

Bob Dylan - The Basement Tapes

By Chris P. James



There are a lot of misconceptions about Bob Dylan's "Basement Tapes". Having been recorded at such an enormously creative time in music history by one of the most famous and influential artists of the day, this body of work has come to be regarded as the stuff of myth. How could anything live up to the expectations put on this group of "sessions"? The truth is, they were never intended for release. At best they were demos. But for the most part these recordings are of Dylan with four fifths of his still-on-retainer back-up band messing around in makeshift home studios. Dylan was searching for new ideas and had the luxury of trying things out with these other musicians. There were no pretensions of making his next album or even making sellable recordings of any kind. At least half of these tracks don't even have a drummer. Many that do, have rudimentary time-keeping of a boom-chick variety that doesn't sound anything like a studio session drummer. And they seldom sound rehearsed. Bob would just start a song, any song, and some combination of the guys fell in. It's generally a pretty sloppy affair.

So why the myth? It exists because Dylan himself was at a creative peak. The time frame basically covers all of 1967. Before Levon Helm finally arrived late in the year (for the last fifth of the taping) the band is almost extraneous. Their performances, while sometimes more interesting than others, are usually not much more than a little bit of window dressing.

What's happening in this collection is all about Bob Dylan. He was brilliant. He drew upon a vast songbook from American folklore. He was brimming over with new ideas for original songs. And he was singing as well as any time in his life. A case could be made that these tracks would be just as good, if not better, had Dylan recorded them alone. But that argument holds no water because it was the surroundings, the situation that spurred on Bob's interest and desire to keep coming up with all these songs. Had he been alone it is doubtful that he'd have come up with such an extensive amount of material. Hanging out with The Band made it fun and more interesting. Though their musical contributions to most of these recordings are minimal and non-essential, their presence is important and pivotal.

You Ain't Goin' Nowhere.

The so-called basement tapes were made during 1967, after Dylan had withdrawn to his Woodstock home in the aftermath of a motorcycle accident on July 29, 1966. This convalescence is also likely to have been triggered by a need to slow down and leave the intensity of touring and super-stardom that was threatening Dylan's well-being. It's possible that he used the bike wreck to his advantage as a handy excuse for dropping out of sight for an extended sabbatical.

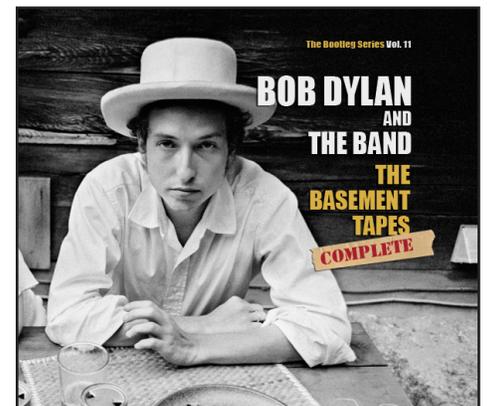
Though not touring, there were still commercial pressures. Dylan said in a 1969 interview with *Rolling Stone*: "They were demos. I was being pushed again into coming up with some songs." In October 1967, a fourteen-song demo tape was copyrighted and the compositions were registered with Dwarf Music, a publishing company jointly owned by Dylan and his manager Albert Grossman. Acetates and tapes of the songs then circulated among interested recording artists.

The songs on the first demo were: "Million Dollar Bash", "Yea! Heavy and a Bottle of Bread", "Please Mrs. Henry", "Down in the Flood", "Lo and Behold", "Tiny Montgomery", "This Wheel's on Fire", "You Ain't Goin' Nowhere", "I Shall Be Released", "Tears of Rage", "Too Much of Nothing", "The Mighty Quinn", "Open the Door, Homer" and "Nothing Was Delivered".

Peter, Paul and Mary had the first hit with one of these songs when their cover of "Too Much of Nothing" reached

number 35 on the *Billboard* chart in late 1967. Ian & Sylvia, also managed by Grossman, recorded "Tears of Rage", "Quinn the Eskimo" and "This Wheel's on Fire". In January 1968, Manfred Mann reached number one on the UK pop chart with their recording of "The Mighty Quinn". In April, "This Wheel's on Fire", recorded by Julie Driscoll, Brian Auger and the Trinity, hit number five on the UK chart. That same month, a version of "You Ain't Goin' Nowhere" by the Byrds was issued as a single. Along with "Nothing Was Delivered", it appeared on their landmark country-rock album "Sweetheart of the Rodeo", released in August. The Hawks, officially renamed the Band, recorded "This Wheel's on Fire", "I Shall Be Released" and "Tears of Rage" for their debut album, *Music from Big Pink*, released in July 1968. Fairport Convention covered "Million Dollar Bash" on their 1969 album "Unhalfbricking". The Byrds released "This Wheel's On Fire" on March 5th, 1969 as the opening track on "Dr. Byrds & Mr. Hyde".

In July 1969, the first rock bootleg appeared in California, entitled "Great White Wonder". The double album consisted of seven songs from the Woodstock basement sessions, plus some early recordings Dylan had made in Minneapolis in December 1961 and one track recorded from *The Johnny Cash Show*. One of those responsible for the bootleg, identified only as Patrick, talked to *Rolling Stone*: "Dylan is a heavy talent and he's got all those songs nobody's ever heard. We thought we'd take it upon ourselves to make this music available." The process of bootlegging Dylan's work would eventually see the illegal release of hundreds of live and studio recordings, and lead the Recording Industry Association of America to describe Dylan as the most bootlegged artist in the history of the music industry.



Though often referred to as monumental recordings, in truth the performances weren't approached with any kind of gravity, and are best listened to less reverently. There are moments of revelation and beauty from a significant artist, but there are also many throwaways."

I Shall Be Released.

The basement recordings became the basis for Dylan's 1975 official release "The Basement Tapes". When Columbia Records prepared the album for official release, eight songs recorded solely by the Band—in various locations between 1967 and 1975—were added to sixteen songs taped by Dylan and the Band in 1967. Overdubs were added in 1975 to all of it. "The Basement Tapes" was critically acclaimed upon release, and reached number seven on the *Billboard* 200 album chart.

After the official 1975 release, more than 100 recordings from the Basement Tapes began to circulate in bootleg form, catalogued by Greil Marcus in his book *Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes* (1997), and by Sid Griffin in *Million Dollar Bash: Bob Dylan, the Band, and the Basement Tapes* (2007).

As the true story unfolded, the 1975 album has been criticized for the omission of some of Dylan's best-known 1967 compositions and the inclusion of material by the Band that was not recorded in Woodstock. The interspersed tracks by the Band tend to disrupt the unity of Dylan material. And key Dylan songs were missing, including "I Shall Be Released", "The Mighty Quinn", "I'm Not There" and "Sign On The Cross". The album as released hardly gave the full idea of what they had been doing in Woodstock. And there were no 1967 Band recordings without Dylan. That is a re-writing of history.

Among the well over 100 songs taped, Dylan recorded around thirty new compositions that year with the Hawks. These include some of the most celebrated songs of his career. Two featured his lyrics set to music by members of the Band. Danko wrote the music of "This Wheel's on Fire". Manuel composed "Tears of Rage". He described how Dylan "came down to the basement with a piece of typewritten paper ... and he said, 'Have you got any music for this?' ... I had a couple of musical movements that fit ... so I elaborated a bit, because I wasn't sure what the lyrics meant. I couldn't run upstairs and say, 'What's this mean, Bob: "Now the heart is filled with

gold as if it was a purse"?"

"The Basement Tapes" is decidedly different from contemporaneous works in its simple, down-to-earth sound. The songs were recorded in mid-1967, the psychedelic "Summer of Love" that produced the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, their most technically elaborate album. In a 1978 interview, Dylan reflected on the period: "I didn't know how to record the way other people were recording, and I didn't want to. The Beatles had just released "Sgt. Pepper" which I didn't like at all. I thought that was a very indulgent album, though the songs on it were real good. I didn't think all that production was necessary."

These recordings represented a radical change of direction for Dylan, who had been incorporating avant-garde ideas into popular culture. He retreated to the countryside and an idea of musical timelessness

In the early 1970s, Dylan released new recordings of five compositions from the Basement Tape era: live performances of "Minstrel Boy" and "Quinn the Eskimo" from the Isle of Wight Festival on August 31, 1969, appeared on "Self Portrait", and October 1971 recordings with Happy Traum of "You Ain't Goin' Nowhere", "I Shall Be Released" and "Down in the

Flood" appeared on "Bob Dylan's Greatest Hits Vol. II".

"The Basement Tapes" provides a window, the missing link between "Blonde On Blonde" and "John Wesley Harding", two albums separated by a year and a half, both recorded in Nashville with the same rhythm section, yet worlds apart in style and content. It also is the origin of The Band. Had that bar band from Canada called The Hawks not been involved with Dylan in Woodstock during this time, they would probably not have transformed into the classic group they became. They owe that metamorphosis to Bob Dylan.

So, finally, after all these years CBS has released a 6CD box set of "The Basement Tapes Complete". At last anyone who is interested can listen to everything that Bob and The Band put to tape that watershed year of 1967. And in far better fidelity than any previous version. There was no artist in the world more highly regarded and respected among the young cognoscenti of the music world (which was exploding) than the former Robert Zimmerman. This stuff triggered the bootleg market and led the way into the next phase: one of introspection and roots-based creativity. Dylan's influence is impossible to overstate.

