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“Where do I begin the Story”: Establishing Biographical Authority in the Rock Biography

Popular music studies has generally viewed rock journalism as an important textual site in the negotiation of rock meanings. Several writers (Hirsch, 1972, Frith, 1983, Thornton, 1991, Toynbee, 1993) have argued that the music press act as gatekeepers of public taste through which meanings are created and disseminated. This paper is concerned with certain central problems and particular conventions of one particular aspect of rock journalism; the rock biography. Through this analysis it will question how useful the gatekeeper model is and ask whether a more reflexive evaluation of rock writing is called for. Using Robert Shelton's 1987 biography of Bob Dylan, No Direction Home as an example, this paper argues that the biographer's project necessitates the construction of a biographical authority which is achieved through the use of certain techniques and tropes. It will further suggest that this biographical authority is by no means stable and is affected through the biography's reception in a wider critical landscape.

In literary terms a critical biography can be categorised as “an account of a writer's life for the purpose of explaining and evaluating their work.” (Gray, 1984:33) This has some parallel in rock biographies which attempt to analyse the work of their subjects through the historicisation of their work and various forms of textual analysis. The question is what is expected of the biographer when writing a ‘serious historical analysis’¹ of a rock artist. Most obviously the biographer's task is to tell the story of a given subject, to relay the ‘facts’ about a band or artist's personal history and professional career. This is perhaps not as simple as it may first appear as many popular music subjects deliberately surround themselves in mystique or often relay untruths about their past in order to present a certain image. In the case of Dylan this is especially true in the way that throughout his career he has constantly re-invented himself and his past. For example his early statements to Bob Shelton (1986) that he had run away as a child to learn the blues or that he had been a rent boy in Times Square etc. Indeed, his whole interview

technique is generally represented as being based on word play, embellishment of fact and (often undetected) ironic statements. This confusion is also articulated in the way in which Dylan has been consistently and deliberately diffuse about the creative process and the way he has seemed loath to talk about his influences. The commonality and enduring use of these techniques by many popular music performers is illustrated in Spencer Leigh's account of his experiences as a radio interviewer elsewhere in this volume. My point is that these kinds of tropes make the biographers task problematic. Also this vagueness, evasiveness and side-stepping of concrete explanations of meaning by the artist results in an opening up of the text: it enables a variety of different (and often contradictory) readings to be teased out of their work.

This is exemplified by the way that Dylan's work has been analysed through Dylanology and the fan culture that has grown up around the singer with its often fiercely debated contestations of meaning of particular textsⁱⁱ. I would suggest that there is a strong 'analytic discourse' apparent in the way in which Dylan is understood and discussed amongst his fans. One only has to have a passing knowledge of the proliferation of Dylan fanzines, newsletters and societies to observe the sheer level of critical scrutiny of his work and the meticulous documentation of the minutiae of his career. Furthermore, there is often a 'possessive discourse' at work where Dylan is represented as having his primary relevance in specific cultures. For example, Stephen Pickering's *Praxis*ⁱⁱⁱ placed Dylan's career within the framework of Judaism, A.J. Weberman's *Dylan Liberation Front*^{iv} and the 7th Avenue lawyer who was in correspondence with Bob Shelton claiming to be "one of the three or four people in the world who truly understands Dylan's work" (Levine, 1987)^v. Although Weberman's actions can be seen as fitting into the pathological model of the fan challenged by Jenson (1992) in that many of his activities were extreme, verging on the illegal, they are perhaps a severe manifestation of the kind of performer-fan relationship that many Dylan fans see themselves as having. That is, a legitimate claim over the meaning of the artist and as interpreters of the underlying 'truth' of Dylan's texts. This is illustrated in the way that Weberman talks about his relationship to Dylan. "I worshipped him... and saw my role as similar to that of the ancient Talmudic Scholar or Cabalist attempting to decipher God-given truth from what appeared to most as an arbitrary arrangement of words." (Weberman, 1973:47) Not only did Weberman claim

to know exactly what Dylan stood for, he also argued as to what Dylan *should* mean. Furthermore, his strategies constituted an active attempt to influence Dylan's direction. Weberman's principle argument, was that Dylan was a counter-cultural leader, a spokesman for the political concerns of the young who had sold out and become de-politicised and hence let his 'people' down. While I am not trying to essentialise 'fans' (or specifically fans of Dylan) by suggesting that they *all* make claims to an objectivity of meaning, it is clear that analytical and possessive discourse do play a strong part in certain areas of fan culture. My point is that in a critical space where 'analytic' and 'possessive' discourses are so highly developed, biographical authority becomes unstable.

John Stratton (1982) argues that the creative process within rock music is mystified by the artist and the music industry in order to conceal the rational workings of capitalism. This is to say that in order to market and sell a product successfully its status *as a product* must be hidden and the ideological concentration must be towards aesthetics, authenticity and meaning. In this model the artist has to be seen as autonomous from the music industry; that their status as 'artists' transcends the dissemination of their work. What I am primarily interested in is the way in which this agenda is set: how certain discourses are constructed and negotiated within popular music culture. I am interested in the way in which we approach music and popular music performers is generally through a process of understanding which is mediated through a variety of textual sites. As rock music is a multi-textual form (that is: meaning is negotiated over a variety of textual sites, music, the written word, film) the representations of an artist's life are central to the way in which they (i.e. their music, their image, what they stand for) are understood. Ultimately, what I'm suggesting is that popular music biography cannot be separated from the political economies and constructed ideologies of popular music be it when a biography acts as part of the promotional, mythology building process or when it is engaged in trying to unravel the identity constructed around a particular artist. As Simon Frith points out "The problem seems to be that in dealing with rock lives we are dealing with ciphers that signify commercial calculations, audience expectations, vested interests as well as individual experience." (Frith 1983:276)

The rock biography then, is released into a complex critical space which is bound up with a multitude of constructed mythologies and critical standpoints projected on to an artist and their work. Because of this process of mythologising in the biographical text of any major artist, establishing the narrative voice is paramount in gaining the trust of their prospective readership. In the rock biography (and certainly in those on Dylan) the mythical element is often proposed as a crisis or a riddle which has to be solved. This works in a similar fashion to the way that Greimas (1966) proposed a model of structuralist narratology in narrative tracing back to ancient myth. This is the suggestion that narrative has three basic recurring patterns 1. Desire, search or aim. 2. Communication 3. Support hindrance (resolved). (Selden, 1989:58) I am not suggesting that this is an unproblematic structure of narrative, merely that it a useful way of examining the aims and means of the rock biography. In the popular music biography the search is set up in terms of a desire to unravel mythical elements of the subject's career, the communication is through the narration and consideration of that career and the resolution lies in the author unravelling the historical facts and issues surrounding the subject in order to present a 'true' picture. Because the biographer's task is to establish the 'truth' behind the myth of their subjects, their role in the text is crucial to this resolution. To resolve the riddle they must self-consciously set themselves up as an authority figure that is capable of creating order. They have to appeal to the readership, to win them over, to say 'trust me with the narration of this story'. Hence, there is a need to establish a 'biographical authority' which identifies the author as trustworthy narrator.

Sarah Thornton (1990:87) suggests two specific ways in which the past of an individual is 'contained' in writings on popular culture: a biographical strategy which "offer glimpses of the past through the lives of their protagonists and histories which are held together by the idiosyncratic voice of their authors" and the "art historical" approach which "determine the significance of an 'artist'... on political and aesthetic grounds." The critical rock biography lies somewhere in between these categories in that they treat their subject in the manner of "histories of art" (ibid.) and contextualise and relate the life and work of their subject within its specific cultural and political landscape but they are ultimately dominated by the "idiosyncratic voice of the author". Furthermore, the authorial voice not only narrates and contextualises the history, but it also controls the

aesthetic judgements made within their text. Biographical authority in the rock biography is generally attempted by setting up the biographer as a protagonist within the actual text. I would like to suggest that this is established in four main ways: the biographer is set up as a spectator, an insider, an expert/chronicler or as analyst. In the process of establishing a strong narrative voice within the text the author 'makes' her/himself within the narrative, s/he becomes a character, an 'actor' in the events that they are describing and this can be done in any of these four ways.

Shelton is interesting in that he uses all these strategies and that he introduces them at a very early stage in the biography. In the introduction to No Direction Home, both the tone of the book and Shelton's role in Dylan's story are immediately established. This is related to the way in which Dylan is portrayed throughout the text as a crisis that needs to be resolved. I will concentrate on first chapter of the book as a brief illustration. Here Dylan is put forward as a complex character of many guises an illusive and constantly changing mystery. The very first words of "Where can I begin the story? I'd need a film camera's flashing chain of images" (Shelton, 1987: 13) establishes that Dylan is a character of multiple facets who is difficult to pin down. Shelton goes on to impress upon the reader that he is the figure who has the capability and authority to draw together the threads of a complex story, he refers to Dylan as "my Kane", a complex and illusive character and the story as a "mosaic". In these opening pages he is inviting the reader to trust him for a variety of reasons.

Firstly, he places himself within the text as a spectator right at the beginning of the story, remembering Dylan "back at Gerde's Folk City in Huck Fin corduroy cap." (ibid.) Shelton also establishes himself as the figure who is present at all the important stages of Dylan's career and he places himself in the action along various stages of Dylan's career; from these beginnings in Greenwich Village, to the Royal Albert Hall in 1966, to Blackbushe Aerodrome etc.

Secondly Shelton is the meticulous researcher, the expert chronicler who has "travelled so far and interviewed so many people." who "offered their bits to my mosaic." (Shelton, 1987: 14) Even though his interviewees could be seen as being closer to Dylan, Shelton maintains his authority by suggesting these individuals only knew a

particular side to the man, (“Most said they knew only a fragment of the picture.” *ibid.*) Whereas as the singer’s ‘Boswell’ he was drawing all the strands together to create a ‘true’ portrayal. He suggests that they regarded him as the authority who could shed light on their unanswered questions, even down to Dylan’s relatives. “Nearly everyone had a question about him, including his family.”(*ibid.*) All these strategies construct Shelton as *the* legitimate authority on the subject who has *all* the components to tell the story.

A third strategy used to establish biographical authority within the text is the suggestion that the author is an insider. In *No Direction Home* Shelton sets himself up as the old friend and describes the 1971 interview in terms of reunion. “Perhaps I should begin at a mid point, in 1971, about ten years after we had met. He visited me at the Henry Hudson Hotel on Manhattan’s West Side. I hadn’t seen him since the Isle of Wight Festival in England. I’d been living there sifting through the facts of his career.” (*ibid.*) Shelton points out that it is Dylan who comes to visit him and the interview in the hotel room is portrayed as being a re-uniting of old friends and sparring partners. He also relates in detail anecdotes which set him up as an influential force with Dylan’s career: the first review, the passing on of information to Columbia records (helping him get a recording contract) recommending Dylan to his future manager Albert Goldman amongst others.

Fourthly, there is the strategy of the biographer as analyst. This tends to involve some of the techniques suggested by Toynbee (1993:290) as stylistic traits of 1970’s rock journalism: ‘close readings’, ‘auteurism’ and the ‘re-establishment of a high/low culture demarcation’. (*ibid.*) Shelton sets himself up as analyst in his extensive examinations of Dylan’s work, all of which tend to utilise these three techniques. For example in his evaluation of *Visions of Johanna* from *Blonde on Blonde* encompasses all these elements.

“The skittering images hurl off like fragmentary chips from a mind floating downstream, neither time nor structure holding forces in check. The nonsequential visions are like a swivelling camera recording a fractured consciousness... in the final two lines of the song King is tantalised by the Keatsian ambiguity of the skeleton key image suggesting both death and the key which opens every door.” (Shelton, 1987: 322)

This ‘close reading’ within this passage makes it is clear that Shelton is treating Dylan’s work as ‘high art’. He is also stamping his own authority on the text through his

descriptive passages, which through use of metaphor and stylised language serve to set up the author as a seer through which meaning is channelled. However, the way in which song-words have been privileged in the way Dylan has been understood and the sheer amount of conflicting (and often highly subjective) readings of Dylan's work amongst critics and fans means that any interpretation is in itself relative, subjective and open. Any real critical authority relating to a particular text is in a sense illusory and unfixed as it is bound by contextual factors: the readers prior understanding of that particular text, how the reader places the text within their own framework of understanding, their individual knowledge and conception of the artist or the wider sphere of popular culture.

These then, are some of the ways that the biographer portrays himself in order to establish his 'biographical authority' and how the resolvment of the text is achieved through these strategies. However it is clear that these constructions are not stable and need to be problematised. We need to explore the question of how much this biographical authority can be seen as an authorial construct. To take the example of his role as an insider, it is clear that Shelton was highly influential in Dylan's early career (for instance Dave Van Ronk's statement that the famous Gerde's Folk City performance was "for Bob Shelton". However, it's also apparent that the way that this role was relayed in singular terms is to a certain extent a construction, which strongly emphasises the writer's role in a complex set of factors, which went towards launching Dylan. In later interviews this construction was something that Shelton himself was happy to acknowledge and he admits that he was just one (albeit influential) party working on Dylan's account at this early stage. One of the principle points which sets up Shelton as important in launching Dylan's career is made through accounts of how Dylan received his first recording contract from Columbia. At a Carolyn Hester recording session shortly after Shelton's New York Times review (for which Dylan was recruited to play harmonica) he was offered a five-year contract by John Hammond. In No Direction Home Shelton writes that Dylan's account of this was that "he handed Hammond *The Times* review and went around the room doing his harmonica thing" and "sung not a note" during the whole session." (Shelton, 1987:113) The inferred point in this account being that Dylan received the contract as a direct result of Shelton's glowing review, not even having to sing.

As he would later freely admit Shelton's role is perhaps not as clear as is stated within the text and that the process was much more complex than the portrayal in *No Direction Home*. Hammond had been aware of Dylan for some time: "Subsequently, I discovered that other people had been raving about Dylan to Hammond... a variety of other people." (Telegraph 54:17) However, his role is strongly emphasised as a tool in the process of establishing his biographical authority. Shelton's role as an insider is justified by the fact that he did write the important first review and did have some sort of personal relationship with Dylan from 1961 to around 1963. It is also justified by the fact that Dylan gave Shelton his blessing to write a biography and told him roughly what he wanted. Dylan is quoted as discussing the biography on an overnight light saying playfully that.. "It's not going to be a biography because I'm not dead yet." (Shelton, 1986: cover copy) The fact that Shelton's contact with Dylan was limited to two interviews after 1966 (1971 in New York and 1978 in London) perhaps shows that the relationship diminished from the mid 'sixties onwards. For the sake of continuity Shelton has to present these encounters using certain terms. In order to maintain the construction of himself as an old friend and sanctioned biographer the accounts are presented with an emphasis on the biographer. In this account Dylan comes to visit Shelton because the pair have a shared history, they are portrayed a fond rekindling old acquaintance.

Shelton's personal correspondence suggests that the relationship between the author and Dylan was something quite different. From the mid-sixties onwards Shelton was communicating exclusively with Dylan's office, specifically the singer's secretary Niomi Saltzman. Letters between the two parties were cordial but business like and as early as 1968 Shelton was complaining to his publishers that he had encountered "More resistance from Dylan and his manager than I had ever anticipated." (Shelton, 1968) He also indicates that Dylan was less than responsive to his requests for information and copyright clearance calling him "erratic and totally unpredictable and will give only so far and no more." (ibid.) Also according to Shelton, Dylan's manager Albert Grossman was deliberately obstructive towards the book and "made it clear... he regards it as 'opportunism' on my (*Shelton's*) part and that he would fight it as some sort of invasion of privacy." (ibid.) The correspondence also shows that the relationship soured down the

years with Dylan's office becoming disillusioned with the length of time the biography was taking to complete and the projected negotiations surrounding its publication.

These small examples serve to illustrate the point that many of the elements of 'biographical authority' can be viewed as a construction. It's as if the corners are ironed out of a particular story in order to create a neat and coherent narrative which is presented from the safe hands of the authoritative narrator. As Shelton himself later admitted "there's a great deal of lying that goes on in biography, whether you consider it lying or not. I mean, Olivier says that all actors are liars. It's technique, manipulation of the reader." (Bauldie, 1996:17)

Finally, it is an unstable authority which is further negotiated in the critical landscape in which it is received, in this instance within the 'Dylan culture' that I mentioned at the start of the paper. In a critical space where 'analytic' and 'possessive' discourses are so highly developed, biographical authority becomes unstable. The biographer's role as an insider or expert can be disputed in an area with such a wide range of official and unofficial textual sites which constantly re-evaluate historical 'facts'. Most strikingly, the roles of 'expert' and 'analyst' are thrown into crisis in an area where 'analytic' and 'possessive' discourses are widely related amongst fans. Thus the resolvment that biographical authority seeks to achieve is constantly under attack both through fan culture and other biographies in the field. For instance, Clinton Heylin (1991) spends the first chapter of *Behind the Shades* picking faults with Bob's work along with Anthony Scaduto and Bob Spitz's books. The preface to *Behind the Shades* is an appraisal of the work of the 'three S's' in which he describes Scaduto's book as "bereft of any major sources", as using "sketchy interviews" and dissipating into "song analysis and speculation", (Heylin 1991:xi) Shelton's as being a "profound disappointment... filled with pat song analysis" and as doing "Dylan a great disservice" (ibid.) and Spitz as not advancing Dylan's story from the first two. It is a theme which continues throughout the book as he points out what he sees as inaccuracies and inadequacies in the others' accounts. There are even sections when it seems that Heylin deliberately misrepresents *No Direction Home* in order to undermine Shelton's biographical authority at the same time as establishing his own^{vi}.

What I am ultimately suggesting is that the space in which a rock biography such as No Direction Home is produced and received is one of aficionadodom in which both ‘fans’ and ‘critics’ stake a claim in meaning and histories. In writing on a figure with the commercial and critical stature of Dylan there is an immense amount of contestation over who had the legitimacy to be ‘the biographer’. Furthermore, when specific popular music texts have been subject to the level of critical dissection (both from ‘fans’ and critics) to the level that Dylan’s work has, the argument that the rock writer acts as a ‘taste maker’ or ‘gatekeeper’ becomes problematic. Hence, these mediated versions of rock lives are mediated not only through the construction of particular narratives by the biographer, but also in the way in which that narrative is received and contested in the wider cultural space which surrounds the artist. In an area where meanings are negotiated, re-negotiated and ascribed to such an extent, the role of the rock critic as expert becomes unstable and the relations that are in play cannot be reduced to simplistic assumptions. Meanings ascribed by these ‘experts’ are contested throughout differing cultural spaces of debate: in both ‘official’ textual sites within the culture industry (magazines, biography, film etc.) and ‘unofficial’ textual sites outside it.

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ⁱAlthough there is a multitude of writing on popular music which could be described as biography, this paper is concerned with those biographies (usually relating to figures included in the critical rock canon) which aim to offer a critical/historical view of their subject. For theoretical attempts toward a typology of popular music biography see Shuker (1994) Strachan (1997).

ⁱⁱVarious writers (Lewis, G:1992 Lewis, L:1992 Fiske:1992, Jenson:1992) have suggested that fans actually take an active role in the creation of meanings within popular music culture. Fiske (1992) for instance, has suggested that many popular audiences are engaged in a cultural economy of fandom in which varying levels of 'production' occur: 'semiotic production' in which the audience internally negotiates and creates meaning, 'enunciative' in which meaning is discussed and mediated orally between fans, and 'textual production' where fans produce their own texts.

ⁱⁱⁱIn *Praxis* the 'meanings' of Dylan's work are negotiated within a specifically Judaic conception of spirituality and the legitimacy of the interpretations are grounded in their assumption that this reading constitutes an objective 'truth' about what Dylan is, and what he stands for.

^{iv} A.J. Webberman perhaps the most well known of Dylan's fans. The self proclaimed 'Worlds leading Dylanologist' and leader of the 'Dylan Liberation Front' Webberman's extreme actions such as his raiding of Dylan's dustbins are well documented through his campaign against Dylan in the underground press.

^vMichael L. Levine, Seventh Avenue Lawyer and part time 'Dylanologist' corresponded with Shelton after the publication of *No Direction Home*. Levine takes this legitimacy to the extreme purporting to be one of the 'two or three people in the universe' (SPC 20/04/87) who understand Dylan. His detailed explanation of his theories are littered with personal interpretations of Dylan's lyrical imagery. His readings, he tells Shelton, are the 'real meanings' of the songs.

^{vi}For instance, Heylin writes that "Shelton claims... implausibly that Dylan arrived in New York in December 1960 and spent two months in Times Square hustling as a male prostitute." (Heylin, 1991:31) However, what Shelton actually writes in *No Direction Home* is somewhat different to Heylin's account in *Behind the Shades*. He says that "By 1966... he was trying portray himself as an urban cowboy hustling and rustling around Times Square" (Shelton 1987:90) after which he quotes Dylan verbatim. After the quote he concludes "whatever the truth Dylan got off the subway in the village in February 1961." (ibid.) Shelton relates two versions of the events given by Dylan himself but never says that they were the 'true' events and treats the second with a good deal of scepticism.