

“Bob Dylan: Masters of War”

‘*Masters of War*’ is one of the most direct political songs in the history of folk-song tradition, whose uncompromising lyrics give evidence to Dylan’s finely tuned skills as songwriter, thinker and poet.

Dylan’s protest songs are exceptional in their “*revolutionary artistic power*” and “*original political aesthetic*”¹, and in recognizing them as such, claims L. Wilde (Boucher/Browning, 2009, p. 105) can be excluded from Theodor Adorno’s statement that popular music is “*a somatic stimulant and therefore regressive vis-a-vis aesthetic autonomy*”², or as Wilde (2009, p. 105) words it: “*incapable of expressing an autonomous challenge to the status quo.*”

‘*Masters of War*’, recorded on April 23, 1963 in New York (Heylin, 2010, p. 140) and released on his second album *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan*, notably complies with Wilde’s claim. Its proposition asserts itself incontrovertible to any attempts of cultural assimilation – and has for example, for being “*untameably over-the-top*”, “*not been worn smooth by film-makers seeking cosy signifiers of 1960s rebellion.*”³

The song, frequently mistaken for an anti-war song, takes its inspiration from parting advice about the military industry’s power and influence on politics that John F. Kennedy received from his predecessor President Eisenhower (Gill, 2011, p. 32). In an interview with *USA Today* in 2001 Dylan explains: “*It’s not an anti-war song. It’s speaking against what Eisenhower was calling a*

¹ Boucher/Browning 2009, *The Political Art of Bob Dylan*, 2nd edition, Exeter: Imprint Academic, p. 105

² Adorno/Tiedemann 1997, *theodor Adorno – aesthetic theory*, 2002 edition, London: Continuum, p. 116

³ Lynskey 2010, *33 Revolutions Per Minute – A History Of Protest Songs*, London: Faber and Faber Ltd, p. 74

military industrial complex as he was making his exit from the presidency. That spirit was in the air, and I picked it up."⁴

Dylan reveals one of the "secrets" behind his rise to stardom as he refers to his ability to draw from current events and turn them into songs.

"This diatribe against the arms industry is the bluntest condemnation in Dylan's songbook," argues A. Gill (2011, p. 32) and concurs: *"a torrent of plain-speaking pitched at a level that even the objects of its bile might understand, with no poetic touches to obscure its message."*

The melody, an adaption of American folksinger Jean Ritchie's arrangement 'Nottamun' Town' was introduced to Dylan by English folksinger Martin Carthy (Heylin, 2010, pp. 140-141). Inspired by the lyrics he said: *"that's like a herd of ghosts passing through on the way to Tangiers."*⁵

Dylan's targets are those who profiteer from the produce of weapons, those who create the need for war to take place: *"You fasten the triggers / For the others to fire / Then you set back and watch / When the death count gets higher."*⁶

Not afraid to display his disgust with those that *"hide behind desks"* (Marqusee, 2005, p. 75) Dylan voices his opposition whilst reflecting the tide of his time. The thirteen day standoff between the USA and the Soviet Union, labelled as the Cuban Missile Crisis, in October 1962 marked the threatening

⁴ Gundersen 10.9.2001, *USA Today*

⁵ Heylin 2010, *Revolution In The Air: The Songs Of Bob Dylan, Vol.1: 1957-73*, London: Constable & Robinson Ltd, p.140

⁶ Bobydylan.com

highpoint during the Cold War. The song's lyrics can be aligned to the event as the fear in face of a possible nuclear war was omnipresent.

A curse highlights the uncompromising essence of the song: "*Even Jesus would never / Forgive what you do.*"⁷ The grand finale of 'Masters of War' is vindictive and revealed a lot about the character of Dylan, whilst it was uncharacteristic for the civil rights and anti-war movements of the early sixties (Marqusee, 2005, p. 75). As Dylan sings: "*And I'll watch while you're lowered / Down to your deathbed / And I'll stand o'er your grave / 'Til I'm sure that you're dead*"⁸, D. Lysnkey (2010, p. 73) debates one can "*imagine that he might clamber down into the grave,...and give the corpse a good kicking just to be sure.*"

H. Sounes (2002, p. 153) reasons that "*Bob's maturity as a songwriter came at an auspicious time.*" He points out that just "*as the twenty-one-year-old Dylan scribbled in his ten-cent notebooks, America entered a period of enormous upheaval and social change.*"

His timely entry to the coffeehouse-scene of Greenwich Village in February 1961 landed him in a small community of folk-singers that lived a ghetto-like lifestyle in what used to be "*America's bohemian capital*" before WW1 (Marqusee, 2005, p.16). Marqusee (2005, p. 17) argues the importance of this special surrounding as the platform for Dylan's extraordinary journey by reflecting: "*that sometimes fruitful, sometimes frustrating search for a synthesis*

⁷ Bobdylan.com

⁸ Bobdylan.com

between individual creativity and collective political action, between vanguard modernism and popular radicalism."

Dylan's creative drive, heavily influenced by anti-fascist protest songwriter Woody Guthrie, Harry Smith's anthology and poet Allen Ginsberg, drew inspiration from all the music his peers were playing, which he famously soaked up (Marqusee, 2005, p. 16).

His career accelerated as the longing for authenticity intensified in a world which offered less and less self-made experiences (Marqusee, 2005, p. 40) in exchange for a mass consumer culture.

Dylan is widely appreciated as an original thinker, his lyrics and words examined for their wisdom with some even becoming figures of speech (Sounes, 2002, p. 11). A. Gill (2011, p. 4) posits *"of all the stars thrown up...of the Sixties, none has exerted as deep or lasting an influence on our culture as Bob Dylan. ...none has so irreversibly altered our conception of what is possible within a popular song, and particularly within its lyrics."*

As time passed, the song lent meaning to the protest movements against the Vietnam War and Gulf War 1 (Sounes, 2002, p. 164).

'*Masters of War*' can still be found in current tour set lists, even though, since becoming a Christian, Dylan has dropped the line citing Jesus (Boucher/Browning, 2009, p. 237). Lynskey (2010, p. 74) refers to G. Marcus to sum up: *"It's the elegance of the melody and the extremism of the words*

that attract people – the way the song goes too far, to the limits of free speech...(it) gives people permission to go that far.”

The biggest controversy, elevated by his contradictory and elusive personality, surrounding Dylan, is the way he and his songs were interpreted. As the craze gathered pace, he was called “*Prophet, Messiah, Savior*” (Dylan, 2004, p. 124). But soon the “*Spokeman Denies That He’s a Spokesman*”⁹-headlines evoked a bitter Dylan (2004, p. 120): “*Whatever the counterculture was, I’d seen enough of it. I was sick of the way my lyrics had been extrapolated, their meanings subverted...*”

Whilst his outspoken phase of political songs is reduced to the short period of 1962-1964, and Dylan since then has, famously, denounced that he has turned his back to politics, he took, so argues L. Wilde (Boucher/Browning, 2009, p. 105), “*songs which take ‘protest’ to another level.*”

‘*Masters of War*’ - written like “*an ancient horror story in which a wrongdoer is pursued by a vengeful spirit*” (Lynskey, 2010, p. 73) - stands out in particular as a song whose social and political expression cannot be assimilated; its haunting nature resonating into the consciousness of presence. Unfortunately, this song’s statement is still as relevant now; it does not refer to things past.

⁹ Dylan 2004, *Chronicles – Volume One*, London: Simon & Schuster, p. 119

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