

61 MINUTES : A SECOND

by John Gibbens

[This article first appeared in *Judas!* 15, October 2005]

1. A second reading of *Chronicles* shows how artful it really is. The first went by fuelled on pure fascination and with the taste of its strangeness keeping you wanting more. The first book I'd read for quite some time that I kept back the last few pages of, not wanting it to end, like the final spoonful of a fine chocolate mousse, home-made by madame.
2. What were the main surprises? The number and richness of its tributes. No character seems to enter without the intention to praise them. One long Acknowledgements page made to stand at the forefront of a life's work.
3. And? The shock of leaping from chapter 2 to chapter 3 – from this generous eye with nothing to win and nothing to lose, to the outrageous bitterness of the blast against, of all things, the counterculture.
4. You couldn't miss on the most cursory reading the deeply contrarian or tricksterish aspect of the form: the way that the narrative vaults the very years of the songs and records and events that are the sine qua non of the book itself. The hole is glaring on the first run through. With hindsight or a second pass, the weird structure becomes less unreasonable, not so mule-headed and more beautiful in its own right.
5. The chapter I least enjoyed at first was the fourth, 'Oh Mercy', which was the one I enjoyed most the second time around..
6. Time travels strangely here, and you can easily lose all track of it. Each time the author takes a retrospective starting point, rather than make it the beginning of a forward-moving narrative, he begins to free-associate around it, flashing forwards and backwards all over the place. Yet the effect seems more true to the actual associative organisation of our memories than any artificially constructed day-stream would be. The technique is reminiscent of the 'epiphanies' or 'radiant moments' espoused by James Joyce in his own fragmented and fictionalised 'autobiography', *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.
7. Joyce, funnily enough – and sadly, to my mind – is the only individual to really catch the sharp side of Dylan's tongue in the book – 'the most arrogant man who ever lived'. Even Ezra Pound, after a damning little resumé, is only dismissed with: 'I never did read him.' These writers crop up during an account of a meeting with Archibald MacLeish. It's odd that Dylan thinks of asking him to explicate Joyce, then drops the idea, but doesn't mention that MacLeish, 20 years earlier, had vigorously defended the awarding of the Bollingen Prize to Pound for his

- Pisan Cantos, and had campaigned to get him released from mental hospital, and his indictment for treason quashed.
8. What is the meaning of 'Markin' Up the Score'? The first thing that comes to mind is a sporting reference. Dylan saves till the end the fact that Lou Levy, with whom the book opens, is a baseball fanatic. But he does drop in on a sports champion on the first page – Jack Dempsey. (Later, in the desperate hour recorded in 'New Morning' he'll compare his situation to a boxer's; in fact, to both of the boxers in one match.) So, if this is a contest, how does the score stand? It surely shows Dylan with a commanding lead: from complete unknown to major-label contract in about 10 months. Those months are the fixture around which the whole story, or at least this instalment, revolves.
 9. 'Markin' Up the Score' comes close to 'Makin' Up the Score' in the scene where the little guy resolutely refuses to tell the publicity man, Billy James, the real score. So early in his supposed autobiography he depicts himself making up a fictitious life story (and telling it to a man whose name combines the West's two most legendary outlaws, Billy the Kid and Jesse James). We can't say we weren't warned.
 10. So what is the point of Clinton Heylin scolding him for factual and temporal inaccuracy? Do I believe that Ray Gooch, Chloe Kiel and their apartment actually existed? Actually, I think it most likely that they didn't. The very detail Dylan goes into about their furniture seems to tell me that. Do I believe I am seeing his world of people and things? Yes I do.
 11. In 1798, Blake (I mean William, not Blind) wrote in his copy of the Bishop of London's *Apology for the Bible in a Series of Letters addressed to Thomas Paine*: 'I cannot conceive the Divinity of the books in the Bible to consist either in who they were written by, or at what time, or in the historical evidence which may be all false in the eyes of one man & true in the eyes of another, but in the Sentiments & Examples given to us of the perverseness of some & its consequent evil & the honesty of others & its consequent good. This sense of the Bible is equally true to all & equally plain to all. None can doubt the impression which he receives from a book of Examples.'
 12. What kind of book is *Chronicles*? Fictional memoir, or memorial fiction, or automythography, perhaps. What it is least is a chronicle – a straight record of events in the order they happened. Perhaps the plural itself tells us so – how many chronicles is this, exactly? It also pulls our ears a little towards 'canticles' - in other words, songs. It's a 'life' that is 'bigger than life', like the songs it says 'you want to write'. Crucially, 'chronicles' points to the word 'time', rather than 'memory' or 'self-life-writing'. It's a song where time really gets to stretch out.

13. 'Markin' Up the Score' could also refer to a musician making notes for a performance. In this case the 'score' is the author's lifetime, of which this telling is one performance.
14. A score is twenty. He says quite particularly, of John Hammond: 'He looked at the calendar, picked out a date for me to start recording, pointed to it and circled it, told me what time to come in and' [markin' up the score?] 'to think about what I wanted to play.' He particularises this again in the last few pages: 'John picked out a date on the calendar for me to come back and start recording...' And that date, carefully marked? The twentieth, of November 1961.
15. Talking of cunning hints, Jack Dempsey says, when he hears the 'kid' writes songs: 'Oh, yeah, well I hope to hear 'em some of these days.' Turn the page and the next line reads: 'Outside *the wind was blowing...*' He'd hear that one soon enough.
16. This author is a specialist in the creative misuse of language. One example from his recent lyrics: 'For whom does the bell toll for love?' There's one 'for' too many in that sentence, for it to mean what it originally meant. But as sung it means the bell is tolling for love – which could mean for the death of love. However, the one that tolls for love is usually a wedding bell, not a funeral knell. So the following line – 'It tolls for you and me' – may mean we're getting married, not that we must die.
17. Another favourite from the same set of songs, though I'm not so sure this one is not a slip of the tongue: 'that I didn't have to want to have to deal with'. I had to deal with Mr Goldsmith, but I didn't want to: a statement of necessity. I didn't *have to want* to do that: a statement of courage.
18. So there was going to be a problem copy-editing this book. It would have been a shame to lose the gulping gaffe of 'a Honorary Doctorate'. Even the chaos of tenses in his encounter with Archibald Macleish – 'He got straight to it, starts right up the track'; shifting back and forth from 'tells' to 'told' – contribute to the portrait of confusion in this chapter. But why spell Zoot Sims with two m's, or commedia dell'arte with one? Past publishing ventures have shown Mr Dylan to be not the most assiduous reader of his own proofs, but I wonder if a marked-up set was even tried on him? Then again, the presence of meaningless mistakes may help to smuggle through more meaningful ones.
19. Word salad: chop two or more possible phrases up and toss them together: 'there was a noticeable shift on his part to represent me'; 'quickly all the great rags changed me overnight'; 'I didn't want to act selfishly on his time'; 'pretty whitewashed and wasted out professionally'; 'catchphrases and metaphors combined with a new set of ordinances that evolved into something different that had not been heard before'.

20. On second reading, I still find the description of the ‘system’ or ‘style’ or ‘method’ of playing that Dylan learned from Lonnie Johnson to be almost entirely opaque. I think it takes some deliberate application of skill to go on for three or four pages in a ‘technical’ discussion of a musical approach without ever making it entirely clear, or even partially clear, what you are talking about. Sometimes he seems to be talking about simply playing triplets; at others it seems to be a matter of picking out sequences of three notes from the scale of whatever key the song is in (regardless of the accompanying chord at the moment? – or is it the same sequence of notes throughout any one performance of any one song?) There are some stunningly impenetrable phrases in this passage: ‘Because you’re thinking in odd numbers instead of even numbers you’re playing with a different value system.’ ‘There are an infinite number of patterns and lines that connect from key to key – all deceptively simple.’ Oh really? ‘Triplet forms would fashion melodies at intervals...’ ‘Thematic triplets...’ ‘...some exploited fix point...’ ‘...it’s geometrical...’ Of this whole description the best description is its own closing line: ‘Nothing would be exactly right.’
21. On second thoughts, it would be as impossible to ‘sivilize’ the prose of *Chronicles* as that of *Huckleberry Finn*, a book conspicuously missing from the reading lists herein.
22. Rather than a beginning, middle and end, the book has an inside and an outside. Rather like the form that some of Dylan’s early LPs take, as described in my book *The Nightingale’s Code* (Touched Press, 2001, available from www.touched.co.uk, or amazon.co.uk, or through your local bookshop. End of plug.) The ending comes back round to meet the beginning.
23. I met a man in the Village Voice bookshop in Paris who said he had typed a bookleg of *Tarantula* in the early 70s, when he worked at shop called Unicorns in Brighton. He’d recently seen a copy going for £800 on eBay. He said the voice of *Chronicles* didn’t seem to him to be Dylan’s. He said his name was Mohammed bin Solomon, but I don’t think it was.
24. Your life has a story, or call it a spiritual development, which a purely chronological telling may not most clearly represent. One step on the way may not have entirely preceded, in the daily order of events, the one that followed it. The two may have been more entangled in time than the sequence you later understand. If this book is not a record of the quotidian facts, to me it rings true as the story of the original growth of ‘the Real man, the Imagination which liveth for ever’, and of two trials on his later path.
25. The outside, which is the bulk of the book, deals with the preparation for the moment, 20th November 1961, when he was going to score his first grooves. We might think he wasn’t ‘standing in the gateway... heavy loaded, fully alive and revved up’ until about April 1963, when he was putting the finishing touches to

- Freewheelin'*. Then all the elements are obviously in place. But as Dylan wants to represent it, even though he hadn't actually started to write the songs themselves, by the time he came to make his first record he had all the information to know what kind of artist he would be.
26. We could break down his preparation into a sequence of distinct (musical) epiphanies – though they're not presented in order of time. First, as the basis for all the rest, there's the epiphany of folk song – a kind of alternative order of reality which frees him from a timebound mind and culture.
 27. Then there's the epiphany of Woody Guthrie, in which the collectivity of folk takes on a single personality. (Dylan recounts reading *Bound for Glory* after discovering Guthrie's songs. In *The Nightingale's Code* I followed Scaduto's account, which was that he read Steinbeck's *Cannery Row*, which led him to *The Grapes of Wrath*, which led him to Guthrie's book, which led him to the songs. Who knows?)
 28. Next there's the negative epiphany of Ramblin' Jack Elliott – a revelation of insufficiency. Emulation, no matter how devoted, will not fulfil the commission he feels that Guthrie has laid on him. That has already been done to completion by Ramblin' Jack.
 29. Then there's the epiphany of Mike Seeger, a consummate traditional player at work – another one of insufficiency. Dylan's relation to the folk tradition cannot be a simple one of belonging. 'The thought occurred to me that maybe I'd have to write my own folk songs... I would have to claim a larger part of myself'.
 30. The epiphany of Irish rebel songs is not so heavily stressed, but seems vital – an ornate rather than a plain style in folk song, a spirit of rebellion not fatalism: both keys to the distinctiveness of his own songs.
 31. Penultimately, the epiphany of Brecht & Weill – of an art of composed song that has the mystery and power of folk song. Paul Williams in *Performing Artist*, his ongoing study of Dylan's art in its 'momentary' aspect, perhaps underplays the formal side of his creativity. Even I, who perhaps overplay it, was surprised by the stress that *Chronicles* puts on structure, in its encounters with the songs of Brecht & Weill and Robert Johnson and others, and in its own artful construction.
 32. Finally, and following swiftly, the epiphany of Robert Johnson, which wraps it all up. A songwriter as artful as Brecht & Weill – 'Songwriting for him was some highly sophisticated business' – but in the American tradition and as powerful a personal presence as Guthrie. The argument of Dave Van Ronk, that Johnson's songs are all derivative of other records, is recounted, it seems to me, not to show off Dylan's own acumen by contrast, but to emphasise how Johnson has formed an entirely individual art out of collective materials – the materials of a 'synthetic' tradition like Dylan's – which is primarily a tradition of recordings. From there

on, Dylan implies, before he had even recorded *Bob Dylan*, he had the means to do all the subsequent work that he hasn't described...

33. By the time you read this, *No Direction Home* will have been shown. I wonder if Dylan's narration accounts for the missing mid-Sixties years in *Chronicles* – if the fact that he was going to tell the story in the film was taken into account in the writing of the book? Or if the narration will form the basis for a subsequent part of *Chronicles*?
34. In the closing pages, we hear of Lou Levy's dislike of the 'home-run ball' – 'the most boring aspect of the game' – which matches the lack of interest that the writer has displayed in his own home-runs – his hit songs.
35. The clip of film which he says, when you slow it down enormously, could not be anyone else but Robert Johnson, is definitely not Robert Johnson – unless it wasn't Robert Johnson who died in 1938. The clip shows a poster advertising a film called, fittingly, *Blues in the Night*, which was released in 1941. The speculation that it might be Johnson in the clip was definitively laid to rest as long ago as 1998.
36. Have you heard the not-so-enormously-slowed-down recordings of Johnson at www.touched.co.uk/press/rjnote.html that make him sound like a man?
37. The eight-second fragment of film slowed down might be seen as a metaphor for the few months of Dylan's early life that *Chronicles* expands on.
38. The figure who 'really is... has to be – couldn't be anyone else' but Robert Johnson, and yet isn't, might also be a metaphor for the character I feel 'really is' Bob Dylan in *Chronicles*.
39. Dylan adds one more hint 'to go with all of that'. Just after describing Johnson as the most important model for his mid-Sixties songwriting, he also acknowledges the influence of Rimbaud, and especially the latter's statement that 'Je est une autre' – 'I is someone else'.
40. The importance for Dylan of seeing the real Robert Johnson (who isn't) is that it shows he is not that haunted, tormented, demonic, obsessed and driven spirit of which we assume his blues to be the direct expression. He is 'childlike', 'innocent', 'angelic' and even like 'Little Lord Fauntleroy'. 'He looks nothing like a man with the hellhound on his trail.' It puts into concrete imagery something he's been saying before – that Johnson's songs are art, not life: 'There's no guarantee that any of his lines either happened, were said, or even imagined.' So you can be 'serious, like the scorched earth' when you're making things up, 'nothing clownish' about that.

41. Indeed the whole description of Johnson, coming at the end of this ‘first-person’ narrative, seems like one more reminder to think again: ‘There are too many missing terms and too much dual existence.’ ‘Johnson masked the presence of more than twenty men.’ According to this text, remember, he’d only recorded ‘about twenty’ songs – the score, again. (The actual figure is closer to thirty.) In other words, each of the songs could be a different man. ‘I just couldn’t imagine how Johnson’s mind could go in and out of so many places.’
42. I met a woman called Penelope in Paris. She runs the Red Wheelbarrow bookshop. Like the Village Voice, she took a copy of *The Nightingale’s Code*, too. She hadn’t read *Chronicles* but she stocked it, of course. Her father had recently died and she said whenever she unpacked a copy of Dylan’s book she thought of her late father, because the picture on the back looked so much like a picture of him as a young man.
43. Stephen Scobie asked, in *Judas!* 12, if the many heroes and models who are namechecked in the book are ‘all in some sense substitute fathers’. Interestingly, this strongest of all the role models, Robert Johnson, had as his ‘musical father’ a man that Dylan calls Ike Zimmerman. Talking of m’s and double m’s, he is also, in some sources, referred to as Zimmerman. (Ike = Isaac, son of Abraham = Abe, Dylan’s father. ‘It’s strange the way circles hook up with themselves.’) One website says that the young Robert met up with Ike when he headed back to his birthplace, Hazelhurst, Mississippi, to look for his real father. A couple of others record that Charles Dodds, who was Johnson’s mother’s husband (though not Robert’s biological father), was a carpenter and furniture maker: or what Germans call a Zimmerman.
44. What is ‘The Lost Land’ (title of chapter 2)? ‘That is the land of lost content, / I see it shining plain, / The happy highways where I went / And cannot come again.’ (A E Housman) Turning suddenly, after this one, into the anger and bewilderment of chapter 3, ‘New Morning’, certainly makes it seem like that.
45. Maybe, also, the lost land is the South, the land that lost. ‘American’ folk music, after all, is overwhelmingly the music of the South. The South and the Civil War crop up a lot in this chapter – he returns several times to the Southern roots of Ray Gooch, and talks about reading the newspapers of the Civil War years in the public library.
46. Is there a hint that, in studying the history – or, rather, the contemporary voices – of the period 1855-65, he sought, or found, a parallel, a map for his own mid-century, 1955-65? The Gorgeous George incident, when the wrestling star seems to give him a kind of secret, personal approbation for his mission, occurs ‘in the mid-‘50s’. The whole ‘outside’ time frame of the book, 1961-ish, stands midway between this and the neck-break point in 1966.

47. The mid-nineteenth century was when the doctrine of Manifest Destiny was formed and promulgated – that the North American continent was given to the white races by God or some such higher purpose, for them to develop. It's a phrase that crops up at two cruxes in *Chronicles*: at the end of the first chapter – 'But now destiny was about to manifest itself' – and the end of the last – 'My destiny wouldn't be made manifest up here at Leeds Music'. The 'road of heavy consequences' that he's desperately trying to get off in the 'New Morning' chapter is a part of this destiny that was not manifest, and ironically counterpoints his faith in it.
48. In *The Nightingale's Code* (Touched Press, etc, you know the score), I wrote about the late Sixties' albums as being underwritten by a steely resolve, a rage, even, to extricate himself from a false position. The 'New Morning' chapter I felt vindicated that rather powerfully. It's ironic that we get this sudden splenetic outburst – a taste of the 'killer Dylan' of the mid-'60s – in the context of his supposedly chilled-out country pie period.
49. 'New Morning' turns out to be bitterly ironic as a chapter title – as does 'Oh Mercy', which largely concerns itself with 'a cosmic kick in the pants'.
50. The chaos of tenses is widespread in 'New Morning', and creates the sense of a man who doesn't know if he's moving forwards or backwards, or whether to. Al Kooper 'had happened to discover Lynyrd Skynyrd' – but some time after this chapter is set. 'I was' in the studio 'with Johnston, and he's thinking that everything that I'm recording is fantastic. He always does.' And so on.
51. Clinton Heylin wrote that *Chronicles* contains 'not a single accurate date. I mean, not one.' Well, in fact there are two, at the end of this chapter: 'The MacLeish play *Scratch* opened on Broadway at the St James Theater on May 6, 1971, and closed two days later on May 8.' (This is by far the most chronologically confounded part of the book – yet he wants to be sure we understand that two days after May 6 is May 8!) One reviewer called MacLeish's play 'too arbitrary for a drama, too ambiguous for a history, and too shallow for a biography'.
52. Why is this the ending of the chapter? I don't think it's what it might seem to be – a dig at a play that failed (and which would almost certainly have succeeded had Dylan carried on with his collaboration). Perhaps it's there to emphasise the truth of MacLeish's prophetic message – that no one wanted to hear it. 'The play spelled death for society with humanity lying facedown in its own blood. ... MacLeish was signaling something through the flames.' There's a foreshadowing here of the apocalyptic tone of Dylan's own Christian albums – and it is on *New Morning* that his Christian faith, his belief in Jesus as the Son of God, is first affirmed: 'Father of *whom* we most solemnly praise' – i.e., of Him whom...
53. The unpopularity of MacLeish's effort also seems to be stressed as a contrast to the popularity which Dylan is desperately trying to erase. 'As long as my records

- were still selling, why wouldn't I be thinking about recording?' In the light of the whole chapter, and of the indifference he evinces to the making of *New Morning*, this seems to mean that he will go on making records, not in order to sell more, but until he can make them stop selling.
54. The inside of the book is in marked contrast to the outside. Outside we have questing openness, a massive self-confidence. Inside, doubt, disillusionment, struggle. The inside is very poignant, and perhaps the more inspiring. The two parts of the inside are again in contrast with each other. The second, 'Oh Mercy', shows him climbing out of the slough that he has plunged into in the first, 'New Morning', where music appears to have become meaningless to him. It is as though one follows directly on from the other. But of course they don't, which opens the question of what lies inside the inside.
55. 'Oh Mercy' contains another sequence of epiphanies – of reaffirmations, this time. Only now they are more the gifts of others, rather than individual determinations, attempts at matching up to others. This is the first chapter in which we see Dylan actually making music. There is, first, a reaffirmation of singing (thanks to the unknown jazz singer), then of performing on stage, then of playing (thanks to Lonnie Johnson), then of writing songs, and finally of recording them (thanks to Daniel Lanois).
56. There are no grey flannel dwarfs to be found in 'Oh Mercy', but there is a motorcycle black madonna two-wheeled gypsy queen.
57. Popular music is becoming a literature. I mean by popular music what could also be called folk – the whole range of non-written music that, before the advent of recording, disappeared with its performance and could only be preserved in memory. Though not all folk was unwritten: there were printed ballads, with melodies, and hymn-books, and reading and writing musicians have always been there in jazz. (Thelonious Monk, a character I never would have expected to find there, says in *Chronicles*: 'We all play folk music.') (And on that subject: Bob Dylan, Don Cherry and Billy Higgins – now there's a dream band.) But now, in the era of the CD box-set, recorded music is being consolidated in standard texts and evolving a canon just like a literature.
58. In the convergence of popular music with literature, *Chronicles* itself is an important bridge. But Dylan's songs are a more important one. In fact, they may be seen as the meeting point, powered by the closing of that circuit. However, folk and literature have been approaching each other for a long time – or have always been side by side. I began *The Nightingale's Code* with a long disquisition about 'folk' – the ideas of what it was that shaped the Folk Revival which Dylan emerged from; about folk as essentially a literary idea, a companion to the Romantic movement, and the ways that folk has been entwined with literature ever since. I knew this had to be the beginning, but I don't think I ever quite arrived at why. It's an argument whose arc is incomplete. The missing piece, I

now think, may have to do with this canonisation of popular music that we currently see continuing apace.

59. Of course, Dylan has inspired a lot – and produced a certain amount – of literature already. But with *Chronicles* the great poet who was not necessarily a great writer has definitely entered the lists as a literary artist. And this goes along with some other recent landmarks to show how far he now is beyond the orbit of the ‘pop star’; that his Rushmoration is well underway. One of the most distinguished English professors and literary critics of our time has published a study of him – though he does spend a disconcerting number of his pages acting as though his name were Brian, running about in pursuit of his intellectual trousers. And after *Invisible Emperor*, an excellent book about Dock Boggs which the publisher inexplicably adorned with a picture of Bob Dylan, the dean of American rock critics has finally devoted a whole volume to a single Dylan recording, *Like a Rolling Stone*.
60. I may have seemed to argue in *The Nightingale’s Code* that ‘folk’ does not exist as such. But it has come home to me since that there is a special quality about the music on record that was not made for records – for example, a couple of personal favourites, the original Folkways recordings of Doc Watson and Clarence Ashley playing on porches, or the Nonesuch albums of *The Real Bahamas in Music and Song*. They have just those powers of the ‘unselfconscious’ and the ‘collective’ that the theorists of the Folk Revival were striving to define, whose definitions I set about dismantling.
61. Phonography – ‘voice-writing’ – which has existed for little more than a century, has radically altered our relationship with music, which has existed for, say, 20,000 years. (For it strikes me as unlikely that the painters of the caves did not also make music, and I think poetry as well. After all, some of those figures appear to be dancing.) But these are other themes, for another time.