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EXHIBITION REVIEW | 'BOB DYLAN'S AMERICAN JOURNEY'

Inside the Museum, Dylan's Youth Goes on Display

By [JON PARELES](#)

On Nov. 4, 1961, after working in Greenwich Village clubs, [Bob Dylan](#) made his New York City concert debut at Carnegie Chapter Hall (now the Kaplan Space, used for rehearsals). It held 225 people; fewer than 55 showed up. Less than two years later, he was the reigning star of the protest-song movement and the folk revival. Another two years, and a generation would be arguing over whether it was right for him to go electric — not that he would pay any attention.

“Bob Dylan’s American Journey, 1956-1966,” an exhibition at the [Morgan Library](#) and Museum through Jan. 6, revisits Mr. Dylan’s headlong trajectory through the early 1960’s, giving visitors a close-up view of a writer and songwriter at work.

The exhibition, which originated at the Experience Music Project in Seattle, doesn’t challenge conventional wisdom. “Born into changing times, Bob Dylan shaped history in song,” it announces, and there’s no caviling or second-guessing through each phase, up to Mr. Dylan’s 1966 motorcycle accident and reclusion. For context, there are segments on the folk revival, McCarthyism and the civil rights movement.

It’s the same era covered by the [Martin Scorsese](#) documentary “No Direction Home,” with roughly the same perspective: that Mr. Dylan soaked up everything instantaneously, intersected briefly with the well-meaning folk revival, but was always on his own path. “People often say first time that this isn’t folk music,” he told Izzy Young from the Folklore Center in Greenwich Village for program notes at the Carnegie Chapter Hall concert. “My songs aren’t easy to listen to.”

Where “No Direction Home” echoed the tumult of the 1960’s, the museum show allows contemplation instead. There’s a listening station offering that 1961 concert, which has never been officially released; a self-effacing but clearly confident Mr. Dylan yodels gleefully through “Freight Train Blues.”

Listening stations also offer illuminating comparisons: [Woody Guthrie](#)’s “1913 Massacre” alongside the same melody in Mr. Dylan’s “Song for Woody,” and Mr. Dylan singing “No More Auction Block,” the melody he would extend for “Blowin’ in the Wind.” A video station has clips from “Don’t Look Back,” the documentary of Mr. Dylan’s 1965 tour of England, and from the rarer, unreleased “Eat the Document,” made a year later.

The exhibition includes staples of rock museumcraft: instruments, discs, posters. A map of Greenwich Village shows how six square blocks held the folk-revival universe. Pictures of Woody Guthrie and Arthur Rimbaud reveal the sources of iconic Dylan poses.

A few explanatory labels draw overreaching conclusions, including one about Ramblin’ Jack Elliott, a

Woody Guthrie disciple like the young Mr. Dylan: “Elliott was so well established playing Guthrie songs that Dylan realized he would need to write his own songs to make an impression.” (Mr. Dylan might have become a songwriter anyway.) A Turkish tambourine owned by the New York studio musician Bruce Langhorne is cited as one inspiration for “Mr. Tambourine Man,” but it’s just a round drum, with nothing to jingle-jangle.

The exhibition’s most telling artifacts are the manuscripts: songs in progress, written or typed on whatever paper was at hand. They reveal how Mr. Dylan sharpened every line. “Gates of Eden,” crammed in small, neat lettering on the back of a sheet of Holiday Inn stationery, wasn’t finished yet: “All men are kings inside the gates of Eden,” it reads, later to be changed to the grimmer “There are no kings inside the gates of Eden.”

A page of “Like a Rolling Stone,” famously a torrent of words before it was distilled into the song, has only the phrase “How does it feel” from the eventual lyrics. An early version of “Don’t Think Twice, It’s All Right” was just called “It’s All Right,” and in its margins Mr. Dylan was trying to decide between “Alright” and “All Right.”

Like “No Direction Home,” the exhibition is full of reminders of how seriously music was treated at the time. For the folkies, each song was a manifesto, each change a matter of high stakes. An account of Mr. Dylan’s epochal 1965 Newport Folk Festival appearance in the folk music magazine *Sing Out!* was far from uncomprehending: “‘The people’ so loved by Pete Seeger are ‘the mob’ so hated by Dylan,” Jim Rooney wrote. The folkies, he continued, “seemed to understand that night for the first time what Dylan has been trying to say for over a year — that he is not theirs or anyone else’s.” He concluded: “He shook us. And that’s why we have poets and artists.”

The only one taking it lightly, or trying to, was Mr. Dylan himself. The exhibition’s postscript is a video outtake from “Eat the Document”: Mr. Dylan in a London alley, making Dadaist poetry out of a dog groomer’s advertising sign. Inspired and silly, a genius even when he’s goofing around, he cracks himself up.

“Bob Dylan’s American Journey, 1956-1966” continues through Jan. 6 at the Morgan Library and Museum, 225 Madison Avenue, at 36th Street; (212) 685-0008.

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