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BC based writer and federal prosecutor **Anthony Varesi** talks to AW's Anna-Liza Kozma about the second edition of his book about Bob Dylan. <https://artisanalwriter.com/anna-liza-kozma/>

Anna-Liza Kozma: *The Bob Dylan Albums* is full of forensic detail and wry observations. Is there a connection between your legal training and your work on Dylan?

Anthony Varesi: To some extent, there is. As a trial lawyer, part of my job involves distilling often large amounts of information into a cogent, chronological and coherent narrative to present to a court. Dylan's body of work is so massive that a similar organizational approach was required. I had the template from the first edition of 2002, but the main formatting change was integrating all the archival releases into the period in which Dylan recorded the songs.

Stylistically, my legal training proved less of an influence on the work. We've all heard the expression that someone "writes like a lawyer" – it's not generally intended as a compliment – and I tried to avoid the dry, formal and often dispassionate style that the legal profession tends to favor.

ALK: Bob Dylan is a member of a very select and very small group of commercially successful singer-

songwriters who straddle the world of the religious and the world of the secular. (Dylan goes even further than Leonard Cohen, Bono and the less well-known Richard Thompson, who also drew from the deep wells of spiritual tradition to quench our thirst for meaning today.) You detail the mixed commercial success of Dylan's most overtly Christian albums and how he used "the pulpit of his stage" to deliver "fiery sermons". How was he able to get away with this and not lose his mainly secular audience?

AV: The production quality of *Slow Train Coming* certainly helped. Dylan brought in Jerry Wexler to craft the album that is probably Dylan's best-produced studio record, and Dylan had an ace backing band, including an emerging Mark Knopfler on guitar.

On stage, Dylan alienated some of his followers, but his live performances were so powerful and his commitment to the cause so utterly uncompromising that even the naysayers had to admire Dylan's devotion. Aside from the Rolling Thunder tours, Dylan's best live work was the product of him being challenged by his audiences, specifically the 1965-1966 electric tours and the 1979-1980 gospel shows. It's a shame that Columbia never got around to releasing any of the latter music until 2017's *Trouble No More* bootleg series box set, because the quality of those live shows remained unappreciated by those not privy to the bootleg recordings.

Dylan never does anything partway, but his audience also knows that Dylan never does the same type of music for years at a time, so much of his audience knew that more secular music was on the horizon.

ALK: I was surprised to read that "the Canadian media were more receptive" to "Dylan's gospel period" than the American press. Why was that do you think? (You referenced the analysis in Maclean's about funnelling audience unease over Iran and Afghanistan.....I found that interesting.)

The American music press had soured on Dylan in the years after Rolling Thunder. Dylan's overlong and largely incomprehensible film *Renaldo & Clara* and the murky album *Street-Legal* both came out in 1978 and were pilloried by critics. *Slow Train Coming* and Dylan's first gospel shows in San Francisco in November 1979 received unfairly hostile reviews, and the initial unfavorable reactions set the tone for other American writers to dismiss "Born-Again Bob."

In Canada, Dylan did three extraordinary concerts at Toronto's Massey Hall in April 1980 (featured on two discs on the *Trouble No More* deluxe boxset), so the Canadian press could analyze Dylan's gospel phase against the backdrop of those shows.

The Canadian press has, through the years, much like the English press, been more forgiving of Dylan, perhaps because the American media tends to "write-off" artists more quickly than their Canadian and British counterparts.

ALK: In 2016 Dylan was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Were you surprised? And do you think his transition away from religious literalism towards, or perhaps back towards, metaphor and allusion, contributed towards his eligibility for the prize?

AV: I was pleasantly surprised by the selection. Since its inception, the award has been bestowed upon poets, novelists, playwrights, essayists, and short-story writers, so a songwriter was overdue. No songwriter was more deserving than Dylan, as the Swedish Academy recognized the value of Dylan's contributions to popular song.

In terms of Dylan's transition away from religious literalism contributing to his eligibility for the prize, I believe it was a factor in the Academy's decision. After 1979's *Slow Train Coming* and 1980's *Saved*, Dylan again synthesized his scriptural learnings into a more literary aesthetic. Dylan's work has always been heavily influenced by the Bible, although before and after this period, his approach was less dogmatic and more in keeping with approaching the Bible as literature. Many of the songs and outtakes from Dylan's subsequent albums, *Shot of Love* and *Infidels*, reflected Dylan's Christian leanings, although, as you note, they relied more on metaphor and allusion than in his more proselytizing records.

Surely, the Academy surveyed Dylan's entire career and recognized the (generally) consistent high-quality of his work.

ALK: You write of Dylan's astonishing longevity. He was heralded as the "voice of a generation" in the late sixties. Every few years a new young singer is proclaimed as "the new Bob Dylan." But he's still there at it in his eighties, unsurplanted. How come?

AV: Dylan constantly explores different genres of music and delves into other artistic endeavors. Throughout his career, he has resisted any attempts at categorization.

By August 1964, the folk-music crowd had tried to pigeonhole Dylan as a "folk singer" or a "protest singer," but

Dylan had already moved towards more impressionistic writing. Dylan then revolutionized rock music in 1965 and 1966 with his trilogy of “electric” albums and his explosive, majestic live shows. After his 1966 motorcycle accident, Dylan retreated to the confines of Woodstock and Nashville to create a rootsier, countrified style of music.

Since the 1960s, Dylan has delved into gospel, 1980’s pop, traditional folk and blues, Christmas music and the Great American Songbook.

No other musician in history has as much diversity in their catalogue as Dylan.

In addition to the music, Dylan has written books, welded metal sculptures, drawn, painted, founded his own whiskey company and hosted a radio programme.

Dylan’s vitality and longevity is unmatched by any other artist.

ALK: You’re not uncritical of aspects of Dylan’s work – pointing out that at times he “no longer had the critical wherewithal to separate the wheat from the chaff” – is this a problem for all writers sooner or later?

AV: Maybe not for all writers, but certainly for many of them. It’s a particular problem for songwriters since the advent of the compact disc in the 1980s and its widespread use as the medium of choice in the 1990s and 2000s, before the streaming era. On vinyl, artists tended to be limited to 45 to 55 minutes total, whereas CDs could accommodate 75 minutes of music, meaning there was less incentive to prune songs that otherwise would not have made the album.

Dylan’s songs also started getting longer in the 1990s – not necessarily a positive.

I do think that writers exercise weaker critical judgment in the later stages of their careers – perhaps with fame there comes a tendency to believe that the public and media will more readily accept lesser works from a great artist. The tendency of writers to release collections of previously unpublished works can also be problematic – if the writer didn’t consider the works worthy of release then, why release them now?

Dylan’s case is more curious because his lack of discernment began in the early 1970s with *Self Portrait* and continued from there – the reworking of *Blood on the Tracks* and major omissions from *Shot of Love*, *Infidels* and *Oh Mercy* are a few examples out of many, unfortunately. In contrast, Dylan’s instincts in the 1960s were unerring. There were, to be sure, great songs left off the early albums, but those omissions made sense in the broader context surrounding the finished product.

Why Dylan’s critical judgment declined is one of the many mysteries surrounding the man. It’s as if his self-confidence somehow wavered in his thirties, for no apparent reason.

ALK: In this updated version of your book, you write about how aging and your own life experiences led you to reconsider some of Dylan’s albums and songs. Can you explore that idea of how Dylan’s songs change as we change and whether this is true for all beloved literature?

AV: The greatness of Dylan’s songs is manifold; one aspect of the study of Dylan’s music that has always struck me as interesting is how some Dylan writers and fans are very passionate about certain songs or albums, yet others may not care for the same work. Dylan is probably the only popular musician of this century and the twentieth century that this can be said of. There are certainly academic disagreements about the merits of works by other musicians, but not to the same extent.

For the second edition, I ended up completely revising the text – I maybe retained 5 % of the first edition – in part because my opinion of certain songs and albums had changed considerably.

As listeners get older, Dylan’s songs can take on different meanings for us. For example, I dismissed 1990’s *Under the Red Sky* in the first edition, but, years later, after the birth of my son, I came to appreciate Dylan’s intentions with the album, celebrating the world of nursery rhymes and fables.

I also gained a deeper admiration for Dylan’s accomplishments in the 1960s. No musician or group has ever produced a body of work as remarkable in an eight-year span (from the recording of Dylan’s debut album in November 1961 through the release of *Nashville Skyline* in April 1969). I say that as objectively as possible and without hyperbole – consider Dylan’s output in 1965 and 1966 alone.

On the other hand, my appreciation for other works has diminished. I dislike the inauthenticity of many of Dylan’s post-1960s songs about public figures such as George Jackson, Rubin Carter and Joey Gallo.

All beloved literature can hold different meaning for people at different points in their lives. Classic works outlast the era in which they were written.

ALK: Please share with us a little about your research and pre-writing processes.

AV: The research for the book involved very few online resources. The first edition of my book was researched and written in the years before the internet was ubiquitous. This involved tracking down books and magazines

in new and used bookstores, weekly pilgrimages to record stores, scouring microfiche for old newspaper and magazine articles, collecting folk, country and blues songbooks, and daily visits to university libraries. In the years since the first edition, I continued to buy books about both Dylan and other musicians, and assemble a large music collection. Sometimes, in reading fiction, I would come across a phrase or expression that Dylan had used in one of his songs. My office and storage space at home is filled with books, magazines, compact discs, and research materials. If I did rely on an internet source, I made sure to cite it in the footnotes.

Most of the second edition was written in 2020 and early 2021 during the COVID-19 lockdowns. As noted, I already had the organizational structure in place for the book. In writing about each album, I had a general outline in place as to how I was going to approach the album. I tried not to take the same structural approach with every album, and for each album I tried to discuss Dylan's singing, the music, and the lyrics, as opposed to, say, just focusing on the lyrics, as some writers have done.

ALK: Was there anything edited out of this book that you wish you could have included? Why was it cut?

AV: I had thought of adding a few more memoir-type recollections or personal anecdotes to my book but decided against them because they didn't fit with the flow of the book.

I had a wonderful story that a colleague in Prince George related to me when Dylan toured there in 2017. Her friend approached Dylan and his personnel outside his tour bus hours before the concert, asking Dylan for an autograph. Surprisingly, Dylan allowed security to invite them over, and Dylan chatted with them for several minutes before autographing a box-set collection. I thought it was a great example of Dylan's kindness. There are other stories of Dylan making anonymous donations to charity or giving gifts to children that I couldn't work in, although I was able to discuss Dylan's album *Christmas in the Heart* in the context of Dylan pledging all royalties to the fight against food insecurity. It's (almost) enough to make one forget about the various scandals that have beleaguered Dylan in the latter part of his career, such as the use of his music in advertisements, the allegations of plagiarism, and the recent autopen controversy.

ALK: Are you aware of having taken some deliberate risks in the preparation of this book? Please explain.

AV: Not risks so much as knowing that some of my views went "against the critical grain," so to speak. I am lukewarm towards the finished *Oh Mercy* and *Time Out of Mind*, two of Dylan's most acclaimed albums from the second half of his career. Numerous strong songs were omitted from those albums, and Daniel Lanois' production on the latter does a disservice to many of the songs, a point emphasised by the recent box set.

I did find some merit to the critically mauled 1980s works *Knocked Out Loaded* and *Down in the Groove*. This was not the book to analyze Dylan's "Never Ending Tour" from 1988 to the present – other writers have covered that well – but I have always considered many legs of the tour dissatisfying.

The widespread praise accorded to Dylan's twenty-first century studio albums perplexes me to some degree. I have seen some writers refer to albums such as *Modern Times* and *Tempest* as masterpieces – does that mean they are on par with, say, *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* or *Highway 61 Revisited*?

But I suppose this takes me back to my earlier comments about how different works impact listeners in different ways.

ALK: Tell us a little about your key priorities when you were working on this manuscript.

AV: I wanted the book to cover a lot of ground in an accessible format. Organizing the book chronologically allowed me to discuss Dylan's albums, but also notable television and concert appearances, films involving Dylan, soundtrack contributions and Dylan's other writings.

That being said, the book does not necessarily have to be read chronologically; readers can easily dip into the book at different points and read about a particular album or period of Dylan's career.

Assembling the discography took a considerable amount of time, and I am hopeful that readers will find it a great resource.

Anthony Varesi has a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of British Columbia, where he studied history and American and English literature, and a Bachelor of Laws degree from the University of Saskatchewan. The first edition of *The Bob Dylan Albums* was published by Guernica Editions in 2002, with an updated version released in 2022. A French translation, *Bob Dylan au fil des albums (1962-2001)*, was published by Triptyque in 2006. Anthony works as a Federal prosecutor and lives in Kamloops, British Columbia with his wife and their son.