

Bob Charlatan

Deconstructing Dylan's Chronicles: Volume One

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The world luvv to be cheated, but they want to hav it dun bi an honest man, and not bi a hornet and then they never seem to git tired ov it.

—Josh Billings

When Bob Dylan's memoir *Chronicles: Volume One* was

released in 2004 it received overwhelmingly positive reviews.

Dylan's recollections came off as disarmingly personal; the use of language in his prose was said to be as distinctive and captivating as it is in his songs. But over the past several years, in loose collaboration with Edward Cook, of Washington, DC, I have been giving *Chronicles* a closer look. Ed is, among other things, an editor of *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation*—deciphering and translating are his business—but he is also a Bob Dylan fan and blogger. In 2006, he first posted about borrowings in *Chronicles: Volume One* from Mark Twain, Marcel Proust, and jazzman Mezz Mezzrow's 1946 autobiography *Really the Blues*; later he posted about borrowings from Jack London and even Sax Rohmer, creator of Dr. Fu Manchu. And together Ed and I have found in *Chronicles* an author, Bob Dylan, who has embraced camouflage to an astounding degree, in a book that is meticulously fabricated, with one surface concealing another, from cover to cover.

Dozens upon dozens of quotations and anecdotes have been incorporated from other sources. Dylan has hidden many puzzles, jokes, secret messages, secondary meanings, and bizarre subtexts in his book. After many months of research my copy of *Chronicles: Volume One* is drenched in highlighter and filled with marginalia and I have a thigh-high stack of books, short stories, and periodicals that Dylan drew from to work his autobiographical alchemy.

To wit: Dylan borrows from American classics and travel guides, fiction and nonfiction about the Civil War, science fiction, crime novels, both Thomas Wolfe and Tom Wolfe, Hemingway,

books on photography, songwriting, Irish music, soul music, and a book about the art of the sideshow banner. He dipped into both a book favored by a nineteenth-century occult society and a book about the Lewinsky scandal by *Showgirls* screenwriter Joe Eszterhas.

In the fall of 2008, while researching what Dylan was up to in a song from his 2001 album “Love And Theft” called “Tweedle Dee & Tweedle Dum,” I discovered that Dylan has used phrases from the 2000 edition of a travel guide called *New Orleans* by Bethany Bultman. Phrases of Bultman’s, from passages such as “Food is served family-style, dripping in garlic and olive oil,” and “Bands can cost well over \$1,000, and the police escorts and parade permits cost over \$1,500,” and “They’re presided over by a grand female-impersonating queen in a multi-thousand-dollar gown” and more appear uncredited in “Tweedle Dee & Tweedle Dum.” The song alludes to a streetcar named Desire and it uses the Mardi Gras call “Throw me something, mister.” Bits of Bultman’s prose fill out the New Orleans atmosphere in a cryptic way.

Much of *Chronicles: Volume One* takes place in New Orleans and, remembering Ed Cook’s discoveries, I wondered if Dylan’s use of material from Bultman’s book extended to his memoir as well. My hunch was correct. In the memoir as in the song, a number of passages match passages in the travel guide. Dylan, like Bultman, sees “pigeons looking for handouts.” Bultman evokes “the chinka-chinka beat of a live Cajun band,” Dylan “the chinka-chinka beat of a Cajun band.” As a courtesy I sent an email to Cook regarding my findings, since it was his writing that had given me the notion to compare *Chronicles* and *New Orleans* in the first place. His response began with, “I think you’re dead right!”

Early in 2009 an interview with Dylan appeared on his website to promote his album *Together Through Life*. Describing the influence that sideshow performers had on him, Dylan cuts up the sentence, “It is our practice to call someone’s dwarf ‘Atlas,’ his Ethiopian slave

‘Swan,’ and his bent and deformed girl ‘Miss Europe,’” from Susanna Morton Braund’s translation of the satires of the Roman poet Juvenal, and he recasts Juvenal’s characters as twentieth-century sideshow performers. Elsewhere in that interview he says, “Images don’t hang anybody up. Like if there’s an astrologer with a criminal record in one of my songs it’s not going to make anybody wonder if the human race is doomed. Images are taken at face value and it kind of freed me up”—another echo of Braund’s translation, another place where Dylan plays with the notion of what can be taken at face value.

I meditated on the fact that Dylan would engage in such interesting wordplay in something as ephemeral as an interview. There had to be more going on in other aspects of his work and I decided to see if I could find and decipher something that Dylan might have hidden somewhere else.

My methodology took a couple of routes. To sharpen my skills I studied cryptography and puzzle-solving. I explored techniques used by crossword-puzzle champions. *The Code Book: The Science of Secrecy from Ancient Egypt to Quantum Cryptography* by Simon Singh I found to be a particularly useful entry point. I keyed in on how code-breakers look for patterns and anomalies, try to find a way in, and then build on their successes. Later I came across a passage in *Chronicles* where Dylan pities producer Daniel Lanois: “I know that he wanted to understand me more as we went along, but you can’t do that, not unless you like to do puzzles.”

Another path I took was to delve deeper into Dylan’s interest in sideshow, which goes back as far as an early interview in which he claimed to have been a carny. I spent months collecting and studying audio and video of sideshow talkers and pitchmen. I went through issues of *Billboard* from the 1940s through the 1960s, reading the columns on carnies, studying the ads. I read books on poker strategy and how to cheat at cards, and I saw how much the world of sideshow dovetailed with other arenas that Dylan has expressed interest in: the worlds of magicians, medicine shows, carnivals, minstrel shows, gamblers, and con men.

At first I didn't know how I was going to be able to apply what I was learning about cryptographers, carnies, and con men to the study of Dylan's work. A way in came when I saw that when writing about the current events of 1961 in *Chronicles*, Dylan calls Hanoi the "brothel-studded Paris of the Orient," using quotation marks but not attributing the quotation. I discovered that the line came from *Time* magazine, March 31, 1961.

A closer look revealed that articles in that issue provided entire passages in *Chronicles*. Dylan adds gags to lines he borrows, riffs off others. Strangest of all, a footnote to an article about Elijah Muhammad recruiting prisoners to join the Nation of Islam that includes, "The pig contains 999 specific germs, is actually one-third cat, one-third rat and one-third dog," turns up reworked as Dylan's snappy comeback to an insult directed at him at a party at Johnny Cash's house in the late 1960s.

When I initially read *Chronicles*, I had found that anecdote about being insulted at Johnny Cash's house to be one of the more compelling tales in the book, and I was amazed to learn how part of it was constructed. After I pieced that together I went looking for other things that might employ the same strategy and it turned out that the book is loaded with similarly constructed tales.

Several anecdotes that Dylan offers are barely disguised re-writes of stories from Gerri Hirshey's *Nowhere to Run: The Story of Soul Music*. His puzzling tale of watching Johnny Carson snub singer Joe Tex on *The Tonight Show* in the late 1980s—puzzling, since Joe Tex died in 1982; he last appeared on the show years earlier—was put together from comments that the singer Jerry Butler made, as quoted by Hirshey.

Sometimes what Dylan has done with material from other sources is witty, crafty, and sly. Other times it's just sloppy. For instance, he works in some delicate touches where he recalls his meeting with the poet Archibald MacLeish, incorporating phrases from MacLeish's poem "Conquistador." In the same passage, though, many remarks that Dylan claims MacLeish made in conversation are

lifted from MacLeish's introduction to *The Complete Poems of Carl Sandburg*, where Sandburg's own "Notes for a Preface" also appears. Dylan seems to have conflated the two, perhaps flipping pages and not realizing that MacLeish's words have ended and Sandburg's have begun, with the result that the "conversation" with MacLeish becomes a bizarre mix of the voices of both MacLeish and Sandburg.

A close read of *Chronicles* reveals this use of cut-and-paste to be thought-out and deliberate; Dylan demonstrates his knowledge of cut-up technique in the way he employs it. On page 82 of *Chronicles* he writes, "Both Len and Tom wrote topical songs—songs where you'd pick articles out of newspapers, fractured demented stuff, some nun getting married, a high school teacher taking a flying leap off the Brooklyn Bridge, tourists who robbed a gas station, Broadway Beauty being beaten, left in the snow, things like that." These "songs" are actual cut-ups from newspaper headlines ("NUN WILL WED GOB," "TOURISTS ROB GAS STATION," and "BROADWAY BEAUTY BEATEN") that John Dos Passos incorporated into his 1936 novel *The Big Money*, an early example of cut-up technique.

Dylan also states what can be considered a rationale for the inclusion of the appropriated material and his invented tales. In a portion of the book where he writes about an evening spent with Bono of U2 he writes, "When Bono or me aren't exactly sure about somebody, we just make it up. We can strengthen any argument by expanding on something either real or not real. Neither of us are nostalgic, and nostalgia doesn't enter into anything and we're gonna make damn sure about that."

He goes on to tell Bono that if he wants to see the birthplace of America he should go to Alexandria, Minnesota and check out a statue of a Viking. Dylan even provides turn-by-turn directions, telling Bono, "that's where the Vikings came and settled in the 1300s."

What Dylan doesn't mention is that the Alexandria's claim as the birthplace of America is based on a huge runestone discovered there in 1898. It was supposedly left by Vikings, telling the tale of their journey. The runestone turned out to be a hoax, but that is of

little concern to the locals. The people of Alexandria have embraced this story and continue to celebrate it, with both the Runestone Museum and the twenty-eight-foot-tall statue of the Viking. They've even made a nod to the tall tale by naming the statue "Big Ole," after the giant blacksmith from the stories of Paul Bunyan.

I previously referred to what Dylan is up to as alchemy and I believe that is apropos; he frequently takes found materials and turns them into gold. It was Dylan's use of the phrase "alchemic secrets" that led me to discover a hidden subtext regarding charlatan-ism in his memoir. My study of confidence men led me to discover that he too had been studying their tricks and gambits.

When Dylan writes about trying to resurrect his career at the end of the 1980s and revitalizing his music after a period of burn-out, he devotes a great deal of space to a mysterious guitar style and approach to music theory that he claims to have learned from the bluesman Lonnie Johnson. Many musicians have dismissed this part of the book as vague shuck and jive. Trying to actually apply what he writes about requires the broadest guesswork. "In reality I was just above a club act," he confides. "Could hardly fill small theaters. There weren't any alchemic shortcuts—critics could dismiss me easily, too, so I wouldn't be able to depend on them to tell my tale."

But I wondered: Were there any "alchemic shortcuts" that one could use? During my search for the phrase I came across an interesting sentence in Robert Greene's 1998 bestseller, *The 48 Laws of Power*, a modern version of Machiavelli's *The Prince*. His book includes this sentence in Law 27: "The charlatans had begun by peddling health elixirs and alchemic shortcuts to wealth"; that's the only other use of the phrase that I've been able to find.

Law 27 is "Play on Peoples' Need to Believe to Create a Cult-Like Following."

The subhead: "The Science of Charlatanism, or How to Create a Cult in Five Easy Steps."

As I read this chapter in Greene's book I noticed something amazing: Dylan had not only read the book, but had constructed

passages out of material from it, using far more than the phrase "alchemic shortcuts." Here is page 159 of *Chronicles*, in that odd section about music theory:

Passion and enthusiasm, which sometimes can be enough to sway a crowd, aren't even necessary. You can manufacture faith out of nothing and there are an infinite number of patterns and lines that connect from key to key—all deceptively simple. You gain power with the least amount of effort, trust that the listeners make their own connections, and it's very seldom they don't. Miscalculations can also cause no serious harm.

Compare that to this passage from *The 48 Laws of Power*, page 214: "It is often wiser to use such dupes in more innocent endeavors, where mistakes or miscalculations will cause no serious harm." Page 216:

Passion and enthusiasm swept through the crowd like a contagion.... Always in a rush to believe in something, we will manufacture saints and faiths out of nothing.... In searching, as you must, for the methods that will gain you the most power for the least effort, you will find the creation of a cult-like following one of the most effective.

Page 217: "This combination will stimulate all kinds of hazy dreams in your listeners, who will make their own connections and see what they want to see."

It had been ten months since I had passed on the info about the New Orleans parallels to Ed Cook when this started to unravel, and I figured he would be interested in these discoveries. He was, and he generously shared some other material that he had come across in the intervening months. Over the course of the next few months, Cook and I built on each other's discoveries and mapped out much of *Chronicles*. The list of passages drawn from Jack London's writing

alone is twelve pages long with dozens and dozens of examples. Of Johnny Cash, for example, Dylan writes, “Johnny didn’t have a piercing yell, but ten thousand years of culture fell from him. He could have been a cave dweller. He sounds like he’s at the edge of the fire, or in the deep snow, or in a ghostly forest, the coolness of conscious obvious strength, full tilt and vibrant with danger.” Almost every word there comes from London’s story “The Son of the Wolf,” cut, pasted, recast.

Dylan also uses material from London’s letters. In an 1899 letter Jack London wrote, “Thinkers do not suffer from lack of expression; their thought is their expression. Feelers do; it is the hardest thing in the world to put feeling, and deep feeling, into words. From the standpoint of expression, it is easier to write a *Das Capital* [sic] in four volumes than a simple lyric of as many stanzas.” On page 56 of *Chronicles* Dylan writes, “Ray had told me to read Faulkner. ‘It’s hard, what Faulkner does,’ he said. ‘It’s hard putting deep feeling into words. It’s easier to write *Das Kapital*.’”

While reading through London’s letters I came across a passage that touches on one of the issues that certainly might come up when considering Dylan’s free appropriation of London’s writing. In December 1906 London wrote a letter to B.W. Babcock of *The New York Times* that reads, in part,

I think the whole subject of plagiarism is absurd. I can conceive of no more laughable spectacle than that of a human standing up on his hind legs and yowling plagiarism. No man with a puny imagination can continue plagiarizing and make a success of it. No man with a vivid imagination, on the other hand, needs to plagiarize.

London’s own daughter Joan called some of her father’s rationale for lifting large chunks of other people’s writing whole hog as “lame indeed,” but the intervening century seems to prove his point—nobody remembers the people Jack London borrowed from and his works still stand up. In a 2006 essay for the Poetry Foundation, responding to my discovery of Dylan’s use of the words of the

poet Henry Timrod in the songs of *Modern Times*, Robert Polito addressed this topic, concluding that the borrowing “certainly isn’t plagiarism.” He calls Dylan’s samplings “among the most daring and original signatures of his art.”

These signatures abound, as elsewhere in *Chronicles* lines from H. G. Wells’ *The Invisible Man*, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, *The First Men in The Moon*, and *The Time Machine* make cameos, sometimes with hidden jokes accompanying them. On page 213 Dylan, recalling how he recorded the song “Shooting Star,” writes, “It would have been good to have a horn man or two on it, a throbbing hum that mingled into the music.” He’s echoing *The First Men in The Moon*, where Wells wrote, “Then began a vast throbbing hum that mingled with the music.” On the same page, about the actor Mickey Rourke, Dylan slyly comments, “The movie traveled to the moon every time he came onto the screen.”

At one point Dylan uses the exact same technique that he did in the interview I mentioned previously, where on the surface he was talking about sideshow performers while covertly talking about the poetry of Juvenal. Early in *Chronicles* Dylan writes about acts he had taken in at the Café Wha?: “Another popular guy wore a priest’s outfit and red-topped boots with little bells and did warped takes on stories from the Bible.”

I believe that what Dylan is doing there is writing in code about John Allen, a New York City scoundrel who died in 1870. Luc Sante’s description of Allen in his book *Low Life: Lures and Snares of Old New York* includes this passage:

His staff of twenty girls were arrayed in costumes consisting of low black satin bodices, scarlet skirts and stockings, and red-topped boots festooned with little bells. The house featured an additional wrinkle that contributed a certain piquancy: Allen ornamented his facilities with religious trappings. Three days each week he led whores and bartenders in a Bible reading at noon.

Right before Dylan mentions the priest with the bells on his boots he writes about “a guy named Billy the Butcher,” a probable nod to William Poole, a contemporary of John Allen’s, who was known as Bill the Butcher and was the inspiration for the Daniel Day-Lewis character in the film *Gangs of New York*.

Much of the detail regarding Dylan’s early days in New York can be traced back to other sources. There are the aforementioned chunks from Mezz Mezzrow’s *Really The Blues*, a quick flash of Willa Cather’s Greenwich Village from her short story “Coming, Aphrodite!” and many lifts from Kate Simon’s classic 1959 travel guide *New York Places & Pleasures: An Uncommon Guidebook*. Dylan alludes to this prismatic approach when he writes, “There were a million stories, just everyday New York things if you wanted to focus in on them. It was always right out in front of you, blended together, but you’d have to pull it apart to make any sense of it.”

While considering why Dylan might be doing these things I kept returning to a passage where he mentions reading the book *Secrets of Mind Power* by magician and memory expert Harry Lorayne. Dylan writes, “I thought that the book might help me to continue freeze-framing my image, help me in learning how to suggest only shadows of my possible self.” Lorayne’s book doesn’t include anything about freeze-framing, but there is a magician of a different stripe, also named Harry, who had touched on that topic: alchemist Harry Smith.

Smith’s 1952 compilation *The Anthology of American Folk Music* was conceived and constructed as a work of magic. Greil Marcus’s book *Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan’s Basement Tapes* discusses the collection’s influence on Dylan at length. Dylan in turn mentions Marcus’s book in *Chronicles*. In a 2001 article in the *LA Weekly* Doug Harvey wrote that

some commentators attribute the entire range of social upheavals that marked the second half of the 20th century to Smith’s magic. The most archetypally resonant outcome is Dylan himself, his messianic role in

the counterculture suggesting the possession of some hapless son of a Minnesota furniture dealer by the daemonic entity conjured from Smith’s alchemical machinations.

Harvey adds, “Okay, maybe not” right after that, but I don’t think he was completely kidding. People who are interested in Smith’s work as a musicologist don’t tend to spend much time considering his extensive work in film. Much of Smith’s film work was animation, one frame at a time. P. Adams Sitney, in *Visionary Film*, quotes a 1971 lecture Smith gave: “Film frames are hieroglyphs, even when they look like actuality. You should think of the individual film frame, always, as a glyph, and then you’ll understand what cinema is about.” In a 1965 lecture at Yale, Smith expressed a belief in “an infinite number of universes, each possessing a similar world with some slight differences—a hand raised in one, lowered in another—so that the perception of motion is an act of the of the mind swiftly choosing a course among an infinite number of these ‘freeze frames,’ and thereby animating them.”

In reading *Chronicles: Volume One*, it may be worth ignoring the perception of motion and looking instead at individual frames as puzzles in their own right. While creating what is read as a narrative, Dylan, with all his samplings and borrowings, may have been seeking to freeze-frame his image and suggest shadows of his possible self.

The very first page of *Chronicles: Volume One* refers to *Beneath the Underdog*, the quirky autobiography of jazz genius Charles Mingus, a book that Dylan read from at length, once, on his radio show *Theme Time Radio Hour*. The very last paragraph in *Chronicles: Volume One* includes a chunk of material gleaned from Joe Eszterhas’s *American Rhapsody*.

There are hundreds of hidden hieroglyphs in between.

In the best cons the marks never have a clue that they’ve been played. They may be out a little cash, but they’ve bought into a really

good story and are none the wiser. Dylan's cons are pretty good; it's difficult to catch on to them and no one ends up a victim. I believe this hidden material was meant to be discovered. Now that I am aware of the cons I think of Dylan as a magician. Magicians do what con men do—except that the audience knows an illusion is being created. With *Chronicles: Volume One*, recognizing that illusions are being performed and finding the components and building blocks of those illusions are just the first steps. The real work involves appreciating how Dylan has made these effects magical.

One set of borrowings stands out for me because the subject is intensely personal and Bob Dylan is a very private man. Where he writes, with great respect, about musician Mike Seeger of the New Lost City Ramblers, he has constructed a couple of paragraphs from language in a book for men struggling with substance abuse: *Touchstones: A Book of Daily Meditations for Men*.

Chronicles: Volume One, page 71:

Nobody could just learn this stuff and it dawned on me that I might have to change my inner thought patterns ... that I would have to start believing in possibilities that I wouldn't have allowed before, that I had been closing my creativity down to a very narrow, controllable scale ... that things had become too familiar and I might have to disorientate myself. (Ellipses are Dylan's.)

Touchstones, August 8: "We change our thought patterns when we change activities." *Touchstones*, April 3: "What is faith? It is believing in possibilities." *Touchstones*, July 21: "Sometimes we feel ashamed or frightened by our imperfections, or we strive so hard to overcome them that we successfully close our lives down to a very narrow, controllable scale." *Touchstones*, June 12: "It tells us how to orient ourselves when there are no familiar landmarks and how to learn and grow from the experience."

For many years Dylan has walked out on stage after an introduction that admits he had at one point "disappeared into a haze of

substance abuse" and later "emerged to find Jesus." In relying on the language of *Touchstones* he hints that he has drawn upon Seeger the musician and serious folklorist and Seeger's performances—performances he viewed as "spiritual experiences"—for support in times of great need. I never approached *Chronicles* expecting to find personal revelations from Dylan, but he comes close in his tribute to Mike Seeger, telling two stories at once in a way that is cloaked in mystery, with a barely perceptible shadow.

The masterstroke in *Chronicles: Volume One* is that Dylan incorporated an initially invisible second book beneath its surface. There are jokes and nods, tip-offs to when he is blowing smoke, and commentaries on artifice and illusion. Occasionally he reveals secrets that he might otherwise keep to himself. He opens up about his influences and his methods. His singular, identifiable American voice is actually an amalgam of the voices of so many others.

There is no need to wait for *Chronicles: Volume Two*: It lurks inside *Chronicles: Volume One*.