Bob Dylan, *Tempest*

by Anne Margaret Daniel

No, his voice is not what it was fifty years ago on his first studio album, ***Bob Dylan***. He is 71 now, and a lifelong smoker; neither of these truths are kind to the vocal cords of any person. But Dylan sings powerfully and clearly on ***Tempest*** — what he’s saying matters, and he wants it to be heard, and not mistaken. And the ten songs on ***Tempest*** are all remarkable, which cannot often be said of any ten songs, even collected greatest hits, on any record by any artist. Each track falls in its place: from a bright start with ***“Duquesne Whistle”*** (our view of the song already altered by the video made of it) through the dark raw middle numbers to the sweeping ballads leading to the moving, peace-giving ending provided by ***“Roll On John***,” the songs are in an order that feels both careful and unalterable. Columbia’s choice to release ***“Duquesne Whistle”***first, both as an audio track, and then in the form of the video, in late August was apt. When you drop the needle, or otherwise press play, on an album you start at, and with, the beginning. ***Tempest*** isn’t a concept album, or a progression of storytales in quite the way that a record like, for example, Willie Nelson’s ***Red-Headed Stranger*** is, but it’s close. It’s therefore best listened to altogether, in order, for the first time and maybe the fiftieth time, too.

In order, ***Tempest*** starts on land and goes to sea, before fetching back up in the forests of the night. ***“Duquesne Whistle”***is a jaunty old-timey train song. A honky-tonky little keyboard-based start gets shaken up first by the hard skiffle beat of the drums, then by Dylan’s voice roughly chiming in. “Listen to that Duquesne whistle blowin,’” he insists, as the refrain shifts and changes. There are floater lines from other train songs, like the insistence that the train whistle’s blowin’ like she’s never blowed before (see, e.g., ***“KC Moan”***). And whenever a “sweet voice gently calling” is taken for “the mother of our Lord,” you’re reminded of the legion of old hymns and songs from Bill Monroe’s ***“I Hear a Sweet Voice Calling”*** to ***“Dreaming Of a Little Cabin***,” in which a dead woman’s voice becomes holy memory and possibility to a singer seeking comfort. But strange new things happen on the Duquesne train (and yes, they rhyme: it’s not doo-QUEZ-ne, but doo-KANE). This train whistle blows not just like it’s gonna blow your blues away, a fairly traditional thing for a train whistle to do, but like it’s gonna sweep your world away, like it’s gonna blow the sky apart, like it’s gonna kill you dead. The insistent tangly wah-wah interspersing Dylan’s lyric becomes ominous quickly, despite – or maybe because of – the jaunty pace. That insistent one-two chord strike is characteristic of the record; it appears on several more tracks, gets under your skin, and makes you nervous.

The video of the song, shot by stuntman and director Nash Edgerton, takes the ominous possibilities of ***“Duquesne Whistle”*** to town, in Los Angeles and perhaps other settings. The jauntiness remains, in the irrepressible – at first – character of a young man pursuing a young woman. The introduction pans across a crowded urban scene of trafficky streets, fire escapes, and pigeons (who move almost in time with the music), across a huge billboard of the poster for the John Lennon show at the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame locations: Lennon, his round sunglasses on, arms folded over his sleeveless “New York City” t-shirt. John’s appearance here makes a circle to the last track on the record, ***“Roll On John,”*** from the very beginning. The sweet-faced, romantic, thin young man ignores the scenery around him, intent on flipping cards at a tin can. The ace and king of hearts miss, but – just as the girl he’s waiting for walks out of her building – the ten of clubs goes in. A bad omen for a young man in love. He’s goofy and innocuous, but the woman wants nothing to do with him. Is he an ex, or someone she doesn’t know? Either way, when with a grin he offers her a rose stolen from an irate street vendor, she maces him in the face and leaves him on the street, peeling out in one of the ugliest cars of an ugly-car decade, a Gremlin.

It gets worse: when pursued for stealing a second rose, the young man runs from the cops, knocks over a ladder being used by a guy to change a theatre marquee, and injures the guy. Revenge ensues. Badly beaten with a baseball bat – with the blows set to George Recile’s drum-bash — the young man has a fantasy of getting the girl as he’s dumped from that classically unidentifiable urban vehicle, an unmarked white van, onto the sidewalk. Does he live or die? Dylan’s posse, who have been strutting through the video with the song and story as their *Shaft*like soundtrack, don’t care. Dylan and the gang — a motley circus crew of the kind of which Dylan has been fond since before the Rolling Thunder Revue days, including a tall Asian woman in a blonde wig carrying an abacus, and a skinny guy dressed like Gene Simmons in his Kiss stage getup — step over the young man and keep on rolling. Moral of this cautionary tale? Don’t stalk women; don’t steal roses; don’t mess with someone working on a theatre marquee; don’t get hit with a baseball bat; and don’t expect Bob and his posse to help you when you’re down.

The video is an interpretation of the song that Dylan has intended, by having it made and appearing in it, which is why I write of it here. However, I like the song better without it. It’s not that the video wasn’t what I expected — really, no one could have expected Bob with his guitar slung across his back, hitching himself up into an empty boxcar on a freight train pulling slowly out of a curve. I don’t know what I expected — though certainly not what Nash Edgerton saw — but Dylan’s songs always lead us to make our own scenes in our heads. Everyone else’s version of ***“Black Diamond Bay,”*** for instance, would be very unlike mine — in which I’ve always thought I’d have Johnny Depp playing all the male roles. The video of ***“Duquesne Whistle”*** is a sort of hypertext version of the song, but, until I’ve heard the track more times, I prefer just the words and music — I prefer to use my ears, not my eyes, for now.

The violence is there, though, from the start. ***Tempest*** owes an overall debt to Warren Zevon and his songs like ***“Excitable Boy,”*** with their mix of boppy tune and dark lyric. It’s a debt I think Dylan would be glad to acknowledge, given his liking for Zevon. With Larry Campbell, Dylan gave some gorgeous performances of Zevon’s ***“Mutineer”*** in 2002, while Zevon was dying. (One night in Virginia, at George Mason University’s Patriot Center, I heard him sing ***“Accidentally Like a Martyr”*** as well as ***“Mutineer”.***) However, the mix of light and dark goes back well before Zevon, to the sparkling fiddle and banjo tunes of Appalachia, and to the Scottish-Highlands and nautical songs before those. ***“Pretty Polly,”*** for example, is a swift-moving, pleasantly beginning tune that seems at first to be a courting song, but that takes a fast turn into terror. Dylan likes engaging in this blending of light and dark on the songs of ***Tempest***. This confounds your expectations, and keeps you both enjoying, and ever alert and on guard.

Dylan also likes a crossing of high and low diction, of archaic words and phrases (‘twas, “cold and frosty morn,” “a gilded age foretold”) and modern lines (“cheapest labor money can buy,” “so much for tears”). The coupling of antique and contemporary words always reminds you of the fact that language never dies. Dylan knows the English language, from its Shakespearean forms to its protean American revelations, over all its many centuries, and no other songwriter is remotely capable of using it as he does. The effect is to make the most memorable couplets on record today. Top ten hits these days have four or five songwriters credited with them, a stable of producers, and lyrics like “tonight, tonight, tonight, tonight, don’t worry ‘bout a club just come lay up under me.” Only one song on this record, ***“Duquesne Whistle,”*** is co-written, with Robert Hunter. Take just one Dylan stanza, from ***“Long And Wasted Years,”*** and you’ll see how you can’t touch this. Other songwriters will listen to ***Tempest*** and weep:

I think that when my back was turned

The whole world behind me burned

It’s been awhile

since we walked down that long, long aisle.

We cried on a cold and frosty morn

We cried because our souls were torn

So much for tears

So much for all these long and wasted years.

*Please read the rest of this essay in my forthcoming book on Dylan*.