

“Look here, you bunch of basement noise”: Bob Dylan plays underground

Alessandro Bratus

alessandro.bratus@gmail.com

Università di Pavia (Cremona)

Abstract

Bob Dylan's *Basement Tapes* came at a critical stage of the singer's career, in the shift from a production strictly based on folk-revival models to a new way of song writing, drawing on a new electric sound presented live and in the recordings of 1965. In this article a brief analytical survey of four songs from that period gives an overall indication about how to look at this repertoire and about its place in the context of the singer's career, as well as in the history of American popular song.

Keywords: The Band; Basement Tapes, American popular music, folk-revival, song analysis, creative process, song writing, analytical method.

Introduction

Bob Dylan's *Basement Tapes*¹ came at a critical stage of the singer's career, in the shift from a production strictly based on folk-revival models to a new way of song writing. Their roots could be linked with the 'electric sound' presented in the recordings of 1965, when - in July of that year - Dylan took part in the Newport Folk Festival with an electric backing-band. The former 'Spokesperson for a Generation', as the critics and the fans nicknamed him for his engagement in political and social causes, now seemed to betray his own folk-revival roots. In the following months Dylan was to start out a very demanding tour. For these shows he split the set into two parts, the first acoustic, just him and his guitar alone on stage, and the second with the electric group The Hawks, usually received with noisy protests by the audience.

As had already happened at the Newport Folk Festival, the problem concerned the ideological interpretation of Bob Dylan's art. The critics and the people who acknowledged him as an important voice in the folk-revival movement now felt his change to electric music was as good as treason, a

rejection of the political and social engagement expressed during the first phases of his artistic life. In June 1966 a motorcycle accident stopped this real *tour de force*, leaving the singer stuck in Woodstock, where he was spending time between the European leg of the tour and the American dates planned for the ensuing months. Neither Dylan nor his management ever made clear the facts of this event in his biography, but what happened brought his live performances to an abrupt halt for the next eight years, until 1974. However, such a withdrawal did not mean an interruption in Dylan's career: in this period he recorded albums like *John Wesley Harding* and *Nashville Skyline*, and he devoted himself to the composition of a large number of songs with his band, collectively known as the *Basement Tapes*. These are a collection of about 130 original songs and covers from various American popular music genres. The name of these recordings comes from the fact that they were made using spare rooms and basements in the musicians' houses, duly converted into improvised studios.

1. Looking for a method: theoretical statements and analytical tools

Besides representing a key stage in Dylan's and The Band's career, the *Basement Tapes* are interesting as an object of scientific study because they can be approached using the analytical tools of both musicology and ethnomusicology. Before tracing their specific features with reference to both these branches of learning, we need first to ask about the status of what is being analyzed and what are the most reliable concepts to do it. For a preliminary problematisation of this issue, I first refer to Philip Tagg's (1982) "axiomatic triangle" (Table 1, with the list of the main characteristics of classical, folk and popular music), where one can clearly see how the *Basement Tapes* fall between the last two categories, as an object with ambiguous features. With the term "folk", Tagg refers to those musical practices mainly transmitted by oral tradition and belonging to a well-defined local community; while with "popular" he means the music produced in a mass-media-based, industrial society, in most cases recorded on a phonogram, in the context of the contemporary global society.

Table 1: Differences and congruencies between popular and folk music, adapted from Tagg (1982).

Characteristics	Folk	Popular
- Produced and transmitted by	primarily amateurs	primarily professionals
- Mass Distribution	unusual	usual
- Main mode of storage and distribution	oral transmission	recorded sound
- Type of society in which the category of music mostly occur	nomadic or agrarian	industrial
- Written theory and aesthetics	uncommon	uncommon
- Composer / author	anonymous	non-anonymous

Generally speaking, the only common characteristic between popular and folk music is the lack of a prearranged theoretical and aesthetical system, because they both pertain to different oral transmission systems, neither necessarily subordinate to musical notation. Apart from that, the categories listed by Tagg are mixed in the *Basement Tapes* - no one of them can be used alone to define these recordings as a whole. Starting with their production and transmission, on the one hand, these songs are the result of collaboration between professional musicians, while on the other hand one could consider them amateurish, as the relaxed attitude of the group shows when they were working on them - without a producer or a manager in charge of the whole operation. Here no one but the musicians is responsible for what happens in the studio, following the contemporary tendency towards the appropriation of the recording studio by the artists, with examples ranging from The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967) to Jimi Hendrix's *Electric Ladyland* (1968), amongst others.² It is worth noticing that in the *Basement Tapes* this fact does not lead to a massive experimentation with technology, in order to obtain an ideal performance of a song. It simply gives the musicians the opportunity to work for as long as they want on their compositions, emphasising the concept of the work of art as a craft product. Although all the people involved in the recordings being professional musicians, the compositional habits reveal their closeness to the traditional rather than to the popular music field. The same ambivalence emerges when one considers the distribution of these recordings, originally intended to be songs covered from other singers and groups in the context of an industrial production system. At the same time their restricted circulation actually implies the reference to a very specialized audience rather than a mass one. From the point of view of storage and distribution the *Basement Tapes* are about recorded sound, like the greater part of modern popular music. But the songs were learned by the musicians from Dylan himself, so at least a part of their transmission can be labelled an oral process, another peculiarity of folk music. Finally, also in regard to the personal attribution of these songs, the repertoire exemplifies a situation where typical folk and popular attributes are not so easily differentiated. As we learn from the copyright records, most of these songs are credited to Dylan (in a few cases in collaboration with a member of The Band) while the effective recorded result is obviously a product of collective work, of collaboration between all the musicians in the studio.

My specific interest is in these recordings as audio artefacts and evidence of a single performance of a given song led me to approach the *Basement Tapes* primarily as musical objects. From this perspective it is possible to investigate them with the analytical tools inherited from “traditional” musicological studies - but they must be used very carefully, considering how they can be adapted to fit the specific features of popular music. This consideration is very important in disciplinary fields that has been:

[...] dominated by cultural critics and sociologists, many of whom do not possess the specialized skills necessary to deal with the musical ‘texts’ in the ways that musicologists do. These scholars tend to be concerned with the effect of musics on listeners, and on the ways in which musics can have various kind of significance within cultures and subcultures; and they treat the music, in the words of John Sheperd, as a kind of ‘inscrutable black box’ (Covach, 2001, pp. 454-455).

Turning the prevailing attitude in the history of the popular music studies upside down, Covach (2001, p. 466) believes in the crucial role of musicology for the investigation of this object “as inherently musical, and only secondarily social”. This statement is drawn on as one of the basic theoretical assumptions for my analysis of the *Basement Tapes*, according to an approach in which, to cite Covach (2001, p. 466) again: “The challenge then becomes the investigation of popular music along traditional musicological lines while maintaining a careful sensitivity to how popular music may differ from art-music in its specifically musical dimensions”.

This is not an attempt to “legitimate” popular music in a disciplinary field still deeply concerned with value judgments, but rather to include the *Basement Tapes* in a knowledge system that already possesses all the conceptual tools to explain the structures of Bob Dylan's & The Hawks' songs, as well as the greater part of Anglo-American rock repertoire. The problem, therefore, does not lie in a new definition of musicology as a whole, but rather in understanding how tools already developed for the study of art music can be applied to different cultural practices. My hope in doing so is not to “bridge the gap” between musicology and popular music studies, as Richard Middleton (1993) did, but rather to pull down these boundaries, which are the extreme consequences of persistent cultural prejudices regarding all music outside the Western art music tradition. Stefano La Via, in his book devoted to the analysis of the relationship between music and poetry in both art and popular music, wrote:

Too often scholars involved in their respective field are inclined to close themselves in a narrow and specialized disciplinary niche, only helping to build and reinforce those walls that all the great writers, composers, songwriters have tried to pull down, establishing many fruitful and revitalizing opportunities for mutual communication (La Via, 2006 [CD-Rom], p. 14).³

In setting up the analytical framework for my analysis of the *Basement Tapes*, I chose to consider them as multi-layered objects, in which music, words, stylistic and recording features work together to build different levels of meaning. In addition, I attempt to underline the connections between the various elements of a song. The homologies and discrepancies in the treatment of different features form a dynamic system through which one can investigate an object in all its inner complexity, not only from a structural point of view, but also take into account its historical context and technological qualities.

The multi-layered method is inspired by Rob Bowman's (1995) article about the analysis of the Stax sound, where he uses a similar approach focusing on a very extensive repertoire produced in the same place, by a limited number of people, with common instrumentation and sound - like the *Basement Tapes*. But, in the first phases of my analysis, I had to adapt Bowman's method according to both the specific features of the *Basement Tapes* and the goals of my research. In Bowman's works the analysis of Stax songs from 1960 to 1974 is designed to study the style of a particular record label between the 60's and the 70's, while for me style is another analytical tool to draw connections between Dylan & The Hawks' recordings and the

entire American popular music tradition, from folk and blues material onwards. Bowman examines his subject by means of nine spheres of interest, all related to different stylistic devices, from the arrangement to the recording technique, but I choose to reduce them in number and extend their width. So I restricted my attention to four general categories:

1. micro- and macro-formal construction of lyrics (verses, choruses, rhymes, metrics, etc.);
2. musical construction, concerning the harmony, scale, arrangement, structure of vocal melody in connection with the verbal text sections;
3. stylistic influences, both internal and external to the singer's production;
4. sound characteristics, especially dealing with the sound sources' disposition and the “sound box” of the recordings.⁴

The main difference in my method is the addition of the lyric content, which plays a fundamental part in constructing the structural and semantic meaning in a song by Bob Dylan; its significance is also clear if one takes into account the influence of his writing techniques on the following generations of musicians. Furthermore, in these recordings words and music are joined together to form a musical-poetical structure in its own right, that needs to be unitarily analysed to discover the reciprocal ties. The lyrics are moreover interesting for their relationship with the musical macro-form and also for the allusions to and citations from other songs, suggesting stylistic references to the rest of the popular music repertoire and its attached ideological or aesthetical meaning.

2. Four analytical examples: a survey of the *Basement Tapes*

According to such analytical assumptions and following a consideration all the songs in the *Basement Tapes*, I chose to focus attention on four pieces, using them to outline the most important aspects of this repertoire as a whole. The songs were selected for their paradigmatic value, because each of them can give some useful hints to gain a better understanding of the Dylan/Hawks' production in Woodstock throughout 1967. The best way to approach this analysis is to briefly run through the list of the examples, summarising the reasons that led me to make certain choices and the conclusions I reached.

2.1. ‘Apple Suckling Tree’ and the folk heritage

The first example is ‘Apple Suckling Tree’, an original song based on an adaptation of the English nursery rhyme *Froggie Went A-Courtin*.⁵ This fact confirms the poetic and musical significance of folk material for the *Basement Tapes*' original compositions, as well as for Bob Dylan's former career. This

was also an important issue in the historical-biographic background of the recordings examined, which come immediately after the move to Dylan's new electric sound of 1965-66 when he began to abandon the most committed fringe groups of the folk-revival. From an analysis of the transformations that occurred in traditional compositions and ballads, I realized that Dylan's supposed "conversion" to electric sound was not coupled with a radical change of mind regarding his compositional habits. The folk tune is subjected to a strong process of elaboration and creative appropriation, but this is a constant feature of Dylan's song writing, ever since his first album, which was recorded five years before the *Basement Tapes*.

There are many resemblances between 'Apple Suckling Tree' and *Froggie Went A-Courtin'*, such as the general melodic contour, the lyric text devoted to unrealistic situations, the blending between the traditional melody from England and the blues features. This last point is especially interesting and it deserves closer attention because, on the one hand, in the *Basement Tapes* as a whole the blues seems a sort of "lingua franca", which allows Dylan to mix together different genres of the American song repertoire and, on the other hand, the versions of *Froggie Went A-Courtin'* found in the US folk tradition are also strongly influenced by blues language. In 'Apple Suckling Tree' this is clear in the AAB form of the stanzas, in the chord pattern, in the modal frame of the melody (with what Gerhard Kubik would call "flexible third" F-F#),⁶ in the call-and-response construction typical of vocal and organ parts. The AAB pattern of the sung lyric is a well-known typical device of blues stanzas, which also share the same organizational scheme and chord patterns, exactly as happens in *Froggie Went A-Courtin'*. As Paul Oliver writes in his definition of this poetic and musical form in the latest online edition of *The New Grove*:

Apparently this form crystallized in the first decade of the 20th century as a three-line stanza in which the second line repeated the first, thus enabling the blues singer to improvise a third, rhyming line while singing the second:

I'm troubled in mind, baby, feelin' blue and sad /
I'm troubled in mind, baby, feelin' blue and sad /
The blues ain't nothin' but a good man feelin' bad
(Oxford Music Online, 2009).

The example given by Oliver is easily comparable with the 'Apple Suckling Tree' verse, if we subdivide it according to the following table:

Table 2: 'Apple Suckling Tree' verse compared to blues AAB rhyme scheme.

A	Old man sailin' in a dinghy boat down there
A	Old man down is sailin' a hook on there
B	Gonna pull man down on a suckling hook And under basin of a peeling brook Oh yeah!

The AAB pattern, with the repetition of a given element in the first two lines and conclusion in the third part of the verse, is used both in the verse and in the chorus of the songs. Besides sharing an identical scheme in the verbal

text, in ‘Apple Suckling Tree’ and in the blues all the verbal stanzas are sung over the same chord pattern, another sign of the closeness between the Afro-American genre and Dylan's song. In this respect, it is also important to note that there is a meaningful correspondence between the form of the harmonic pattern and the overall shape of the single verse/chorus. The B section of the verse actually coincides with the final IV-I-V-I cadenza of the chord sequence, as in the chorus the same part of the text begins with an instrumental break, emphasising this fundamental link in the song structure from a musical and verbal point of view. Moreover, a comparison between the chord pattern and modal framework of the blues and of ‘Apple Suckling Tree’ confirms the stylistic similarity with this antecedent:

Table 3: Confronting ‘Apple Suckling Tree’ with the blues harmonic pattern.

D	D	D	A	→ (I-V)
D	G	D - A	D	→ (I-IV-I-V-I)

I	I	I	I
IV	IV	I	I
V	V	I	I

In the table above I compare the ‘Apple Suckling Tree’ chord pattern with the twelve-bar model according to Van Der Merwe’s definition of the latter as the “standard blues pattern”, whereas the eight- (“Gregory Walker pattern”) and sixteen-bar sequences, common in many blues-derived songs, are interpreted as variations on that basic scheme (1994, pp. 198-204). In this perspective, it seemed better to me to confront the song’s harmonic structure with what has been acknowledged as a sort of “original” blues pattern, and to look at the process by which Dylan adapted this “universal” structure to his expressive aims, rather than to compare the formal organization of ‘Apple Suckling Tree’ with an eight-bar pattern, which is derivative in respect to the twelve-bar model. In the song analyzed here the standard blues pattern is subjected to a slight transformation: the first four measures are essentially the same, with the insertion of the dominant in the fourth bar, while the subsequent four measures shorten the eight-bar IV-I-V-I cadenza of the original scheme. This process of creative elaboration of such model is understandable as a reduction of the blues pattern to match the expressive and formal requirements of Dylan's song, following a common device in popular and folk music:

One of the great forces in American music, both white and black, but especially black, is what one could call creative fragmentation. A tune is broken down into simpler and simpler elements, while, in compensation, these elements may develop a new complexity of their own (Van der Merwe, 1994, p. 203).

Finally, a musical example taken from 'Apple Suckling Tree' shows other shared features with the blues, i.e. the use of a call-and-response technique between the voice and the organ part. This fact confirms the crossbreeding between the folk model and the Afro-American genre, thus underlining the quality of such features as a common musical language capable of joining together different influences within the same song and, from a wider point of view, within the *Basement Tapes* repertoire as a whole.

The image displays a musical score for the song 'Apple Suckling Tree' #2, specifically measures 12-15. The score is written in G major (one sharp) and common time (C). It is divided into two systems. The first system shows the Voice part with the lyrics 'Pull man down on a cran - ky hook down there' and the Organ part with a rhythmic accompaniment. The second system shows the Voice part with the lyrics 'Pull man down like a cran - ky hook down there' and the Organ part with a more complex rhythmic accompaniment, including triplets. The organ part in both systems features a call-and-response structure with the voice.

Example 1: 'Apple Suckling Tree' #2, bb. 12-15 (voice and organ parts).

2.2. 'Clothesline Saga' and some intertextual relationships

I found a similar example of song writing inspired by pre-existent lyrical and musical material in the second item I examined, this time concerning a Summer 1967 hit: 'Ode To Billie Joe' by Bobbie Gentry. In this case Dylan composes an 'original' song that is not only the sum of the parts taken from his sources, but a new entity itself, in which those components are integrated in a coherent entity. From this point of view both 'Apple Suckling Tree' and 'Clothesline Saga' bring to mind the same "self-reflection" mechanism which can be found in both folk and contemporary American popular music production. Such intertextual ties among different songs have been identified by Richard Middleton (1990, p. 221), where he points them out as some of the basic processes through which the signification of a song is constructed as a large scale intertextual phenomenon, in which a series of connections ranging from literal quotation to veiled allusion are found. Furthermore, the reference to miscellaneous compositional models allowed me to realize just what extensive musical horizons Dylan and The Hawks drew on when writing their songs. This is also confirmed by a brief evaluation of the covers released on *The Genuine Basement Tapes* bootleg, coming from all the most representative American song genres. From this point of view, it is important to note that the classification presented in Table 4 it is not intended to offer a rigid categorization of the songs (that could be questioned): rather it aims to

show how wide-ranging are the examples covered by the band working in Woodstock.

These observations led me to define the compositional work carried out in this repertoire as mainly ‘intensional’, following the terminology presented in Andrew Chester's essay *For A Rock Aesthetic* (1970). Commenting on this article, Allan Moore wrote:

“Chester distinguished between ‘classical’ music (intentional composition), which consisted of small, indivisible musemes which were put together in additive fashion to form musical pieces, and ‘blues-derived’ music wherein large-scale structures underwent internal development through quasi-improvisatory practices (extensional composition). [...] Intentional construction pre-supposes an existent structure which will necessarily have an historical dimension, a dimension absent from the ‘extensional’ musemes (Moore, 1997).

From this theoretical approach and from the compositional behaviour in the *Basement Tapes* one can see that the processes that take place in Dylan/The Hawks' composition are not only the product of a reproduction, but they also deal with a certain degree of alteration and development, needed to make the new creation an object independent from the examples taken as inspiration; they have a historical dimension, which is a proper sign of their “intensionality”. It is by means of these kinds of relationships that a song forms its own message, using an existing model and developing it, until the new creation becomes an object independent from the sources taken as inspiration. In the same way, ‘Clothesline Saga’ is not merely shaped on ‘Ode to Billie Joe’, it actually *replies* to the Gentry song in many respects, starting from the subtitle, ‘(Answer to Ode)’. But there are also other shared features between the two songs:

- the textual organization of the single verse, that follows in both cases an AAB blues textual structure, with the first double A presenting a static situation, and the B section introducing the action (see Table 5). They have also the same rhyme scheme AABBC, and a sort of “documentary feel”, given by the dates mentioned in both lyrics.

Table 4: Covers in the *Basement Tapes* repertoire.

Genre	Title	Year	Lyricist-Composer	First, or most famous interpreter
ROCK'N'ROLL	<i>I Forgot To Remember To Forget</i>	1955	Stan Kesler - Charlie Feathers	Elvis Presley
	<i>Confidential</i>	1956	Dorinda Morgan	Sonny Knight
	<i>Silhouettes</i>	1957	Frank C. Slay Jr. - Bob Crewe	
	<i>All American Boy</i>	1959	Bill Parson - Orville Lunsford	
	<i>Baby Ain't That Fine</i>	1966	Dallas Frazier	Gene Pitney
Country	<i>Be Careful Of The Stones That You Throw</i>	1949	Bonnie Dodd	Little Jimmie Dickens
	<i>You Win Again</i>	1952	Hank Williams	John Lee Hooker
	<i>(Now And Then There's) A Fool Such as I</i>	1953	Bill Trader	Hank Snow
	<i>I Don't Hurt Anymore</i>	1954	Don Robertson - Jack Rollins	Hank Snow
	<i>Folsom Prison Blues</i>	1956	Johnny Cash	
	<i>Belshazar</i>	1957	Johnny Cash	
	<i>Big River</i>	1958	Johnny Cash	
	<i>Cool Water</i>	1959	Bob Nolan	Marty Robbins
	<i>Waltzing With Sin 1 & 2</i>	1963	Hayes - Burns	Cowboy Copas
	<i>Still In Town</i>		Hank Cochran - Harlan Howard	
Blues	<i>You Gotta Kickin' My Dog Around</i>	1916	Webb M. Oungst - Cy Perkins	Byron J. Harlan and the American Quartet
	<i>See That My Grave Is Kept Clean</i>	1928	trad./ "Blind Lemon" Jefferson	
	<i>I'm In The Mood</i>	1951	John Lee Hooker	
	<i>Flight Of The Bumble Bee</i>		Trad.	
Soul	<i>People Get Ready</i>	1965	Curtis Mayfield	The Impressions
Folk-revival	<i>Joshua Gone Barbados</i>	1963	Eric Von Schmidt	
	<i>The Bells Of Rhymney</i>	1965	Idris Davies - Pete Seeger	
	<i>Rock Salt And Nails</i>	1965	Bruce "U. Utah" Phillips	Rosalie Sorrels
Folk	<i>Bonnie Ship The Diamond</i>			
	<i>Come All Ye Far And Tender Ladies</i>			
	<i>Coming Round The Mountain</i>			
	<i>Down On Me</i>			
	<i>Going Down The Road</i>			
	<i>Hills Of Mexico</i>			
	<i>Johnny Todd</i>			
	<i>900 Miles</i>			
	<i>Ol' Roisin The Beau</i>			
	<i>Wildwood Flower</i>	1928	A. P. Carter	Carter Family
	<i>Young but Daily Growing</i>			
Classical (opera)	<i>The Royal Canal</i>	1954	Brendan Behan	

Table 5: First stanza of ‘Clothesline Saga’ and ‘Ode to Billie Joe’ verse compared to blues AAB rhyme scheme.

After a while we took in the clothes / And nobody said very much Just some old wild shirts and a couple pairs of pants / Which nobody really wanted to touch	A
Mama come in and picked up a book / An' Papa asked her what it was Someone else asked, "What do you care?" / Papa said, "Well, just because"	A
Then they started to take back their clothes / Hang 'em on the line It was January the thirtieth / And everybody was feelin' fine	B

It was the third of June, another sleepy, dusty Delta day. I was out choppin' cotton and my brother was balin' hay.	A
And at dinner time we stopped, and we walked back to the house to eat. And mama hollered at the back door "y'all remember to wipe your feet."	A
And then she said she got some news this mornin' from Choctaw Ridge Today Billy Joe MacAllister jumped off the Tallahatchie Bridge.	B

- the harmonic vocabulary of the songs is based only on the combination of tonic, subdominant and dominant chords. In ‘Clothesline Saga’ this results in a sequence that expands the standard 12-bar blues pattern to a 24-bar pattern. ‘Ode to Billie Joe’ is slightly different in this respect, since here there is a tonicisation of the dominant chord, but the basic compositional materials are the same.

Table 6: Comparing ‘Clothesline Saga’ and ‘Ode to Billie Joe’ harmonic pattern.

||: E	E	E	E :||
A	A	A	A
E	E	E	E
B	B	B	B
E	E	E	E

||: D	D	D	D :||
G	G	G	G
D	D	D	D
G	G	G	G
D	C	D	D

- the melodic line shows a static profile in both songs, with the exclusive use of intervals ranging from a second to a third. Also it is important to note that 'Clothesline Saga' and 'Ode to Billie Joe' share the same "grain" in the vocal presentation of the text, flat and cold, denying the emotional participation of the singer in the story he is telling the audience.

D

E

Exemple 2: 'Ode to Billie Joe' and 'Clothesline Saga', first melodic lines.

2.3. 'Lo And Behold' and the United States as an utopian nation

The third example I chose for my survey on the *Basement Tapes* is 'Lo And Behold', a song that shifted my main attention from formal reflections on the lyrical and musical dimension of the text to its verbal content. It is based on the travel theme, in this case the narration of a train journey through some U.S. cities and states, which is a real *topos* in American culture. Figure 3 visualizes the itinerary that Dylan describes in his song, a round-trip from San Antonio to Pittsburgh passing through Memphis.



Figure 1: 'Lo And Behold' Itinerary through the USA.

The main character of the song travels over the entire East Coast, from one end to the other - from the Mexican border to the Great Lakes region. In this way he moves through the part of the United States where the European settlers first established their cities - where the real American culture grew up from various sources, merging elements from both the Old World and from Africa. In addition, the itinerary is covered by train, another very important object in contemporary popular culture, which in the 19th century acquired significance in the popular imagery that cannot be ignored. During this period the myth of the railroad and the idea of a nation constantly growing westwards started to be closely associated. The rapid expansion of the major cities during those years was also a consequence of more effective connections between remote places, with spin-offs in the cultural and musical fields. In such a context it is important to bear in mind that the cities cited by Dylan in 'Lo And Behold' are all included in the part of the country where the rail system was first developed.⁷

Understanding how the subject of American identity has been handled in the *Basement Tapes* means becoming familiar with the expression of Dylan's identity as an American. This is a crucial point in a totality of recordings defined by Greil Marcus (1997) as a “map”, from which a new type of American song and an idea of an utopian nation emerges. It is also interesting to note that this attitude has a significant role in a phase of the singer's career when he stopped hoping for fast, radical social change. Keeping his political thoughts idealistic, Dylan showed no consideration at all for contemporary reality; he was deeply concerned about expressing a utopian struggle towards a social structure which was impossible to realize in a practical sense.⁸ In the social and political confusion of the United States in the mid-Sixties, what the singer looked for in a vision like that is the concept of the country as an aggregate of dissimilar experiences, consciences and aspirations, blended together by the sharing of the same social context. The tendency shown here is focused on an ideal democracy in which the folk ballad heroes and the freaks depicted in 'Apple Suckling Tree' and in 'Lo And Behold' can live side by side. For the formation of such an idea in Dylan's mind his folk-revival period seems to have been very important, as a musical and social movement that could connect all its participants in a wide, egalitarian network.

This song also enables me to give a meaningful example of the audio comparison between two versions of the same composition: they are pretty similar in terms of general structure, but when they are opened with digital software they look very different, as shown in Figure 4. The first image shows a song with a constant sound level in decibels for all its duration, while in the second image one can clearly see one climax for the whole song. Here the musicians are involved in another kind of large-scale organization, regarding the general shape of the composition as recorded sound, which is verifiable only with an analysis which also considers the sonic dimension of a composition, even though in a non-specialized and intuitive manner.

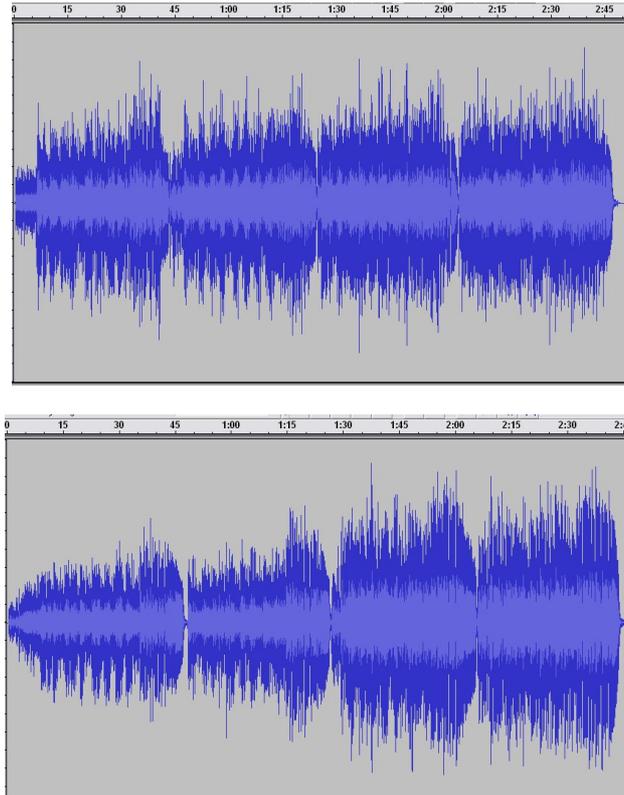


Figure 2: Audio file graphic representation (made with Audacity sound editor) of 'Lo And Behold' #1 and #2.

2.4. 'Tears of Rage' and the dynamics of composition in a popular song

The last example analyzed, 'Tears Of Rage', is one of the few songs released in three different interpretations on the bootleg I am using as the main source for my study, allowing me to delve deeper into observations related to the gradual elaboration of a song. The theoretical and practical dynamics in popular music composition are of rich thematic interest and are usually difficult to approach because of the restricted availability of recorded material preceding the official released record. In the case of 'Tears Of Rage' I had the opportunity of examining a song as a result of a coherent compositional project, discovering that the musicians are primarily concerned with achieving the best possible union between the general structure of the music and the lyrics, focusing their attention either on the macro-formal features of a song or on the micro-formal organization of the individual instrumental parts, depending on the different necessities of the individual song.

Figure 6 summarizes the overall shape of the three versions of 'Tears of Rage', gathering both their formal (marked by the column) and audio features (marked by the different lines on the left and right channel).

Table 7: 'Tears of Rage' #1/3, structural organization.

	Bars	1/4 (4)		5/20 (16)		21/30 (10)		31/46 (16)			47/55 (9)		56/71 (16)			72/29 (8)
			5/8	9/20	21/28	29/30	31/33	34/38	39/46			56/57	58/64	65/71		
Harmony		A		B		A			B		A			B		
Section	<i>Intro</i>	<i>Str. 1</i>		<i>Rit.</i>		<i>Str. 2</i>			<i>Rit.</i>		<i>Str. 3</i>			<i>Rit.</i>		
L	Piano	.....													
	Guitar 2	-----														
	Voice	—————														
R	Bass	—————														
	Bk. vocals				---				---				---			
	Guitar 1	-----	.....			.....			.....			.....
	Organ															

	Bars	1/4 (4)	5/20 (16)			21/29 (9)	30/45 (16)		46/53 (8)
			5/7	8/13	14/20				
Harmony		A			B	A		B	
Section	<i>Intro</i>	<i>Str. 1</i>			<i>Rit.</i>	<i>Str. 2</i>		<i>Rit.</i>	
L	Piano	.....						
	Guitar 2	-----							
	Voice	—————							
R	Bass	—————							
	Bk. vocals				---			---	
	Guitar 1	-----	.....		.....		.....
	Organ								

	Bars	1 (1)	2/17 (16)		18/25 (8)	26/41 (16)		42/49 (8)	50/65 (16)		66/73 (8)	74 (1)
						26/31	32/41		50/57	58/65		
Harmony		A	B	A		B		A		B		
Section	<i>Intro</i>	<i>Str. 1</i>	<i>Rit.</i>	<i>Str. 2</i>		<i>Rit.</i>		<i>Str. 3</i>		<i>Rit.</i>	<i>Coda</i>	
L	Piano	.....									
	Guitar 2	-----										
	Voice	—————										
R	Bass	—————										
	Bk. vocals		---		---		---		---		---	
	Guitar 1	-----	.....		.....		.....		.....		.....
	Organ											

Examining the three versions, it is possible to underline some crucial points:

- the introduction of the song is gradually reduced from four to one measure, in order to obtain a more concise expression of the same musical idea;
- the verse length is the same in all the versions, but the chorus does not have a regular duration: in the first version it can be composed by ten, nine or eight bars, in the second by nine or eight, in the third finally all the choruses consist of eight bars;
- in 'Tears of Rage' #2 there are some elements discarded in the first and third versions, like the ternary time signature and the presence of the backing vocals only in the chorus. In versions #1 and #3 the signature is in both cases binary and the choir, formed by Richard Manuel and Rick Danko, and starts to sing some vocals in the second half of the verse after the first chorus.
- in 'Tears of Rage' #3, the definitive one, the backing vocals has a louder volume than in the previous versions, revealing its structural role in the composition as a whole.

The dynamics implied in the transformations of 'Tears of Rage' are not an isolated phenomenon, but mirror a widespread situation in the repertoire considered. After a fairly complete survey of the recordings made in Woodstock during 1967 on the *Genuine Basement Tapes* bootleg, I was able to see that the other songs recorded frequently go along the same lines during their elaboration, as a product of a coherent compositional project. These songs are also offered as they are before the operations of mixing and mastering - required before commercial release - that were done for the official 1975 release. An analysis based on this kind of material allowed me to clearly identify what criteria led to the selection of certain compositional solutions instead of others, and to understand how the various constructional levels of a song are reciprocally correlated. All these considerations led me to understand that there is a consistent plan capable of joining all the phases documented in these recordings together, mainly linked with their overall communicative project, conceived *a priori* by its author or authors, and that this plan functions behind the song as a hidden system capable of linking different features of a song. From this point of view, I believe that such observations could may be applied not only to the *Basement Tapes*, but are also fully operational in other popular music repertoires, outlining tendencies and principles comparable with what happens in different examples and contexts.

Notes

1. In this article I will refer to the recordings as a whole as the *Basement Tapes*, while when I will speak about the double vinyl disc published in 1975 I use the official title *The Basement Tapes*.
2. This aesthetical attitude is an example of Dylan’s “negotiation of the relationship between past and present”, discussed by Zak (2004) comparing Dylan’s and Hendrix’s versions of *All Along the Watchtower*.
3. “*Troppo spesso gli studiosi impegnati nei due rispettivi versanti tendono, ancora oggi, a chiudersi nei loro angusti e specialistici abitacoli disciplinari, contribuendo solo ad innalzare e rafforzare quelle stesse muraglie cinesi che da sempre tutti i grandi letterati, compositori e poeti cantanti si sono sforzati di abbattere, riuscendo non di rado ad aprire autentici quanto fertili e rivitalizzanti varchi di mutua comunicazione.*”
4. The concept of “sound-box” as a tridimensional representation of the overall sound features is taken from Moore (2001, pp. 120-129).
5. “Froggie Went A-Courtin” would have been recorded by Dylan himself more than 25 years later, on *World Gone Wrong* (1993).
6. According to Kubik (1999, p. 125), in African-derived American music, a “flexible pitch area” is a peculiar feature of the scalar organization, where “two different pitches values are perceived by the singer as variants of one and the same toneme”. This is a feature not exclusive of Dylan’s song writing, but quite common in all the blues tradition where both thirds are often found in the same piece. Given the strong influence of the musical and formal language of the blues in the *Basement Tapes*, it is not surprising to find such a feature here, integrated with others at the crossroads between blues (especially for formal characteristics) and folk tradition (for song inspiration and setting).
7. As Katherine Preston (1998, p. 218) acknowledges in her account of the development of American music in XIX century, the rail system played a crucial role in spreading different cultural tendencies even in the most isolated regions of the United States. A brief survey of the train image in both popular and art music traditions has also been made by Paolo Prato (2003), who devotes a large part of the book discussing the American popular music repertoire.
8. About Dylan’s retreat from political concerns in these years, Mike Marqusee (2003, p. 268) speaks of a failure “of the Vietnam test posed to all Americans. He did turn away his head and pretend that he just didn’t see [...]”.

References

- Bowman, Rob. 1995. ‘The Stax Sound: A Musicological Analysis’, *Popular Music*, Vol.14, No. 3, pp. 285-320.
- Chester, Andrew. 1970. ‘For A Rock Aesthetic’, *New Left Review*, No. 59, pp. 83-96.
- Covach, John. 2001. ‘Popular Music, Unpopular Musicology’, in Cook, N. & Everist, M. eds. *Rethinking Music*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 452-470.
- Kubic, Gerhard. 1999. *Africa and the Blues*, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson.
- La Via, Stefano. 2006. *Poesia per musica e musica per poesia. Dai trovatori a Paolo Conte*, Carocci, Roma.
- Marcus Greil. 1997. *Invisible Republic. Bob Dylan’s Basement Tapes*, Henry Holt & C, New York.
- Marqusee, Mike. 2003. *Wicked Messenger. Bob Dylan And The 1960s*, Seven Stories, New York.

- Merwe, Peter (Van Der). 1994. *Origins Of The Popular Style: The Antecedents Of Twentieth-Century Popular Music*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Middleton, Richard. 1990. *Studying Popular Music*, Milton Keynes, Open University Press.
- Middleton, Richard. 1993. 'Popular Music Analysis and Musicology: Bridging the Gap', *Popular Music*, Vol. 12, No. 2, pp. 177-190.
- Moore, Allan. 1997. 'Anachronism, Responsibility And Historical "Intension"', *Critical Musicology*, <<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/music/info/critmus/articles/1997/03/01.html>> [Accessed 12 May 2010]
- Moore, Allan. 2001. *Rock: The Primary Text. Developing A Musicology Of Rock*, Ashgate, Aldeshot. Second edition.
- Oxford Music Online. 2009. 'Blues' in *The New Grove Dictionary Of Music And Musicians. 2nd Edition*, 20 April. < <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/public>> [Accessed 12 May 2010]
- Prato, Paolo. 2003. *Il treno dei desideri. Musica e ferrovia da Berlioz al rock*, L'Epos, Palermo.
- Preston, Katherine. 1998. 'Art Music From 1800 To 1860', in David Nicholls ed. *The Cambridge History Of American Music*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 186-213.
- Tagg, Philip. 1982. 'Analysing Popular Music: Theory, Method and Practice', *Popular Music*, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 37-65.
- Zak, Albin J. III. 2004. 'Bob Dylan and Jimi Hendrix: Juxtaposition and Transformation "All Along The Watchtower"', *Journal Of American Musicological Society*, Vol. 57, No. 3, pp. 599-644.

Discography

- Beatles, The. 1967. *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, Parlophone, 1 June, UK.
- Dylan, Bob. 1967. *John Wesley Harding*, Columbia, 27 December, USA.
- Dylan, Bob. 1969. *Nashville Skyline*, Columbia, 9 April, USA.
- Dylan, Bob. 1993. *World Gone Wrong*, Columbia, 26 October, USA.
- Dylan, Bob (with The Band). 1975. *The Basement Tapes*, Columbia, 25 June, USA.
- Dylan, Bob (with The Band). 1990. *The Genuine Basement Tapes*, Scorpio, USA.
- Gentry, Bobbie. 1967. *Ode To Billie Joe*, June, Capitol, USA.
- Hendrix, Jimi. 1968. *Electric Ladyland*, Reprise, 16 September, USA.