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## Book Review: *The Philosophy of Modern Song*

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Bob Dylan. *The Philosophy of Modern Song*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2022. 352 pages.

Most readers interested in this book will find it to be exactly what they are looking for. Dylan enthusiasts will get plenty of the cagey mysticism, the enigmatic wit, and the incredulous contrarianism they have come to expect from the man. Most consumer reviews of the book have been positive, and with good reason. It is entertaining. As a Dylan fan, I enjoyed it. But in this review, I would like to begin with a bit of structural analysis to set up my critique of the book. Specifically, I would like to talk about what *The Philosophy of Modern Song* is not, namely, that it is not in any defensible sense a coherent philosophy of modern popular music.

Rather, this book is a series of sixty-six short essays, ranging from a couple of paragraphs to five pages in length. A little over half of the essays are split into two parts. The book surveys songs from a wide variety of genres, including rock, rhythm and blues, country, and folk, with a dash of Americana, jazz, blues, and bluegrass thrown in for good measure. Whereas the genre breakdown is fairly representative, in most other categories the songs chosen seem to be based on nothing more than the author's fancy. I was surprised by the heavy emphasis on the 1950s, a decade in which twenty-eight of the featured songs were released. That was even more than songs featured from the 1960s and 1970s combined. The vast majority of songs fell within those three decades, with just five predating 1950 and six released in 1980 or after—though several more recent artists, songs, and genres are mentioned in the content of the essays. The heavy focus on mid-century popular music also helps to explain why more than half of the featured songs were originally released as singles rather than on full-length albums.

Dylan heavily emphasizes solo artists, who comprise roughly seventy-five percent of the book's content, rather than bands or duos. The racial demographics skew white, with only fourteen Black solo artists or groups as well as one Latino artist (Carlos Santana) and one native artist (John Trudell). This could partly be explained by structural inequality in the popular music industry during the primary time period surveyed. But Dylan's inattention toward gender diversity borders on the bewildering. Only four of the sixty-six artists are female. The first female artist (Cher) does not appear until Chapter 47. A heavy emphasis also is applied to American artists. Apart from The Who, The Clash, "Volare" crooner Domenico Modugno, a discussion of French pop influences on Bobby Darin's

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“Beyond the Sea,” and some extended interest on The Platters’ international influences for “My Prayer,” this book focuses entirely on U.S.-based popular music.

My point is not to charge Bob Dylan with bias, though the lack of female artists is odd and raises questions about the book’s editorial process. But I think it is important to be clear that this book is nothing more than his random thoughts about songs he wanted to write about. The writing is at times insightful (Chapter 63 on Elvis Presley’s “Viva Las Vegas”), hilarious (Chapter 25 on Johnnie Taylor’s “Cheaper to Keep Her”), and even hilariously insightful (Chapter 7 on Little Richard’s “Tutti Frutti”). When Dylan writes “Pat Boone was probably the only [cover artist] who knew what he was singing about” in reference to the many cover versions of “Tutti Frutti,” it is a jocular, incisive observation about faith and popular culture that is somehow tongue in cheek yet cuts straight to the heart of what he is trying to say (29). At other times, when it merely summarizes without an apparent purpose, it can be a bit lazy and forgettable (Chapter 18 on Johnnie and Jack’s “Poison Love”) or retells without added insight (Chapter 57 on Jimmy Webb’s “By the Time I Get to Phoenix”). Dylan’s significant knowledge of popular music history is displayed in enough of the book to perhaps say “throughout,” and particularly towards the essays at the end. But it is precisely because Dylan is capable of writing a historically informed philosophical treatise, but chooses not to do so with this book, that it becomes important to be clear about what he actually does.

Chapter 24 about Stephen Foster’s “Nelly Was A Lady” best illustrates my point. This song, written in 1849, is by far the oldest featured in the book. In the first part of its essay, there is no historicization whatsoever to differentiate how Dylan experiences the song from his engagement with doo-wop, Motown, punk, or new wave. The chapter is just composed of five paragraphs describing how the song makes him feel. The essay’s second part begins with the claim that “Stephen Foster is the counterpart to Edgar Allan Poe” before going on to emphasize the song’s unique ability to evoke sadness as an emotional response (115). I agree that a song about the death of a beloved “dark Virginny bride” is sad. The song’s melody is evocative but also catchy. It’s an excellent example of Foster’s unique songwriting ability. But the song is also sad because it’s about the effects of slavery written in partial Black dialect from a white person’s point of view.

It’s possible that Dylan’s decision to write about Alvin Youngblood Hart’s version of this song is meant to serve as an oblique acknowledgment of the song’s problematic racial representation. Hart, a Black blues artist, contributed his version to a compilation album that reimagined several Foster songs in 2004, paradoxically making it the most recent recording featured in the book. Dylan claims that “Hart’s is as good a version as you’ll ever hear. Alvin sings the song in its pure form” (115). It is that kind of claim that prevents this book from aspiring to be an overarching philosophy. There is no “pure form” of a creative work apart from its historical context. There is no way to idealize the racism out of blackface minstrelsy, the first truly American form of popular culture. If you want to talk about other aspects of a classic song, write about whatever you want I guess. But if you are going to characterize your writing as a “philosophy” you have to consider the entirety of your message—both what you intend and what you leave out.

Part of Dylan's own songwriting genius comes from his ability to create vivid imagery while leaving enough space for the listener to imagine their own stories as part of the narrative. To a true disciple, every detail of his work can seem to be dripping with meaning. I'd venture to guess that selecting sixty-six songs, the same number of books in the Bible, was not accidental. To be clear, I don't mean to suggest that Dylan should have to conform to academic standards or submit his work to peer review. He has built a long and successful career, and thousands of fans will want to read what he has to say just like I did. My guess is that Dylan knows this is just a coffee table book of illustrated essays, but I also think that many of his fans will take the book's title at face value and ascribe meaning to it that just isn't there. It may be okay for a songwriter to take that kind of artistic license, but a philosopher cannot.

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