

Dylan's "Trouble No More" and Greil Marcus's view on "Slow Train" – by Kees de Graaf.

Having read most of the press reviews of Bob Dylan's *"Trouble No More: The Bootleg Series, Vol. 13 / 1979-1981"*, we may safely conclude that this release was received with much eulogy by the vast majority of critics in the musical world, not only – and not surprisingly - by believers but also by non-believers and atheists. That was quite a different story when Dylan released his first album in the period "Trouble No More" covers: *"Slow Train Coming"* in 1979. Although musically *"Slow Train Coming"* received quite a lot of appraisal at the time, from a lyrical point of view however, most of the critics -and fans as well - were shocked and horrified by what they heard and were completely taken aback. At the time, those critics and fans had to deal not only with his conversion to Christianity but also with the fact that this conversion – in their opinion - showed itself in an uncompromising and relentless way in the lyrics of this new album.

Now more than 38 years later in 2017, it looks as if things have changed. Why is that? First of course, there is the wear and tear of time. As time goes by controversies tend to lose their sharp edges and people are more and more inclined to see and understand in a more objective way what really happened in a certain situation at a certain time. Listening to and watching *"Trouble No More"*, what do most people now hear and see what they did not – and some of them maybe were not willing to - hear and see at the time in 1979-1981?. What they now see and hear is first of all the craftsmanship of Dylan and his band and the back-up singers. This was really a good and tight band. It rocked and it had soul!. The second thing might be Dylan's commitment and sincerity. Listening to and watching *"Trouble No More"* you can feel and sense that Dylan had gone through a life changing experience and felt a sincere vocation to share this experience with his audience and the rest of the world. There is no guile in these performances. The third thing is that people now begin to realize that a firm conviction such as the Christian faith is capable of producing some of the finest art, also in the case of Bob Dylan. Take e.g. Johan Sebastian Bach's (1685-1785) masterpiece the St. Matthew Passion. No matter how confrontational the Christian lyrics of this masterpiece may be at some points, there is no one in our times who is offended by these lyrics. We accept these lyrics as they are and both believers and non-believers equally enjoy this music, in spite of the fact that it must be assumed that Bach's wellspring of creativity was fed by his Christian faith.

Now to Greil Marcus. Marcus published a book in 2011 called *"Bob Dylan: Writings 1968-2010"*. In this book Marcus comments on *"Slow Train Coming"*. Marcus writes on Page 95: *"What we're faced with here is really very ugly"* and *"The songs on Slow Train are monolithic, Jesus is the answer, and if you don't believe it, you're fucked"*. On page 96: *"Dylan's songs have nothing of the sanctified quest in them: they're arrogant, intolerant. Much of the writing is insultingly shoddy – some of the songs are no more than glorified lists"*. These are pretty harsh words from Marcus. It even gets worse when Marcus goes on to say on page 96: *"In "Do right to me Baby", the devastating entreaties of Mat. 5:44 are corrupted: "But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you" turns into you- scratch-my – back- I'll-scratch -yours. Dylan is promoting a very modern kind of gospel: safe, self-satisfied and utilitarian. There is no sense of his own sin on Slow Train, no humility, and less God than Dylan' own choice that's celebrated"*. When we read this we wonder: has Greil Marcus done his homework?. Because when we take a close look at the lyrics of *"Do Right to Me Baby (Do unto others)"* we see that this song is a parody on Matthew 7: 12 where Jesus says *"So whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets"*. Dylan writes in *"Do Right to Me Baby"*: *"But if you do right to me, baby, I'll do right to you, too. Ya got to do unto others, like you'd have*

them, like you'd have them, do unto you". This parody is exactly what Jesus intended to say in Mat.7:12. Dylan himself indirectly returned to this subject in his in 2003 rewritten version of another Slow Train track: *"Gonna change my way of thinking"* where he writes ***"we're living by the golden rule, whoever got the gold rules"***. The Golden Rule or ethic of reciprocity basically says that 'one should treat others as one would like others to treat oneself'. We find this Golden Rule in the modern concept of human rights and in a wide range of world cultures and in all the major world religions. Therefore, within the context of this song and in *"Do Right to Me Baby"* Dylan no doubt refers to the Christian Golden Rule of Mat. 7:12: *"So whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets"*.

So when Marcus says: *"In Do right to me Baby", the devastating entreaties of Mat. 5:44 are corrupted. "But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you" turns into you- scratch-my – back- I'll-scratch -yours"*, Marcus is fully mistaken. Dylan does not deal with the subject of how one should treat one's enemies in *"Do right to me Baby"* but deals with the Golden Rule taught by Jesus. How you should treat your enemies and the Golden Rule of ethic reciprocity are two different subjects.

Marcus goes on to say: *"There is no sense of his own sin on Slow Train, no humility, and less God than Dylan' own choice that's celebrated"* and further on: *"What Dylan does not understand are the hard spiritual facts that have always formed the bedrock of traditional American faith. What he does not understand is that by accepting Christ, one does not achieve grace, but accepts a terrible , lifelong struggle to be worthy of grace, a struggle to live in a way that contradicts one's natural impulses, one's innately depraved soul. Sin does not vanish, it remains constant, but now one cannot hide from it, and one must accept the suffering recognition brings"*.

First of all, this statement from Marcus is wrong from a Biblical point of view. The Bible teaches that the love of God through Jesus Christ is unconditional. One needs not to be *"worthy of grace"* to be accepted by God as Marcus writes. Those who believe in Christ and accept Him receive unconditional grace(John 1:12, Roman 3:24).It is true, a lifelong struggle against sin remains. Is Dylan really not aware of this lifelong struggle against sin as Marcus seems to suggest? Look at what he writes in *"Solid Rock"* : *"It's the ways of the flesh to war against the spirit, twenty four hours a day you can feel it you can hear it, using all devices under the sun, and He never give up till the battle 's lost or won"* What Marcus seems not to understand is that a convert passes through various successive phases of inner renewal. The first phase is the acceptance of the newly found faith and the confrontation with the 'old' way of thinking and living: *"Make myself a different set of rules"* in *"Gonna change my way of thinking"*. This first phase is marked by a high degree of apologetics. Confrontation with the outside world cannot be avoided and if it appears that you are serious, you may expect that the outside world will be critical of the steps you have taken and questions you: *"They ask me how I feel, and if my love is real"* (I Believe in You). You meet with a lot of hostility from the press and your fans who cannot get their neck around what they regard as a sudden and incomprehensible turnaround. We feel therefore that the album *"Slow Train Coming"* is marked by these apologetics. Here we find Dylan defencing his newly found expression of faith. The price he paid for it was high and that was not at all an easy affair, like Marcus suggests, when Marcus writes that: *"One never claims, as Dylan does throughout Slow Train, that redemption is a simple affair. When Marcus says: "Dylan is promoting a very modern kind of gospel: safe, self-satisfied and utilitarian. There is no sense of his own sin on Slow Train, no humility, and less God than Dylan' own choice that's celebrated"* he does not do justice to Dylan and to the songs on Slow Train. It is true, the certainty of his religious conviction shines through on Slow Train. The conviction that there is only one road to salvation.

And it would seem that the expression of *this* certainty is the main source of all the repugnance like that of Marcus's. For Marcus the expression of *this* religious certainty is synonymous to following a map. This appears when Marcus writes: "*American piety is a deep mine, and in the past, without following any maps Dylan has gone into it and returned with real treasures: John Wesley Harding is the best example, but there are many others*". But who is without any maps in life? Atheism, Liberalism, Nihilism, all sorts of ism's, they all have maps. Christianity is also one of them. All these maps are capable of producing great art. But not for Marcus. It seems that for Marcus all maps are allowed and may produce great art, but apparently not the map Dylan follows in *Slow Train*, *this* map is abhorrent, condemned, and cannot produce great art in the eyes of Marcus. In other words: only if you follow *my* map you can make great art.

Apart from this, when you study the lyrics of *Slow Train* carefully you will find a lot of vulnerability, compassion, pain and fear which has nothing to do with self-satisfaction and lack of his own sin: "*What you have given me today is worth more than I could pay*" is that self-satisfaction? When Dylan addresses himself in "*When He returns*" and says: "*Can I cast aside, all this loyalty and pride?*" is that not an expression of his own sin and an expression of the mother of all sin: pride?.

Moreover, Marcus completely ignores the successor of *Slow Train*, the album "*Saved*". One may say that "*Saved*" represents a second phase a convert is going through. The first phase "*Slow Train*" was marked by the doctrinal fixation of the faith and the apologetics as a result of that. The second phase "*Saved*" is marked by joy and gratitude for salvation. There are plenty of examples, we give a few: "*Saved*": "*I'm so glad, so glad, I want to thank you Lord*". In "*What can I do for You*": "*You have given everything to me, You have given all there is to give*". By the way, how can Marcus say that that there is no sense of his own sin: "*If you find it in your heart, can I be forgiven?*" ("*Saving Grace*").

The third phase a convert is going through is marked by the integration of one's specific secular skills of song writing. By 'secular' skills we do not intend to suggest that there is a contrast between 'secular' skills of writing and 'spiritual' or 'religious' skills of writing. There is no antithesis between nature and grace. The message in this third phase is therefore basically still the same but to understand the message fellow believers will have to read between the lines. This style of communication is more or less comparable with Jesus' style of preaching and communication by means of parables. People no longer wanted to listen to the overt and outspoken message of the coming Kingdom of Heaven (Mat. 13:10-15) so Jesus started to preach in parables. The message is no longer outspoken but hidden in a parable. To understand the message you have to make an effort which was only given to his (real) disciples (Mat 13:11). Something comparable happened to Dylan's song writing. The message of "*Slow Train Coming*" and "*Saved*" was unequivocal and outspoken. At the time this was necessary for phase one and two of his conversion. In "*Shot of Love*" however, we see a transition to the third phase a convert is going through. Some of the songs like e.g. "*Property of Jesus*" and "*Dead Man, Dead Man*" still belong to phase one or two but songs like "*Heart of Mine*" or "*Lenny Bruce*" and even more so "*Every Grain of Sand*" belong to the third phase of his conversion. To understand the lyrics of songs like that, you have to make an effort and read the message between the lines, in the same way as the disciples had to do when Jesus told them parables. This third phase makes his song writing acceptable to believers and (again) non-believers, the lyrics are open for debate and contemplation and can be interpreted in multiple ways, but that does not mean that these lyrics are without a message and make sense no more. The basic message is still the same but the packing is different. Now in 2018 we are more or less still in this third phase, albeit the learning process still goes on. Layer is built upon layer, "*Love and Theft*" is quite different from "*Infidels*" and "*Tempest*" is quite different from "*Oh Mercy*". We cannot go into details here but lyrics like

in *"Pay In Blood"* simply had to be made.

This also implies that things cannot and will not be duplicated or repeated. *"Slow Train Coming"*, *"Saved"* and *"Shot of Love"* were unique and once-only. Dylan has never repeated a creative phase in his career and also never denounced a creative phase in his oeuvre. *"I did all I could, I did it right there and then (1979-1981?) I've already confessed, no need to confess again"* Dylan stresses in *"Thunder of the Mountains"*.

We guess that as much as Dylan despised to be pinned down as a 'protest' singer or 'voice of a generation' he may also despise his 1979-1981 phase to be pinned down as 'a Christian' or 'born-again' phase, as some bygone whim which actually does not belong to the true Dylan, a stance which is adopted and advocated by the overwhelming majority of his critics and followers. In our opinion his oeuvre forms a unity, an edifice in which layer is built upon layer. You cannot break lose a layer of bricks – like his so-called 'Christian phase' or any other phase for that matter- without the whole building collapsing. Sometimes we have to take Dylan interviews with a little pinch of salt but we feel that Dylan was serious when, in his Sixty Minutes interview in 2004, he said: *"it goes back to the destiny thing. I made a bargain with it, you know, a long time ago. And I'm holding up my end"*. In this 'destiny thing' there is right time and place for everything. We strongly believe that the release of *"Trouble No More"* has everything to do with this 'destiny thing'. With the release of *"Trouble No More"* Dylan made a statement. He made this statement at the right time. It is part of the bargain.