

Bob Dylan - Bring It All Back Home

1. Subterranean Homesick Blues
2. She Belongs to Me
3. Maggie's Farm
4. Love Minus Zero/No Limit
5. Outlaw Blues
6. On the Road Again
7. Bob Dylan's 115th Dream
8. Mr. Tambourine Man
9. Gates of Eden
10. It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)

11. It's All Over Now, Baby Blue

Bringing It All Back Home, the 1965 album in which Bob Dylan broke free from the shackles of acoustic music and began his gradual drift away from the out-and-out protest song, represents a perfect marriage between two genres which, up to the record's release, had never been brought together in such a way. To fans of Dylan, this is no revelation — Bringing It All Back Home is, after all, commonly held up as the album that gave rise to the 'folk-rock' movement. But it is not for its influence on a host of mid-sixties bands that this album is significant. Roger McGuinn did not base the Byrds' distinctive music on Bringing It All Back Home; he based it on a combination of Dylan's lyrics, the Beatles' sound, and his own unique guitar skills and techniques (and beyond the Byrds' early music, folk-rock was and is too broad a category to be pinned down to one founding record). No — Dylan's first electric album is important more because of its place in Dylan's own canon. In fact, we should first take a step back, and remember that Dylan first performed several of the songs that were to feature on Bringing It All Back Home during his 1964 acoustic tour. He had already recorded Another Side of Bob Dylan, an album which took him away from his straight protest song period and into a more reflective song-writing phase, in which he penned introspective love songs as well as more complex political songs (for example Chimes of Freedom). But Another Side of was still exclusively an acoustic affair, and the first songs he wrote for its successor were initially played acoustic as well — for instance Mr. Tambourine Man, and It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding). Such songs feature on side two of Bringing It All Back Home — where Dylan actually plays acoustic, but with subtle electric touches. In this sense, Bringing It All Back Home acts as some sort of precursor to Blonde on Blonde, in which Dylan achieved his goal of "That wild, that thin mercury sound". But Bringing It All Back Home was recorded without the guitar sensitivities that Robbie Robertson would bring to Dylan's 1966 recordings, and it must be considered as an album in its own right — not as a rehearsal for what came later. Because such songs are notable less for their musical arrangement, and more for the sheer poetry and vision contained within. Mr. Tambourine Man needs little introduction, but the familiarity with which it is regarded — by Dylan aficionados and casual music followers alike — means that it is often over-looked as a work of art. The song is some kind of trip, but also a plea — Dylan recalls the writings of the Beat Generation poets as he seems to reach out for the fulfilment of a dream, which fuses a very personal empire, bleak historical visions and the simple pleasure of dancing beneath the starlight. Quite where he is going, nobody can say — setting a pattern for much of Dylan's future work. It's Alright Ma is evidence of a more mature and nuanced approach to politics — Dylan aims broadsides at the phoney morality of teachers, preachers, religion and the press (to name but a few) — but he can find less in the way of concrete solutions, instead resigning himself to his own internal self-confidence and leaving others to get on with their inadequate lives. The other half of Bringing It All Back Home is in the style for which the whole album has become famous — it is mostly a brilliant bluesy romp through seven songs. But that is not to say that Dylan's lyrical genius is any less important here. In what is probably the most inventive of his blues songs from the mid-sixties, Dylan uses Bob Dylan's 115th Dream to tell a hilarious tale of a trip which starts, apparently, aboard The Mayflower. The journey has a more definite pattern than the one described in Mr. Tambourine Man, but nonetheless, Dylan's surreal imagination runs riot. His use of historical figures like Columbus would return later in the year in the song Desolation Row (from Highway 61 Revisited) — but 115th Dream is much more entertaining, with its fast and driven bluesy style. Dylan's development as a political philosopher/activist — as opposed to just a demonstrator — is further highlighted in Subterranean Homesick Blues and Maggie's Farm. It was these songs which, more than any others, gave rise to criticism of Dylan by the politico-folk traditionalists, as they are protest songs recorded with electric guitars. How was this possible? The bluesy rapping in Subterranean and the very personal industrial action in Maggie's Farm showed that an electric protest song could do things an acoustic one could not — it could shout. Let us not forget Bringing It All Back Home's love songs. Taking the excitement level down a notch or two, Dylan uses She Belongs To Me and Love Minus Zero to describe very particular lovers — the star of the latter song is an engaging and low-key character who Dylan appears to appreciate for her ability to remove herself from all of the hangers-on, the people seeking a piece of Dylan, and the result of his musings on her is an unassuming song which cannot fail to strike a chord with its listeners. In both songs, Dylan demonstrates his capacity for writing very complex songs and making them flow very easily and naturally. These songs bear repeated listening, which in my case is just as well — as a child, I had double-exposure to She Belongs To Me, as my parents' copy of Bob Dylan's Greatest Hits was faulty and contained the song twice, at the expense of Just Like a Woman. The songs that have yet to be mentioned should not be over-looked — Outlaw Blues, Gates of Eden and It's All Over Now, Baby Blue are no less remarkable than their peers — but by this point, readers should be itching to listen to the album, and so I will not dwell further on these tracks. Bringing It All Back Home combines blues, folk, introspection, politics,

humour, poetry, a very tight band, vivid characterisations, and originality. Most albums that are deemed at least 'good' contain some of these elements, but very few display them all. These ingredients, and many more, jump out at you when listening to Bringing It All Back Home, and for this reason it must be considered a truly great album of rock and roll music.

About the Author

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