



Highway 61 Revisited

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"In this book, Mark Polizzotti examines just what makes the songs on Highway 61 Revisited so affecting, how they work together as a suite, and how lyrics, melody, and arrangements combine to create an unusually potent mix. He blends musical and literary analysis of the songs themselves, biography (where appropriate) and recording information (where helpful). And he focuses on Dylan's mythic presence in the mid-60s, when he emerged from his proletarian incarnation to become the American Rimbaud. The comparison has been made by others, including Dylan, and it illuminates much about his mid-sixties career, for in many respects Highway 61 is rock 'n' roll's answer to "A Season in Hell."

Highway 61 Revisited Details

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From Reader Review Highway 61 Revisited for online ebook

Jeff says

My daughter picked this up for me. She advised she had done a little research and that while the 33 1/3 Series was considered hit or miss that this one was, in general, well reviewed. Of course, what do I find as I log in to do this review but the first review attached is a negative one. Well I guess that there is one in every crowd.

I feel like the author does a good job in going over an era, a recording session, actually material in general, that, to a Dylan fan has been fairly well covered. He does provide insight and little anecdotes that I, at least, was not familiar with.

There is a great deal of interpretation of songs in this. To some extent this is interesting but, as Dylan was known to change his story and be most cryptic even on his best days, all of that is guesswork. Who was Queen Jane? Who is Mr. Jones? There might be a hundred answers to each of these and other questions and on any given day they might be right or wrong.

Each song on the album has a small section as well as other songs recorded in the same session but not on the album itself, such as "Positively 4th Street."

Like a Rolling Stone might well be Dylan's most popular, most famous and most hated song. It is very polemic. Opening the album with what the author calls the most famous rim shot in drumming history, (which might be only slightly hyperbolic) the song explodes in your face and makes you sit up and take notice. The often cited story is told by Bruce Springsteen of riding with his Mother at the time the song first played in the radio and the fact that it changed his life then and there. This song has a story to tell. The signature timing of the song was, according to Dylan, from La Bamba. I can't hear it, I doubt anyone else could but there you have it. Three main partners in the song had a major impact. Mike Bloomfield the Jewish guitarist who had a tight partnership with Dylan for a few years. An incredible player he played on some of the great recordings of the sixties but died in the early eighties of an overdose. Reading that he died in early 81 at the young age of 37 makes us see just how incredibly young these people were when they were making this epoch, culture changing music. Tom Wilson had worked with Dylan as his producer on three albums and though the relationship was starting to fray and would soon end he had a great impact on this album. We are advised that it might well have been Wilson's early work with The Animals electric version of "House of the Rising Sun" and later the commercially successful version of "Sound of Silence" that convinced Dylan electrifying was a good idea. Wilson was also responsible for allowing a young guitarist named Al Kooper into the studio. He was expected to just watch and listen but Kooper had other ideas. As the piano was the only other instrument he played, and it was occupied, he stood next to an organ and started playing along on the early attempts. Reprimanded by Wilson, it was Dylan himself who said he could and should continue. This, was a piece of the power struggle going on with Wilson and Dylan but can one really imagine the song without Kooper's heavy organ grinding the song forward. And, it is claimed, that was his first attempt at playing it. Kooper went on to form Blood, Sweat and Tears, and, if playing on this song is not iconic enough it is his piano playing you hear on The Rolling Stones "You Can't Always Get What You Want."

Recorded at the session but not put on the album "Positively 4th Street" is one of the angriest songs Dylan ever recorded. Any Dylanologist knows the story of the 65 Newport Folk Festival. Dylan went electric and it caused an ugly split from the folkies that had revered him. When he sings "You've got a lot of nerve, to say you are my friend, " it is those people, those that booed he is singing too. He was angry. Simply angry and he

channeled into one of his most enduring singles.

Tombstone Blues is a song that has aged well. In this original version Mike Bloomfield's guitar sets the tone on what, really, was the first work with a new producer, Don Johnston. Not a lot of new information on this song.

It Takes a Lot To Laugh, It Takes a Train To Cry is a fantastic song. It might well be our first look at the Nashville sound that was soon to come fully into play with Blonde on Blonde.

From a Buick 6 is more of a blues number. In it Dylan talks about two women in his life one who takes care of his kid and another who takes care of him. This woman keeps a loaded gun to protect him, and will fix him up if something happens to him. And, if "he should go down dying, you know she's bound to put a blanket on my bed. " While we might think it's a pretty low bar to be happy someone will cover your dead body this is the height of happiness for Dylan's song.

Can You Please Crawl Out Your Window, while not appearing on the album, was a single later. I never found the song that memorable. I did learn that Dylan was an inveterate needler who could sometimes be incredibly cruel. The song might be about Richard Farina, a sometime performer who married Joan Baez's sister when he, Dylan, was involved with Joan. Farina died in a motorcycle crash a short three months before Dylan suffered his own crash.

Ballad of a Thin Man is one of my favorite Dylan songs. While there could be many people he is referencing in this song, we will never know. Still, the funereal opening piano is unique in Dylan's work and certainly a huge mood change for the album. The lyrics follow the A,A,A,B,B rhyme with each verse ending with Mr. Jones, which for a listener is very comforting and Dylan's songs are not always comfortable. One of the most played songs by Dylan at his concerts I can personally say that it still packs a punch. I saw Dylan about five years ago and while the song was a mix of old and new for me the highlight was surely Dylan's almost spitting, sardonic, performance of this song. One of the interesting aspects of this song is that no matter what era we are in there is someone you can imagine Mr. Jones to be .

Queen Jane Approximately opens side two. I never spent too much time with this song but we are advised that this song is a clear diatribe to Joan Baez.

Highway 61 Revisited is another of the most popular songs in Dylan's catalogue, it was only a B side on a single, but again is a concert staple. The Kill Me a Son verse is to me one of his best pieces of work. A personal note, I have taught my children classic rock from an extremely young age. This led to some strange juxtapositions when my six year old son would spend the morning at Sunday school and then on that same afternoon would sing the whole verse to his Mother and eye. She was..less than pleased.

Just Like Tom Thumbs Blues is, again, a totally different song than the previous songs on the album takes one to Mexico ending with the line "I'm going back to New York City, I do believe I've had enough.

Ending the album is one of Dylan's extra long masterpieces. Telling the story of the victims of the machines of society with imagery that still makes one shake their head with wonder, spoon feeding Casanova a d heart-attack machines, Dylan says silly things that no one else could. The version we know of this is also interesting in that his band was scrapped, Kooper, Bloomfield, etc and replaced only by the acoustic playing of long time session musician Charlie McCoy.

A classic album.

Åsmund Ådnøy says

Fin innføring i Bob Dylans mest kjente plate. Forfatteren er litt for opptatt av å knytte Dylans sanger til virkelige personer som inspirerte dem, noe som blir mindre og mindre interessant for hvert år.

Polizzotti er best når han løfter hodet opp fra kildehaugen, kommer med sine egne meninger og får oss til å tenke enda en gang. Som omslagsfotoet: Dylans gjennomborende blikk passer perfekt til platens skarpe tekster, men koblingen mellom musikk og cover foregår i hodet vårt. "Omslagsbildet til *Highway 61 revisited* ble ikke tatt som et svar til musikken, men flere måneder før den ble skapt," skriver forfatteren. Han skriver også - helt riktig - at alle senere versjoner av *Desolation row* er dårligere enn originalen som avslutter *Highway 61 revisited*. (Full omtale på Sølvbergets nettsider.)

Ryan Acosta-Fox says

I don't often give 33-1/3 books a 5-star rating, and this wasn't a life-changing read or anything, but seriously it should be the model for the SOP for writing a 33-1/3 book. Superb exegesis of the album, its making, its meaning.

Steve says

The best book I've read in this series, a series I love in theory, but one that in practice tends toward the egotistic ramblings of a writer fortunate enough to get a paycheck for writing about a fave album. Polizzotti takes a more scholarly approach, providing context and detailed (song by song) history and analysis of what may very well be the best album of the 1960s. I've got shelves of Bob books, and this little one taught me something and sent me back to the record (both the mono and stereo mixes, as well as the bootlegs and outtakes).

John says

Illuminating. The author goes song by song through the album, and in the process reveals Dylan and the culture around him at a specific time and place. I enjoyed understanding Dylan's lyrical references to a parade of wives and girlfriends, which for me cuts the Great Artist down to an accessible human level; rock n roll hero worship is undermined in a good way, even if it makes the world seem smaller. In addition to contextualizing songs that are so familiar, my favorite part is the portraits of the other musicians, their lives before and after, and their specific contributions to the songs. The style of deconstruction by musician is fun and entertaining, and a great way to revisit the songs with a new ear. I love the stories about the accidental organ.

Eric Cartier says

"So powerful is the emotional response it can evoke, at least in a certain kind of listener, that it demands some kind of outpouring in return." Thus, Mark Polizzotti offers us this slim 33 1/3 volume about Dylan's masterpiece *Highway 61 Revisited*, which Bob released between *Bringing It All Back Home* and *Blonde on Blonde*.

The book's for the initiated, especially those who have and love the album, or at least "Like A Rolling Stone", which earns plenty of page space. Polizzotti sets the scene, introduces the major players, curious producers, girlfriends, and overbearing manager, and describes the generation, production, and meaning (his...he's a critical U.S. citizen) of each song.

"It is a work of unique directedness, even pragmatism: diamond-hard, muscular, powerful as a V-8, at times joyously spontaneous yet always controlled."

Having watching Scorsese's documentary "No Direction Home" four times, and D.A. Pennebaker's "Dont Look Back" twice, I thought I knew all I needed to know about this period of Dylan's career - *nonono*, obviously not. There are demos and bootlegs to track down and listen to, as well as the album itself, which is endlessly replayable, full of chaotic punk sonic touches and dense lyrics to parse.

"*Highway 61* is perhaps the only moment when he shows us, and himself, what it looks and sounds like to be Bob Zimmerman, the rock 'n' roll kid with the dark imagination and truckloads of attitude, not to mention crateloads of insecurity; the only time he challenged us to know just how it feels. In delivering himself of his most elliptical material, he has offered up his most authentic statement."

There's the infamous electric Newport set, meetings with Ginsberg and The Beatles, endless touring, political posturing, drugs, booze, poems, and Joan Baez, who wrote the following about Dylan in 1965:

"Everyone traveling with him is going mad - He walks around in new clothes with a cane - Has tantrums, orders fish, gets drunk, plays his record.... He doesn't speak to me, or anyone, really, unless it's 'business,' how many records he's selling, will his record be #1, etc"

Dylan was literally living out Rimbaud's notion of the "derangement of the senses", while producing the richest music and lyrics of his career.

Polizzotti's final section about "Desolation Row" is a bit heavy-handed, but the song moved him to write it. I can't fault him for it but, for people who aren't of the same opinion, that part could appear embarrassingly earnest. Nevertheless, I enjoyed this book, which would certainly satisfy anyone who's given in to Dylan's audible travels, particularly beyond the radio hits. *Highway 61 Revisited* is a journey. If you haven't listened to the album yet, put the book aside. As the author concludes, more writing about extraordinary music isn't really necessary: the record will reduce you to silence.

Margaret says

This author must be very smart. This book is so well written. He really captures the album and answers lots

of questions about Dylan and his influences around this time period that I had yet to hear about. It's very thorough and thoughtful in its investigation and descriptions. I wish I could write as densely, but clearly as Polizzotti!

Jennifer says

As an admirer of the 33 and 1/3 series, I submit that this book is far better than any such book has any right to be. It isn't a jaunty or trifling booklet. It is a fully fledged, nicely articulated, complete analysis of a singular work of art (with a bonus mini Dylan bio thrown in for good measure). It's literature. Really a pleasure to read, as well as surprisingly informative and fair in its conclusions. Frequently, I stopped to read sections aloud to my partner. And that last page! Bravo, Mr. Polizzotti. Bravo.

Paul Secor says

This is the first book in the 33 1/3 series that I've read, and it may be the last. I have the feeling that anyone who loves a record enough to read a book based on it probably knows it well enough that the book is somewhat superfluous. At least, that was the case for me and *Highway 61 Revisited*. I picked up a few bits of trivia that I didn't know about and which were interesting, but that was about it.

Mark Polizzotti spends a lot of time discussing "Like a Rolling Stone", which annoyed me. (Perhaps it just seemed that he spent a lot of time discussing it, since "Like a Rolling Stone" is a Dylan song that I dislike intensely.) Dylan supposedly said that he wanted to get away from writing finger pointing songs, but "Like a Rolling Stone" is the finger pointing song of all finger pointing songs (though in a different way from what Dylan was speaking about), told from the point of view of a paranoid insect.

At another point, Mark Polizzotti writes that trying to interpret Dylan's song lyrics is a fool's game. Then he proceeds to play that game. I can't blame him for that, since that's always been the game that Dylan's played with his listeners, or that his listeners have always played with him. I've played the fool's game over the years. For example, it's always been clear to me that the song, "Highway 61 Revisited" makes constant references to the Vietnam War (with the exception of the fourth verse, which doesn't fit into my interpretation. Why did you include that one, Bob? Everything fits so nicely, otherwise.) Mark Polizzotti doesn't agree with me about the lyrics of that song, and I'm sure that Bob Dylan doesn't agree either, or care.

If you're a *Highway 61 Revisited* fan, my advice about this book would be to skip it and play the album one more time.

Patrick McCoy says

I just finished up another 33 1/3 book on Bob Dylan's seminal *Highway 61 Revisited* by Mark Polizzotti. It is another exhaustively research look at how this great record came together. I think it has three of his greatest songs: "Like A Rolling Stone" (recently voted as the greatest rock song of all time), the underrated "Tom Thumb Blues," and dark "Desolation Row." I need to go back and watch the film *Don't Look Back* since it was made during this period and has many of the players mentioned in this book. I saw it at the urging of a roommate back in college but I wasn't as invested in Dylan or this record as I am now so it should be a revelation this time around. Another observation I have made is that I am drawn to the surly nature of

Dylan's song writing where it seems as though he is trying to get back at all those hypocrites, back stabbers, and people who have tried to drag him down, from "Like A Rolling Stone": Once upon a time you dressed so fine? / You threw the bums a dime in your prime, didn't you?? / People'd call, say, "Beware doll, you're bound to fall" / ?You thought they were all kiddin' you? / You used to laugh about / ?Everybody that was hangin' out? / Now you don't talk so loud / ?Now you don't seem so proud / ?About having to be scrounging for your next meal. Another stray observation, Dylan like Patti Smith was heavily influenced by Arthur Rimbaud—"the rock poet."

Jonathan Reynoso says

My formal introduction to the 33 1/3 series. This book, written more like an essay, chronicles the entire "Highway 61 Revisited" sessions of 1965. Each page, written in great detail, is commendable. Polizzotti knows when and where each song was recorded down to the day, the hour in some cases. It's a great read for Dylan fans, obviously. The last paragraph reminded me how being a music critic can be difficult as our job is to conjure sounds from our words. Though, some pieces of music can leave us speechless.

"As writers and critics, we rhapsodize with our pens. Faced with music that stays beyond our command, the penetrating emotional charge born of sound, we have only soundless words as our response...I am gladly reduced to silence."

Kyle Pennekamp says

This is the first of the 33 1/3 series I've read. Instead of taking us strictly through the record in order, Polizzotti basically takes us through the record by taking us through the recording sessions. I'd say the first half of the book is superb writing on Dylan, with good history, a few stories I hadn't heard before, a thorough assessment of the critical response at the time, and personal reflections and analysis. 60 pages or so are spent on Like a Rolling Stone. And, while I understand how big that song was in the history of music, I wish not that he'd spent less time on that particular track, but that he'd spent close to the same amount of time on others. Where LARS gets 60 pages, Ballad of a Thin Man gets less than five. The internal governor that kept Polizzotti from indulging in "I know more than other critics and see things they haven't" gets ditched in the road somewhere in the final third of the book, and there are a few snarky, holier-than-thou moments... but on the whole, an informative and at many points beautifully written book-length criticism on one of the best albums ever produced. Definitely recommended.

Jake says

The more I listen to Bob Dylan, the more impressed I am. This little book gave me some more appreciation for a perfect album. Looking forward to more 33 1/3 books.

Steve Bennett says

One of the better written books in the 33 1/3 series. Unlike some of the other books in the series (or indeed

like many of the other books on Dylan) I never once threw the book down in frustration saying either (or both) that argument is ridiculous or this writer simply cannot write. Also gets an additional star for correcting my decades-long misperception that the object with the shiny metallic bars in the background of the Highway 61 Revisited album cover is not a motorcycle but is actually a baby stroller.

Byron says

Highway 61 Revisited is the best album ever, and this isn't a poorly written book by any means, but it's decidedly nonessential. The best way to get up on mid '60s-era Bob Dylan is to cop this album, listen to it like a million times, and watch Don't Look Back and that Scorsese PBS documentary that's like Don't Look Back + some extra footage and a different title. The most you can possibly learn from this book, or probably any similar book on Dylan, is (a) the dates these songs were recorded, and the dates when they recorded versions that weren't quite good enough to make it on the album, as if you needed to know that; and (b) random people's guesses as to which one of his jumpoffs he was referring to in any given song. Joan Baez? The girl he married who's the mother of the guy from the Wallflowers, from my beloved '90s? The Warhol heiress chick whom "Like a Rolling Stone" is supposedly about?
