

Larry Miller

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1966

This week, a record review concerning not fact, but opinion about Bob Dylan's "BLONDE ON BLONDE", (Columbia C2S 841). The current interview in these pages [FE #12, August 15, 1966] is covering the personal side of Dylan far better than anything I could write, so we shall instead talk about music. The main thing wrong with the record is the quality, or lack thereof, of the vocals. From the earlier Dylan records, particularly the last two rockers, we know that he is capable of sounding damn good when he wants to. The impression one gets is that he is sort of putting the listener down, trying to see how much he can get away with. Dylan is probably THE supreme individualist, and makes a point of not being what his audience expects him to be. However, when this protection of personal identity goes too far, it can and does detract from the art itself. What would have been a truly great recording is spoiled by the Rex Harrison manner of talking thought words, and the record is then merely good. The second point of criticism is based on Dylan's apparent inability to grow musically. In spite of Dylan's obvious genius as a lyricist, the inability to keep the musical idiom growing and changing detracts from the possible real greatness of this record. Apparently, in order to venture in to the rock field, Dylan felt it necessary to establish a certain sort of sound as a base, a musical framework. The truly exciting thing about this music (to me) is the search for new sounds, along with the expression of new ideas. In making BLONDE ON BLONDE he resorted to rather drastic measures to perhaps try to do something better with the music; he recorded in Nashville, used practically all new sidemen, but, with several exceptions, for the most part it sounds the same.

Of the songs on the record, RAINY DAY WOMEN #12 & 35 would seem to be the most obvious exception...with the use of brass and a distinct change of mood, something different has surely been created. It's been this difference that has brought critical disapproval from a number of Dylan tantes; to me it is significant of the right kind of search for change in the music, not to mention the fact that it is a very hip song and fun to listen to. The double or possibly even triple entendre in the lyrics boggle the mind.

ONE OF US MUST KNOW seems to repeat the basic anti-love theme again; this has been used by him in many songs, going all the way back to "Don't think twice". The music here is at a higher level, but still seems to be idiomatically hung up. I WANT YOU is a shot at real "rock and roll"...Let's play the real mainstream and see what it does... Might be worth listening to if the vocal weren't so damned unmusical. MEMPHIS BLUES again is a real winner... probably one of the high points of the record. Here is the familiar situation of having to repeat going through the same changes over again, not being able to break the pattern and avoid them. At points he sounds very credible, as if he really feels the agony of this repeating senselessness and wants to tell you. LEOPARD SKIN PILLBOX HAT is a beautiful stomping blues rock trip, the laughing absurd images seem to say there are too many changes to be coped with, the answer is to learn to dig the absurdity itself. Worth noting that some genuinely anarchistic lead guitar is played by Dylan himself.

JUST LIKE A WOMAN is surely one of the more commercial, hokey sounding ventures on the record and really doesn't do too much. MOST LIKELY YOU'LL GO YOUR WAY AND I'LL GO MINE is in a way caught up in the standard rock sound, but again indicates some effort with again the use of brass. TEMPORARY LIKE ACHILLES is real slow and bluesy, with sort of a country-Nashville sound. More of the same old love song, but how many ways

can you say the same thing. ABSOLUTELY SWEET MARIE is absolutely Motown, good driving music. Makes us wonder what could be done if he could really make something HAPPEN with the music and get away from the clichés. 4TH TIME AROUND is the exception... A very beautiful and tasty thing in 3/4 time and what sounds like a ukulele! This is probably my own personal favorite... The lyrics seem to go farther and say more, perhaps because of the music. OBVIOUSLY FIVE BELIEVERS sounds like a reworking of a traditional song, "Let me be your Chauffeur" and here again the idiomatic hang-up detracts from the potential impact of the total product. More groovy word trips, and here I must say that the writing quality is consistently excellent throughout the record. SAD EYES LADY OF THE LOWLANDS is meant to be the epic on the record. though only 11 or 12 minutes long, it takes up an entire side...One gets the feeling that the record has been unnecessarily padded out to make two records, and with the elimination of a few of the singles and by tightening up the grooves this could have been one record and perhaps not so loosely knit. For my own taste, I prefer to have the album as is, including the longer versions of the singles.

In a song like Sad Eyes Lady, it surely is necessary to take as much time and space as is needed...

The series of images used in the telling are so rich and abundant that it has to be this long or it really wouldn't be worth doing at all. Perhaps it is significant that a major pop label like Columbia will actually allow an artist to create with this much freedom, although the record sales may suffer from the \$6 to \$8 price tag. For a Dylan, the only way to do it is to go all the way, do it as big as possible, knock their heads in with the immensity of your genius. However sometimes faulty it may turn out, I'm very encouraged by the fact that it can be done.

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