are "about black life and the sheer earth and gut capacity to survive in an extreme situation of oppression," and strike a posture of "fortitude in

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Artwork by Marilyn Rochat

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the face of a broken existence." As Cone's earliest writings wed authentic Christianity to justice, *The Spirituals and the Blues* connects

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the *experience* of oppression to this music. To attempt to "understand the blues apart from the suffering that created them," Cone avers, "is to misinterpret them and distort the very creativity that defines them." Cone may note that "to be black is to be blue," but the reverse seems equally true.

Dylan's appropriation of an idiom that arose in racist conditions, therefore, raises questions of power, violence, and oppres-

sion. The morality of a rich white artist borrowing heavily from black music may not be the best way to approach Dylan's work, however. It may be better to ask *why* Dylan uses the blues as his muse or *why* others respond positively to the result. The answer to this line of questioning may yield a partial response to Cone's unflinching words.

Dylan's legacy as a performer and artist is immense. His prolific early years alone assure his status as legend, but Dylan has entered an artistic renaissance as a senior citizen. Joe Levy's *Rolling Stone* review of Dylan's newest and self-produced recording calls *Modern Times* a "masterwork" and declares that "Dylan has captured the sound of tradition as an ever-present." Dylan's workload doesn't seem to be lightening with age: not only does he continue his so-called Never Ending Tour, but his recent projects include the autobiographical *Chronicles* (with hints of a follow-up); writing and acting in the planned *Masked and Anonymous* movie; commentary on Martin Scorsese's PBS documentary, *No Direction Home*; and hosting a weekly satellite radio show, *Theme Time Radio Hour*. In each of these ventures, Dylan seems to relish dual roles of eclectic artist and purveyor of American folk traditions.

And while Dylan's radio broadcasts sample bluegrass, country, swing and gospel, the blues loom largest in Dylan's canon. Commentators and journalists routinely describe this relationship in dynamic terms. Jonathan Lethem recently described Dylan's work as "grounded in a knowledge of the blues

built from the inside out," asserting that his "convergence with his muses grows more effortlessly natural" with each successive album. Tim Parrish claims that Dylan turns "the blues *inside out* to enact his own identity as a musician," portraying himself as "a consequence of slavery and more specifically of the world the descendants of slaves created after the Civil War." And Cecil Brown notes that Dylan "steeped himself in black culture, mainly the blues culture," as a young man, and now "seeks to express the viewpoint of silent, unnoticed victims."

Part of Dylan's predilection for the blues may be explained by how genre affects artistic expression. Using the blues, Dylan can move effortlessly between past and present, violence and sex, and even ecstasy and apocalypse. While other genres hint at these themes, the blues does so while refusing to be civil: adultery and drink are everywhere, women get shot while men get two-timed, disaster happens, and despair *reigns*. These moments, blended seamlessly with other folk idioms, form the lion's share of Dylan's symbolic framework.

In *The Lyrics of Civility*, a study of biblical imagery in pop music, Kenneth Bielen argues that popular artists use, or are forced to use, "lyrics of civility" when speaking about the Bible or God. As Bielen bluntly puts it, "Searching is okay.... Finding is not." Bielen argues that the marketplace of American culture bifurcate of nature and grace, proscribing attitudes and even rebelliousness around religious matters.

Part of Cone's argument that black music must be experienced to be known is fuelled by the unique ability of this music to express the fullness of black existence in explicit faith or doubt. Cone claims that black music breaks down "false distinctions between the sacred and the secular." Bielen himself confirms the idea that traditional music, particularly African-American music, has proven an exception to the lyrics of civility, a loophole for popular music to integrate "faith with the daily earthly walk." Dylan proves an important confirmation of Bielen's basic thesis, as his apparent conversion to a very confrontational Christianity in the late 1970s and early 1980s was met with extreme agitation. Dylan's message, at that



time, was far too explicit or phrased too much in a conventional rock form to be palatable for the masses.

Because historic black music has always been marginal enough to permit an integrated existence alien to the mainstream American marketplace, it is able to express everyday experience with honesty unacceptable in a predominantly white culture. Dylan's use of the blues, I suspect, is akin to his more opaque references to biblical apocalypse and creation: an attempt at inhabiting an outsider language in order to stand as a complete person in and outside of the larger world. The language of the blues may be forgotten in popular culture, but as Dylan mutters in this lost dialect, he performs the dual tasks of preserving and creating the blues. As a performer increasingly marginalized by age, Dylan may not yet be up to Cone's impossible task. He may, however, be increasingly able to point to the hidden power of the oppressed and forgotten.



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