

A Different Country. 'The Old, Weird America' on Bob Dylan's *Basement Tapes*

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1 Greil Marcus' book was originally titled *Invisible Republic*, but was re-released as *Old, Weird America*. I will be using the latter title throughout my essay.

2 For a comprehensive overview of Romantic ideas on mythology, see: Burton Feldman & Robert D. Richardson. *The Rise of Modern Mythology: 1680 – 1860*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972. and Joep Leerssen. *National Thought in Europe – A Cultural History*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006.

In the 2008 motion picture *I'm not There*, Bob Dylan is being portrayed by six different actors who are all meant to represent the prolific singer-songwriter at a different stage of his artistic life or his career. Richard Gere plays the character 'Billy the Kid,' a travelling hobo who ventures upon a town called 'Riddle,' somewhere in America. It is a rather strange 19th century-styled town, where an unusual burying ritual of a young girl is accompanied by the hauntingly beautiful song 'Goin' to Acapulco,' solemnly played by a band with painted faces, dressed in American Civil War outfits. The idea for 'Riddle' appears to be lifted straight from Greil Marcus' 1997 book *The Old Weird America – The World of Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes*. In this book Marcus, a frequent *Rolling Stone* contributor who somewhat specializes in Dylan, proposes the idea that Dylan uses a different world, a different mythical form of America as a backdrop to *The Basement Tapes*, an album that was recorded in sessions in 1967 and released in 1975. As "the playground for

3 As documented on a bootleg from a 1966 concert in Manchester's Free Trade Hall, where an audience member notably shouts 'Judas' at Dylan. This bootleg was released in 1998 as *The Bootleg Series Vol. 4: Bob Dylan Live 1966, The 'Royal Albert Hall' Concert*.

God, Satan, tricksters, Puritans, confidence men, illuminati, braggarts, preachers, anonymous poets of all stripes," this is the land Marcus calls 'The Old, Weird, America' and Riddle seems to be a clear representation of this country.¹ This essay follows the originally Romantic idea of mythology as a symbolic language to describe, or speak of, transcendental truths as it looks at the mythical picture of America Dylan and The Band paint on their album.² The idea of myth as gateway into an altered consciousness or a higher form of truth will prove important as this truth can be represented by a different nation, an ideal country in art. Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson built upon this idea and through them it will prove highly relevant in the case of the different country represented on Bob Dylan's *Basement Tapes*.

The Basement Tapes

A short introduction to the history of *The Basement Tapes* might be in order. In 1966 Bob Dylan had unwillingly turned into one of the biggest stars in popular music. He had just released *Blonde on Blonde*, the third of his 'electric' albums, which saw him transform from a socially conscious folk singer to a fully fledged rock 'n roll poet. His music no longer comprised of just his highly idiosyncratic voice, guitar and mouth harp but he was now backed up by a rock 'n roll band, called The Hawks. After an exhausting world tour, where he was met with ecstatic praise over his new sound on the one hand, and all-round booing on the other,³ his manager had booked him 63 more concerts throughout the United States. Before this tour could get underway, however, Dylan got in a motorcycle accident which caused him minor injuries, offering him the opportunity

4 For a complete history of *The Basement Tapes*, see: Sid Griffin. *Million Dollar Bash – Bob Dylan, The Band and The Basement Tapes*. London: Jawbone Press, 2007.

to get out of the tour and retire for a while, become a family man. During this exile, Dylan joined members of his backing group, now simply known as ‘The Band’, in their house in West Saugerties, New York, to write some new material. In a matter of months after the first recording session in March 1967, Dylan and The Band wrote and recorded dozens of new songs in the basement of this old house, which was nicknamed ‘Big Pink’ after the pink outside walls. This music would be the source for The Band’s first album, *Music from Big Pink*, as well as for *The Basement Tapes*, which is the main focus of this essay.⁴ 1967 was the year of The Beatles’ *Sgt. Peppers’ Lonely Hearts Club Band* and Pink Floyd’s *Piper at the Gates of Dawn*, but the music from these recording sessions did not sound anything like the psychedelia of the time. It rather seemed a reinvention of an old American style of song writing, drawing on old folk tunes and characters from American folklore. The music, which circulated in the form of various bootlegs for years, was officially released in 1975 as *The Basement Tapes*. It seems striking that in 1967, in these most revolutionary and progressive of times, Dylan and The Band chose to hearken back to a much older form of music, chose to associate themselves with the folklore of a country that was more than a 100 years older than the one they were living in. As mentioned before, Greil Marcus dubbed this old country, the one that *The Basement Tapes* seems grounded in and the one that seems to have been the inspiration for ‘Riddle,’ ‘The Old, Weird America’.

The Old, Weird America

As an imagined community, to use Benedict Anderson’s well-known concept somewhat

frivolously, the 'Old, Weird America' is hard to assign to any particular time period. Chronology is not the question in a nation of ideas. For a glimpse of what this country stands for we can principally turn to F.O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance – Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*. Matthiessen's initial reason for writing his book is the remarkable productivity of great American writers in the mid 19th century. The five years between 1850 and 1855 alone saw the release of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Melville's *Moby Dick*, Thoreau's *Walden* and Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, all of which have become classics of American literature. As the title suggests, there is indeed an idea of this time period as a rebirth of America, an American renaissance that pervades Matthiessen's book. The poetics of the American writers of this time seem to support this idea.

The first poet Matthiessen discusses at length is Ralph Waldo Emerson, leader of the American Transcendentalist movement. The core of Emerson's poetics, drawing heavily on Romantics such as Coleridge and Wordsworth, is that "in good writing, words become one with things" (Matthiessen 30). Language has not only to describe thoughts and objects, but rather has to become one with them. The word should incorporate the object, as the object should incorporate the word. This rather abstract conception of language sees language as a direct gateway to a higher form of truth, as it, through poetry, not only represents or stands for a certain object or idea, but rather *is* that idea, has become the object. In this concept, language can directly grasp the object, directly stand for the material. Another towering figure from this time period is Walt Whitman. Matthiessen describes Whitman's poetics as an idiosyncratic mix between idealism and materialism. Whitman is adamant to describe, to fix and solidify in words what he sees around him, because "the mountains, rivers, forests and the elements that gird them round about would only be blank conditions of matter if the mind did not fling its own divinity around them" (Matthiessen 521). Perception and experience through the senses is to be captured in language. However, in his ardent attempt to come up with the best possible words for the material, Whitman was driven to abstractions, was moving 'beyond language' and entered the world of forms, of ideas. Matthiessen, referencing American linguist Sapir, describes this process as though Whitman was trying to come up with a "generalized art language," to optimally fix in words what he saw, what he experienced (Matthiessen 522). The ideal mythical concept of America that Whitman and Emerson use in their art is very much grounded in their poetic ideas.

Both Emerson and Whitman show a willingness, a desire to wholly capture the material in language. Both, according to Matthiessen, could be seen as examples of an attempt to try and solidify the new world, to capture the American land in words. This desire could be explained sociologically or historically, as Matthiessen himself tries to do briefly in the introduction of his book. This was the time that America had finally reached its limits. The pioneers had gone from East to West, but had now reached the Californian shore. The time had come for the country, which up to that point had consisted of loosely affiliated states largely inhabited by travelling bands of pioneers, to solidify its status as a legitimate nation. With this process comes a form of poetry that tries to find the words to do this. This is where the idea of an 'American renaissance' comes in. America had to re-adjust, had to affirm its status. Not just politically, with the civil war at hand, but also culturally, through art. Bob Dylan, in keeping with the idea of an American rebirth, remarkably said of this time period in his autobiography *Chronicles: Volume One*, "Back there, America was put on the cross, died and was resurrected" (86). The poetics of Whitman and Emerson are interwoven with this thought, because they want their language, their art, to embody a world of forms, a world of ideas that has to provide an answer to the then very contemporary question of what America really stands for. As an answer, they present us with an ideal form of America in their art. Whitman and Emerson want to fix, in their writing or through their language, an ideal form of America, a mythical America of archetypes perhaps and that is a thought we can link to the American mythology on Bob Dylan's *Basement Tapes* and Greil Marcus' book.

Anthology of American Folk Music

Marcus finds this different America of archetypes, which he sees as the world behind *The Basement Tapes*, in Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music*. Harry Smith was an eccentric film maker from Portland, Oregon who had fallen into San Francisco's bohemian circles in the 1940's. He developed an interest in folk music and started collecting recordings from the Depression-era. In 1947, he met Moses Asch, who owned major folk distributing label Folkways Records and talked about releasing a selection of the songs he had scrambled together over the years. Smith released a collection of folk songs on Folkways in 1952 and named it the *Anthology of American Folk Music*. He divided 84 songs, all recorded between 1927 and 1932, into three categories, spread out over six lp's. The first category was 'ballads', the second one 'social

5 The carnival holds a socially critical function. For an account on the 'carnavalesque', see Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his World*. In this 1965 work, Bakhtin coins the term 'carnavalesque' to describe Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. The carnival, or 'feast of fools' was a festival that, in Medieval times, was designed to turn the social hierarchy upside down for once a year. The jester was made king and the king could be openly mocked during this festival. The carnivalesque in literature, in Rabelais' story for example, works the same way, as it tests authority, or the authoritative voice in a story through humour and satire. It tests social hierarchy by turning it upside down in a story.

music' and the third one 'songs'. The lp's contained songs by, among others, Mississippi John Hurt, Bascom Lamar Lunsford and Blind Lemon Jefferson. Songs like 'Spike Driver Blues', 'I Wish I Was a Mole in the Ground' and the haunting 'See That My Grave Is Kept Clean.' The music provided the textbook for the burgeoning folk revival of the 1950's, with many of the songs becoming standards performed by artists such as Dave van Ronk, Odetta and, of course, Bob Dylan.

The 84 songs on the *Anthology* paint a mythical picture of America, inhabited by noble bandits walking alongside corrupted Puritans and weird carnival-folk. This land is criminal and holy at the same time. Edward L. Crain, a real-life cowboy from Texas, tells the story of Bandit Cole Younger, a member of Jesse James' gang, who gets arrested whilst trying to rob a Minnesota bank and is "a-wearing" his life away in a Stillwater jail. The Williamson Brothers and Curry sing the tale of John Henry, a mythical steel driving man, who lays train tracks when the steam-engine is invented. Henry refuses to stand down, is not going to be fired because of this new invention. He races a steam-driven engine to see who can lay track the fastest and according to the tale dies "with his hammer in his hand." Some jug band instrumentals by Prince Albert Hunt's Texas Ramblers provide a carnivalesque mood.⁵ At the same time, there are deep religious sentiments as The Carter Family describes with pathos how 'Little Moses' was laid in the river Nile and The Memphis Sanctified Singers sing in deep, Louis Armstrong-like voices how Jesus "Got Better Things for You." The Reverend D.C. Rice furthermore declares, supported by his congregation, to be "on the battlefield" for his Lord, while Buell Kazee from Kentucky

6 An interesting note, in keeping with the idea that America was asking itself what kind of country it was, is that F.O. Matthiessen himself was blacklisted as a communist during the McCarthy-era.

paints a grim picture of a father who finds his daughter hung from a rope, dead of love sickness over a cheating 'Butcher's Boy'. In this way, we are presented with a strange mixture of the holy and the horrible, a less than wholesome country.

Greil Marcus sees all these songs as representative of one imagined land. This 'Old, Weird America,' or 'Smithville,' as Marcus likes to call this imagined community as well, provides a backdrop for the 'secret, unofficial' music of America (Marcus 220). Marcus' America is a mythical nation of ideas and it is very different from the real-life America as we know it. Mythical figures and archetypes inhabit this land, as we can see in the songs Harry Smith selected. According to Marcus, Smith wants to give a different version of America than the one he is living in. The songs perhaps provide a mode of escape, a gateway out of the narrow-mindedness of 1950's America. The *Anthology* was released in 1952, during the height of the Red Scare, and the country was, as it was in the days of Matthiessen's American Renaissance, being put to the test.⁶ It was asking itself what America was and what it meant to be an American. Smith, with his *Anthology*, gave us his thoughts on the subject. He used art as a gateway into a different country, into a country of archetypes that he believed was the real America. The question if a community's need for mythology is then confined to specific time periods, political situations or specific 'moments of crisis' (such as perhaps the Red Scare, the time around the American Civil War or maybe in the case of *The Basement Tapes* the year 1967) is one we will address shortly later on. The focus for now is on a mythology that, since the Romantic age, can represent an altered form of consciousness, can represent a

different country. Whitman and Emerson wanted to capture an America of ideas in their art and that is what Smith's *Anthology* seems to be about as well. In the next chapter we will see how Bob Dylan and The Band convey this idea of a different nation, Harry Smith's concept of America, on *The Basement Tapes*.

Different World

Now we can begin to look for a different world as the backdrop to *The Basement Tapes*. The previous chapters contained a description of how such a hidden world, such a different nation is constructed and we saw how Greil Marcus found a different version of America in Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music*. The time has come to see in what kind of country *The Basement Tapes* are situated. The world of *The Basement Tapes* seems at first glance a lot stranger than the one of Harry Smith's *Anthology*, or, as Greil Marcus says, "For one thing, this town is more drunk" (Marcus 128). A lot of these songs have a weird, bizarre quality to them. We meet strange characters such as Tiny Montgomery, king of the drunks from San Francisco or Ruben Remus, a "hypnotist" and a "fancy talker" who pretends to be a doctor. There are also seemingly nonsensical tales, such as 'The Clothes Line Saga'. This song offers us a story of a young man who, while picking up the washed clothes for his mother, runs into a neighbour. This man asks him if he's heard the vice-president's gone mad last night. The boy answers no, shrugs his shoulders and, abruptly ending the saga, goes back inside the house. This whimsical song thereby seems throwaway at first, but as I will later show, there is more to it.

At no time are the songs as directly referential as the *Anthology* songs. Stories are not as explicit on this album and politics and religion are seen in a different light. The emphasis in a lot of the songs is on the absurd, on the weird. "What's the matter, Molly, dear, What's the matter with your mound?" someone for instance asks in the song 'Lo! And Behold!' Molly responds with a bewildering "What's it to ya, Moby Dick? This is chicken town!" Also, the narrator in 'Yea! Heavy and a Bottle of Bread' explains how he "and the comic book, just us (...) caught the bus" while the chauffeur is sick at home "with a nose full of pus." There is however more to some of these seemingly rather nonsensical songs than is apparent at first sight. Greil Marcus identifies the vice president from the aforementioned, at first glance also rather absurd, 'Clothes Line Saga,' as Hubert Humphrey. This was the second man to Lyndon Johnson in 1967, when *The Basement Tapes* were recorded. Humphrey

7 Dylan himself was never fond of the term 'topical songwriter', as he explained in a 1963 radio interview with DJ Studs Terkel on Chicago's WFMT Radio. He felt his writing was beyond 'topical', even the songs that indeed had a clear topic. This interview is shown in the 2005 documentary *No Direction Home*.

started his political career as a staunch advocate for left-wing, liberal causes and had been a peace promoter up until his vice presidency when he chose to back president Johnson on his Vietnam policy. This prompts Marcus to believe that this is the vice president "gone mad" from the song. There is, however, no grand political statement, as we would maybe expect from a song recorded in 1967. There is simply the observation that the vice-president has gone mad, before the characters return to their normal day-to-day business:

"'Well, there's nothin' we can do about it,' said the neighbor,
'It's just somethin' we're gonna have to forget.'
'Yes, I guess so,' said Ma,
Then she asked me if the clothes was still wet."
(*The Basement Tapes*, Clothes Line Saga)

As the characters shrug their shoulder over the vice-president's mental condition, contemporary politics seems to be put on the back burner.

The idea that Dylan's music on *The Basement Tapes* is situated in another world can be juxtaposed with some of the songs on his earlier albums, which are very clearly situated in the world we live in. These early songs specifically name names, reference events you can look up in the newspaper. These are the songs that are commonly referred to as 'topical songs.'⁷ There is for instance the song 'The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll,' which Dylan recorded in 1963 and that appeared on his 1964 album *The Times They Are A-Changin'*. This song deals with the murder of Hattie Carroll, a 51-year old black barmaid, by 24-year old William Zantzinger, a white man from Maryland. He killed her with his cane because she did not deliver an ordered glass of

bourbon fast enough. He was sentenced to only six months in a specially selected prison, one that did not have many black inmates so he would not become the target of abuse. The case was covered extensively by, among others, *Time* magazine and Dylan's song offers a direct retelling of the whole event, as read about in the newspapers. *The Basement Tapes* do not offer any direct-from-newspaper songs like that. In stead we find for instance 'Ain't No More Cane,' a traditional prison work song originally performed by legendary blues player Lead Belly in the 1920's, about the inmates working in the Texas prisons that lay beside the river Brazos. This song may also be referencing social injustice, but in a very different way, as it less referential, it points less to the social realities of the 1960's than it does to a more generalized brand of American social injustice. It references the "judgement day" as the song breathes a yearning for redemption for the inmates.

We can perhaps look at Walt Whitman's poetics and the aforementioned concept of a 'generalized art language' to give this phenomenon a theoretical backbone. In stead of pointing to the world around them, these songs point to myth. Dylan and The Band look to the American past to construct a different nation, a mythological nation of bizarre archetypes and meaningful abstractions, much as Harry Smith did on his *Anthology*. By doing so, they follow along the lines of the archetypal nations of the American transcendentalists, as they offer an escape from the 'real' world into a different realm, into a mythical form of America. Steering away from the revolutionary Zeitgeist of the 1960's these songs, in contrast to Dylan's early topical songs, step into a different world, offer a mythical America and this is the country in which Dylan seems to feel most at home.

The 'Real' World

We have seen how Dylan and The Band try to convey a mythical form of America on *The Basement Tapes*. The question remains, however, if there is any social or political dimension to this form of myth-making. Whether or not these songs were actually meant to give an opinion on contemporary American society is difficult to tell. The time in which Dylan and The Band chose to venture into a different country is, however, remarkable to say the least. The year 1967 was, as mentioned before, a critical time in American history, as were 1952 when Harry Smith compiled his *Anthology* and the mid-19th century when Whitman and Emerson wrote their work. Protest was flaring up throughout the nation over the escalating Vietnam War and there was a youthful

counter-culture on the rise that seemed to question everything the previous generations had stood for. Popular music of the time followed suit and became more radical, more progressive and precisely at this time Dylan and The Band ventured into an older form of America, constructed their different nation, their version of America. That may not be a matter of coincidence. The scale of this article is, however, not big enough to draw any definitive conclusions on that particular matter.

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SUMMARY

This article looks at how a different world, a mythical version of America, is created on Bob Dylan's 1975 album *The Basement Tapes* by reflecting on *Rolling Stone*-critic Greil Marcus' ideas on 'The Old-Weird America'. Using the Romantic idea of mythology and the Transcendentalist poetics of Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson as a theoretical backdrop and the *Anthology of American Folk Music* as a template, it tries to find a different America in the songs on *The Basement Tapes*.

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