Trouble Songs: A Musicological Poetics

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I’m a Fool to Want You

Is Bob Dylan’s *Shadows in the Night* (2015) a slanted, elliptical album cover of Frank Sinatra’s *Where Are You?* (1957)? The question looks so closely at the track list — four of 10 songs on Dylan’s album appear on its ostensible wellspring — that it fails to hear the songs. The interview Dylan gave to Robert Love at *The Independent* (published February 7, 2015) positions Dylan in relation to both the Great American Songbook he seemed long ago to burn, and to Sinatra as interpreter of the classics. Of course, Frank’s voice is at a different stage of his career in ’57 than Dylan’s is in ’15, even if Dylan’s latter-day crooning on this record makes a convincing case that he’s smoother than ever.

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98 and all 10 were recorded there or elsewhere by Sinatra.
99 Dylan’s eponymous first album (1962) is heavy on traditional songs and blues covers (or appropriations, if you prefer), and concludes with Blind Lemon Jefferson’s plea, “See That My Grave Is Kept Clean,” whereas his sophomore effort the following year turns decisively to original material (with the exception of the traditional “Corrina, Corrina,” which he baldly steals in his (re-)definitive rendition, and “Honey, Just Allow Me One More Chance,” for which his version takes a co-credit). However, his underrated (in their time) early ’90s all-cover albums (*Good as I Been to You* and *World Gone Wrong*) served notice that Dylan hadn’t burned any bridges in song.
100 The interview presents Dylan the musicologist and dry-as-ice comedian, thrilled to be drilled on matters pertaining to his trade. After a lengthy round of questioning, Love thanks Dylan for his generous responses. Dylan: “The last time I did an interview, the guy wanted to know about everything except the music. Man, I’m just a musician, you know? People have been doing that to me since the Sixties — they ask questions like they would ask a medical doctor or a psychiatrist or a professor or a politician. Why? Why are you asking me these things?”
101 or that nice pipes were never his thing and who ever went to him for easy listening? These songs will kill you if you sing them straight, or the ghost of Frank will fuck you up.
But _Shadows in the Night_ opens with a clue that Dylan has another reference\(^{102}\) in mind.\(^{103}\) While _Where Are You?_ begins with the eponymous track, Dylan heads straight for the middle of Frank’s set,\(^{104}\) “I’m a Fool to Want You.”\(^{105}\) This is the same place Billie Holiday begins her penultimate album, _Lady in Satin_ (1958).\(^{106}\) At this late date, Lady Day’s voice is a different instrument than it was in the ’30s and ’40s, but it is an instrument she knows well. Far from betraying her, Holiday’s voice is in her command — or rather, she knows how to listen to its demands. _Shadows_ shows just how well Dylan has absorbed her lesson.

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\(^{102}\) and other trouble

\(^{103}\) and let’s pause here to note trouble’s passage through the end of the end of the album, among the final lines of “That Lucky Old Sun”: _Show me that river / Take me across / and wash all my troubles away._ Perhaps the bridge has been burned, or “troubles” cover the “bridge,” or Dylan is singing to the bridge, begging it take him to the other side.

\(^{104}\) the two sets double-knotted by a lyric from “What’ll I Do”: _With just a photograph to tell my troubles to_.

\(^{105}\) We would have loved to hear that Dylan opened his Vegas show the day he won the Nobel Prize — how beautiful it is that he debuted his laurel crown in Vegas — with this song, but happily settle for his closer, “Why Try to Change Me Now” (which appears on _Shadows in the Night_ and on Sinatra’s _No One Cares_). The writing is on the wall. In any case, Dylan’s trouble shield was up as he refused committee calls.

\(^{106}\) Holiday’s set has this one song in common with _Where Are You?_ but also includes three songs that appear on Sinatra’s epic sad-bastard companion, _In the Wee Small Hours_ (1955): “I Get Along Without You Very Well,” “Glad to Be Unhappy,” and “I’ll Be Around.” In his _AllMusic_ overview of _Where Are You?,_ Stephen Thomas Erlewine further complicates the relationship by noting the influence of Holiday’s ballads on the album’s tempos.