

## **Rough and Rowdy Ways: After 60 years, Bob Dylan has started to open up**



It's comforting to know that at 79 years old, Bob Dylan is pissed. A true American soldier, a wordsmith smitten with pugilism. An old, wealthy man who seems to be viscerally and cerebrally aware of the plight of people stricken with poverty and affected by boiling racial tensions; Bob Dylan is an anomaly because he is telling the truth.

*Rough and Rowdy Ways*, Dylan's first album of original material since 2012's *Tempest*, comes at a time of fright and uncertainty in the world. Dylan boldly addresses death and injustice in the long, pop-culture-reference filled, "Murder Most Foul," which is a commentary on the very public assassination of then sitting president John F. Kennedy and the shady coverup surrounding his murder. Dylan spends 17 somber minutes painting a vast and detailed account of the climate in the nation and popular culture leading up to Kennedy's assassination, and segues into shading in the feelings of the changing political climate and the shift of culture following the president's death. Dylan includes a wide range of references from the Everly Brothers' fictional "Little Suzie" and Larry William's (also fictional) "Dizzy Miss Lizzy" to Abraham Zapruder, whose 8mm film of the assassination is probably the most widely viewed footage of JFK's murder. In what seems to be a desperate midnight prayer to Wolfman Jack, Dylan begs to hear John Lee Hooker, the Eagles, Etta James, the Allman Brothers, Nat King Cole and Junior Wells, and to see silver screen legends Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd, to name a few. The breadth of the pool of knowledge that Dylan draws from knows no bounds. Dylan conveys the desperation and sharply pointed sadness that was bestowed on America when the president of the

people was murdered in broad daylight in Dallas, Texas, on November 22, 1963.

Dylan's band on the record is his top-notch touring group Tony Garnier (bass guitar), multi-instrumentalist Donnie Herron (pedal steel guitar, violin accordion), both Charlie Sexton and Bob Britt on guitar and Matt Chamberlain plays the drums. Benmont Tench, formerly of Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers, and jazz artist Alan Pasqua provide the organ and piano work. Blake Mills and Fiona Apple are also credited, seemingly providing the spacey backing vocals that bob and weave throughout the album. Dylan injects his winding and wiry guitar playing, as well as some harmonica work, which has become increasingly bluesier over recent years.

The tour infamously dubbed "the Never Ending Tour" is on hold for the longest period since its inception in 1988, and "I've Made Up My Mind to Give Myself to You" reads like an ode to the road that has harbored Dylan so graciously, particularly for the last 32 years of his career. He made up his mind to give himself to his fans and the road after a tumultuous stretch of career in the '80s during which Dylan himself admits that he had been written off as a 'has-been' and was washed up.

Since then, he's upheld his decision to give himself away with 14 album releases (not to mention numerous extensive releases of previously unreleased material and live recordings), the first installment of his memoir, *Chronicles*, a few authorized documentaries, and over 3,000 tour dates performed since '88. His work has not gone unrecognized as he's earned seven Grammy wins, an Oscar for the song "Things Have Changed," the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Obama and 2016 Nobel Peace Prize in literature.

"Goodbye Jimmy Reed" is the upbeat highlight of the album with collectively bold guitar performances from Charlie Sexton, Bob Britt and Dylan that drive Dylan's lyrical search for a simpler time that he admits isn't *better*, but simply, more simple. Dylan's harmonica playing is sweet and clear and reminiscent of Little Walter; Dylan once said "rock n roll died when Little Walter died." Emitting the same cool late-night juke-joint feeling of "Goodbye Jimmy Reed," "Crossing the Rubicon" is arguably the best song on the album; Dylan brags about his experience and showcases his bravado, but remains skeptical of the whole thing, giving us a rare glimpse into the state of his creative being and reminding us that his mind is ever mossy.

If you're looking for *Blood on the Tracks*, you came to the wrong place. However, Dylan touches down as close to his *Blonde on Blonde*-era sound as we may ever hear on "My Own Version of You," which seems to be vaguely inspired by the tale of Frankenstein's monster in whatever form Bob may have come across. "Key West (Philosopher Pirate)" is like a travel brochure written by an oracle meant to end up in the hands of some romanticized criminal on the run, and it seems like Dylan places himself in the song as the romanticized criminal, as he has in other recent work like "Pay in Blood" from his 2012 offering *Tempest*. As the nine and a half minute epic slides along, Dylan speaks from the point of view of someone who spent time down there and speaks of the place frankly and preaches of its dark virtues.

In "False Prophet," Dylan proclaims, "I ain't no false prophet, I just know what I know." He says he's just one of us, while pleading with his eyes and his subtext not to let our pasts be forgotten as we will put ourselves in danger of repeating mistakes. In a *New York Times* interview with historian Douglas Brinkley, Bob Dylan is very candid about his feeling of disgust over the brutal murder of George Floyd, which took place in Dylan's native state of Minnesota. In the same interview, explaining his sentiment of staying educated about the past, a seemingly wistful Dylan clearly articulates a feeling shared by anybody aging and watching the world change; the kids born yesterday won't be able to truly grasp what life was like before them.

Luckily, Bob Dylan is hard at work putting it all together in song — the sentiment, the reality, the references and the history — without forgetting to include a bit of tongue-in-cheek humor. He's delivered the first honest and true State of the Union address we have been given in about four years, and set it all to music.

**Album Stats:**

Overall Score (Donovan Scale) 4.5 out of 5 Stars

Key Tracks: "Murder Most Foul," "Goodby Jimmy Reed," "Key West (Philosopher Pirate)," "Crossing the Rubicon," "I've Made Up My Mind to Give Myself to You"

Singles Released: "Murder Most Foul," "I Contain Multitudes," "False Prophet"

Produced by Jack Frost (Bob Dylan pseudonym) for Columbia Records