



# Like a Complete Unknown: The Poetry of Bob Dylan's Songs, 1961-1969

*John Hinchey*

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This study explores the poetry of Dylan's songs from his first album, *Bob Dylan* (1962), through *Nashville Skyline* (1969). It covers all the officially released albums of new material from that period. Some attention is given to almost every original song on those albums, and to some songs--singles, outtakes, demos, and other stray songs--not included on the albums.

The first chapter treats only a single song, "Like a Rolling Stone," and the second covers Dylan's first two albums, both of which are miscellanies. After that, each chapter treats a single album (though the discussion of *Blonde on Blonde* takes up two chapters), and in these chapters, some attention is given both to the individual songs and to their place in the context of the album. Decisions about what to emphasize and what to gloss over are based partly on Hinchey's judgments about the relative worth of each song or album and partly on his instinct for what is interesting or undiscovered about them.

Given Dylan's history of perpetual self-transformation as an artist, the critical approach is necessarily flexible, varying from album to album and even song to song. But there is a recurrent theme. The most distinctive feature of Dylan's poetry, Hinchey argues, is the way it is implicitly shaped by the changes (as Dylan imagines them) that are induced in his listener in response to the song as it unfolds. As the lyric unfolds, "you," the listener, are changed by what "you" hear, and anticipating these changes in the "you" he is addressing, Dylan's perception of and attitude toward "you" changes correspondingly. Moreover, these changes in his perception of "you" provoke in turn adjustments in his perception of and attitude toward himself. Dylan's characteristic song is seen as a duet for solo voice.

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