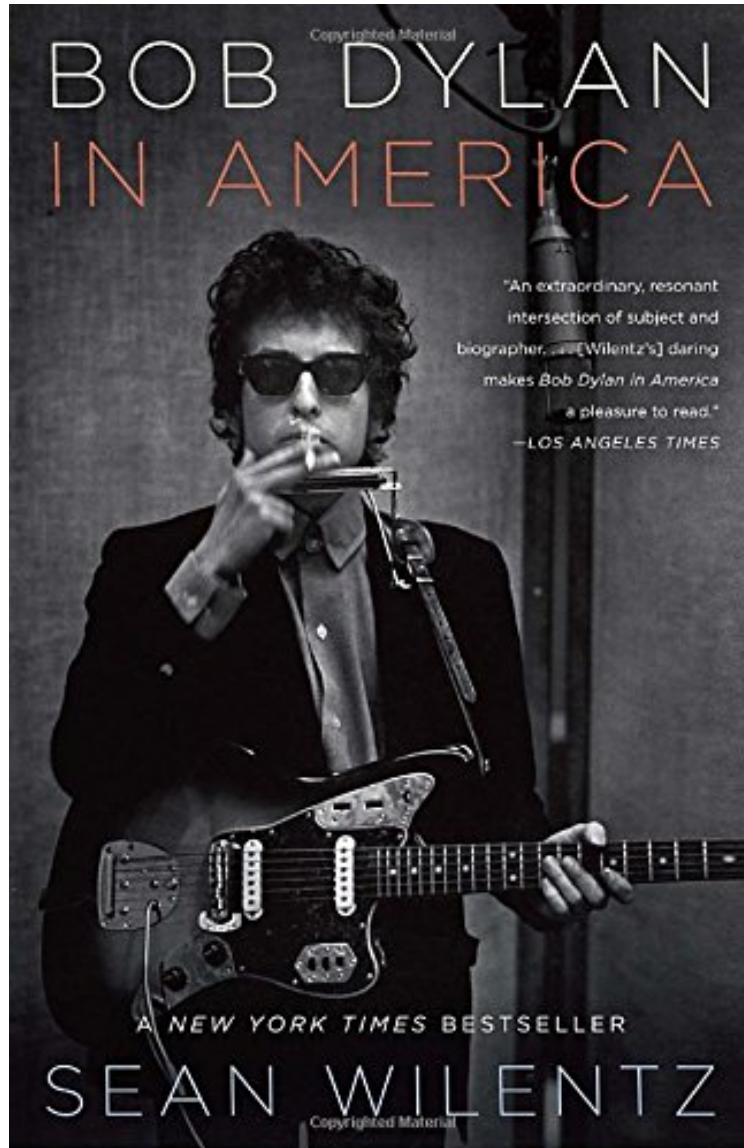


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Bob Dylan in America

Sean Wilentz

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A unique look at Nobel Prize winner Bob Dylan's place in American cultural history through unprecedented access to Dylan's studio tapes, recording notes, and rare photographs.Sean Wilentz discovered Bob Dylans music as a teenager growing up in Greenwich Village. Now, almost half a century later, he revisits Dylans work with the skills of an eminent American historian as well as the passion of a fan. Beginning with Dylans explosion onto the scene in 1961, Wilentz follows the emerging artist as he develops a body of work unique in Americas cultural history. Using his unprecedented access to studio tapes, recording notes, and rare photographs, he places Dylans music in the context of its time and offers a stunning critical appreciation of Dylan both as a songwriter and performer.

"Wilentzs book stands apart . . . in the lucidity of its prose, the rigor of its research and convincing originality of the place he assigns his subject in the context of American cultural history. . . . Here is scholarship that successfully slips the bonds of specialty and pretension. Los Angeles TimesAuthor Sean Wilentz combines a lifelong music fans enthusiasm with a history detectives doggedness to unearth Dylans entire root system. . . . The book is at once a time-hopping biography; a catalog of Dylans myriad, eclectic influences . . . and a primer on American music. The Christian Science Monitor Not just another biography of the chameleon folkie-rock-star-poet-troubadour. . . . At once deeply felt and historically layered. The Washington Post Book WorldAmong those who write about Dylan, Wilentz possesses the rare virtues of modesty, nuance and lucidity, and for that he should be celebrated and treasured. The New York Times Book A panoramic vision of Bob Dylan, his music, his shifting place in American culture, from multiple angles. In fact, reading Sean WilentzsBob Dylan in America is as thrilling and surprising as listening to a great Dylan song. Martin ScorseseExtraordinary. . . . With Wilentz, the world around, and inside the head of, Bob Dylan becomes an aperture into the deeper meaning of the American experience. . . . Wilentz has managed to write both the most important book on American history and the most important book on American music in recent memory. PopMatters.com An enjoyably thorough, convincing explanation why Dylans music has gone on finding new audiences ever since he burst upon the New York folk scene of the early 1960s, fresh from the iron range of northern Minnesota and ferociously ambitious for his art. Los Angeles Times All the American connections that Wilentz draws to explain the appearance of Dylans music are fascinating, particularly at the outset the connection to Aaron Copland. The writing is strong, the thinking is strong the book is dense and strong everywhere you look. Philip RothPassionate and informative. The New York of BooksA tour de force. . . . By the end, hes masterfully offer[ed] not so much an image of Dylans place in America as a carefully calibrated lens with which to see it for yourself. Newsweek Unlike so many Dylan-writer-wannabes and phony encyclopedia compilers, Sean Wilentz makes me feel he was in the room when he chronicles events that I participated in. Finally a breath of fresh words founded in hardcore, intelligent research. Al Kooper[Bob Dylan in Americas] unusual structure [is] well-suited to exploring Dylans career, with its many distinct eras governed by different rules, even different gods. The Dylan of this book is not a troubadour or a trickster or a radical, but an alchemist who never met a snippet of music, writing, or art that he couldnt make his own. New York Magazine A reading of Dylans work within the wider framework of American culturea [topic] Wilentz . . . tackles with vigor. The Onions A.V. ClubWilentz lays out nuanced arguments on the profound effect Dylan has had on expanding the American consciousness in his five-decade career as a singer and songwriter. The Newark Star-Ledger [Wilentz] mixes his history and critical assessments with long, often thrilling accounts of concerts and recording sessions. . . . What this book finally doesthis is me, not Wilentzis establish Dylan as the 20th centurys Walt Whitman.Bryan Appleyard, The Times (London) Sean Wilentz is one of the few great American historians. His political and social histories of American Democracy are masterful and magisterial. A masterpiece of cultural history that tells us much about who we have been and who we are. Cornel West, Class of 1943 University Professor in the Center for African American Studies at Princeton UniversityInteresting and intelligent. The Guardian (London)By focusing on the parts of Dylans canon that most move him, Wilentz getsstraight to the heart of the matter. If you thought there was nothing new to say about Bob Dylans impact on America, this book will make you think twice. Bill Flanagan, author ofAR and Evenings Empire and Editorial Director, MTV NetworksWilentz combines his deep musical knowledge with the skills of the fine historian to write one of the most important, insightful and revelatory books about America, its culture and its people, as interpreted through the works of one of its greatest artists. His book

is a work both of deep scholarship and profound cultural engagement: a rare and marvelous achievement. Philip King, *The Irish Times* About the Author Sean Wilentz is the George Henry Davis 1886 Professor of American History at Princeton University. He is the author of *The Rise of American Democracy*, which received the coveted Bancroft Prize, and most recently of *The Age of Reagan*. The historian-in-residence for Bob Dylan's official website, he has also received a Deems Taylor Award for musical commentary and a Grammy nomination for his liner notes to *Bootleg Series, Vol. 6: Bob Dylan, Live 1964: The Concert at Philharmonic Hall*. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.

PART I: BEFORE MUSIC FOR THE COMMON MAN: The Popular Front and Aaron Copland's America

Early in October 2001, Bob Dylan began a two-month concert tour of the northern United States. In his first performances since the terrorist attacks of September 11, Dylan debuted many of the songs on his new album, "Love and Theft," including the prescient song of disaster, "High Water (for Charley Patton)." Columbia Records, eerily, had released "Love and Theft" on the same day that the terrorists struck. How, if at all, would Dylan now respond to the nation's trauma? Would he, for once, speak to the audience? What would he play? The new tour had no opening act, but as a concert prelude the audience heard (as had become commonplace at Dylan's shows) a prerecorded selection of orchestral music. And on this tour, Dylan began playing what may have seemed a curious choice: a recording of the "Hoe-Down" section of Aaron Copland's *Rodeo*. Then Dylan and his band took the stage and, with acoustic instruments, further acknowledged the awfulness of the moment, while also marking Dylan's changes and continuities over the years, by playing the country songwriter Fred Rose's "Wait for the Light to Shine": When the road is rocky and you got a heavy load Wait for the light to shine For the rest of the month, through fifteen shows, Dylan opened with "Wait for the Light to Shine," often after hitting the stage to "Hoe-Down." He would continue to play snatches of *Rodeo* at his concerts for several tours to come, and now and then he would throw in the opening blasts of Copland's *Fanfare for the Common Man* or bits of *Appalachian Spring*. Copland's music from the 1940s served as Dylan's call to order, his American invocation. Sixty years on, whether he knew it or not, Dylan had closed a mysterious circle, one that arced back through the folk-music revival where he got his start to the left-wing New York musical milieu of the Great Depression and World War II. Anyone familiar with Dylan's music knows about its connections to the 1930s and 1940s through the influences of Woody Guthrie and, to a lesser extent, Pete Seeger. But there are other connections as well, to a broader world of experimentation with American music and radical politics during the Depression years and after. These larger connections are at times quite startling, especially during the mid-1930s, when shared leftist politics brought together in New York a wide range of composers and musicians not usually associated with one another. Thereafter, many of the connections are elliptical and very difficult to pin down. They sometimes involve not direct influence but shared affinities and artistic similarities recognized only in retrospect. Yet they all speak to Dylan's career, and illuminate his artistic achievement, in ways that Guthrie's and Seeger's work alone do not. The most important of these connections leads back to Aaron Copland and his circle of politically radical composers in the mid-1930s. On March 16, 1934, Copland participated in a concert of his own compositions, sponsored by the Composers' Collective of the Communist Party-affiliated Workers Music League and held at the party's Pierre Degeyter Club on Nineteenth Street in New York. Copland was still known, at age thirty-three, a decade after first making his mark, as a young, iconoclastic, modernist composer. The collective, with which Copland was closely associated, had been founded in 1932 to nurture the development of proletarian music, and it consisted of about thirty members. The Degeyter Club took its name from the composer of the melody of "The Internationale." The review of the concert in the Communist newspaper *Daily Worker* praised Copland for his "progress from [the] ivory tower" and hailed his difficult *Piano Variations*, written in 1930, as a major, "undeniably revolutionary" work, even though Copland "was not 'conscious' of this at the time." A few months later, Copland, increasingly drawn to the leftist composers and musicians, won a songwriting contest, cosponsored by the collective and the pro-Communist periodical *New Masses*, for composing a quasi-modernist accompaniment to the militant poem "Into the Streets May First," written by the poet Alfred Hayes, who is best-known today for his lyrics to the song "Joe Hill." In the 1950s, Copland would publicly disown the piece as "the silliest thing I did." At the time, though, he was proud enough of what he called "my communist song" to bring it to the attention of his friend the Mexican composer Carlos Chavez, and to note that it had been republished in the Soviet Union. The *Daily Worker's* music reviewer later recalled that the contest judges agreed that Copland's song was "a splendid thing." That reviewer, who was one of the founders of the Composers' Collective and wrote under the pseudonym Carl Sands, was the Harvard-trained composer, professor, and eminent musicologist Charles Seeger. At this point, Seeger, a musical modernist, had little use for traditional folk music as a model for revolutionary culture. "Many folksongs are complacent, melancholy, defeatist," he wrote, "intended to make the slaves endure their lot—pretty, but not the stuff for a militant proletariat to feed on." A year later, though, the Communist Party, on instructions from the Comintern, abandoned its hyper-militant politics and avant-garde artistic leanings in favor of the broad political and cultural populism of the so-called Popular Front. The Composers' Collective duly folded in 1936, but Seeger took the shift in stride. In 1935, he moved his family to Washington, D.C., to work as an adviser to the Music Unit of the Special Skills Division of the Resettlement Administration, the forerunner of the New Deal's Farm Security Administration; and he and his second wife, the avant-garde composer Ruth Crawford Seeger, were able to collaborate with their friend John Lomax and his son Alan in helping to build the Archive of American

Folk Song at the Library of Congress. In addition to collecting and transcribing traditional songs that were in danger of disappearing, the archive and its friends would encourage the development of folk music as a tool for radical politics-efforts that eventually helped inspire Bob Dylan and the folk revival of the 1950s and 1960s. Charles's son Peter, then a teenager, had accompanied his father and stepmother to hear Copland discourse at the Degeyter Club, and during the summer of 1935 he traveled with his father to a square dance and music festival in Asheville, North Carolina, run by the legendary folklorist and mountain musician Bascom Lamar Lunsford. The youngster was already a crack ukulele player, but in Asheville he heard traditional folk music for the first time, played by Lunsford on a cross between a mandolin and a five-string banjo-and it changed his life forever. A few years later, after dropping out of Harvard and working under Alan Lomax at the Library of Congress, Pete Seeger teamed up with a revolving commune of folk artists, including a young songwriter discovered and recorded by Lomax, Woody Guthrie, to form the leftist Almanac Singers, who promoted union organizing, racial justice, and other causes with their topical songs. (The supervisor for one of the Almanacs' recording sessions in 1942, Earl Robinson, had written the tunes for "Joe Hill" and the Popular Front classic "Ballad for Americans"-and in 1935 he had studied piano with Copland at the Workers Music League's school.) In the late 1940s, the Almanac Singers evolved into the Weavers. The Weavers' recordings would later prove essential in introducing a younger generation, including Bob Dylan, to the music of Woody Guthrie and in sparking the broader folk-music revival. But the Weavers were not the only influential musical descendants of the Composers' Collective-and not the only ones drawn to American folk music. Like the Seegers, Aaron Copland continued his musical career with his politics intact. After winning his Communist song award in 1934, Copland spent the summer with his teenage lover, the photographer and aspiring violinist Victor Kraft, at a cabin his cousin owned in Lavinia, Minnesota, alongside Lake Bemidji and just to the west of the Mesabi Iron Range. Copland worked hard on his abstract and purposefully radical formal work, *Statements for Orchestra*, but also relaxed and took in what he called the "amusing town" of Bemidji, nearby. As he told a radical friend in New York, the amusements included some political escapades: It began when Victor spied a little wizened woman selling a *Daily Worker* on the street corners . . . From that, we learned to know the farmers who were Reds around these parts, attended an all-day election campaign meeting of the C.P. unit, partook of their picnic supper and [I] made my first political speech! . . . I was being drawn, you see, into the political struggle with the peasantry! I wish you could have seen them-the true Third Estate, the very material that makes revolution . . . When S. K. Davis, Communist candidate for Gov. in Minn. came to town and spoke in the public park, the farmers asked me to talk to the crowd. It's one thing to think revolution, or talk about it to one's friends, but to preach it from the streets-OUT LOUD-Well, I made my speech (Victor says it was a good one) and I'll probably never be the same! The "good one" for the Communist candidate in Bemidji was, as far as we know, the last political stump speech Copland ever delivered, and his slightly bemused, slightly awkward, and maybe self-ironic description-"the peasantry"? "the true Third Estate"? in northern Minnesota?-makes it sound out of character. But Copland and Kraft did seek out the "Reds around these parts" and joined in their political activity. "The summer of 1934," Copland's most thorough biographer writes, "found him no mere fellow traveler, but rather an active, vocal 'red.'" Thereafter, and until 1949, Copland, if not a member of the Communist Party, was aligned with the party, its campaigns, and its satellite organizations, connections he would later try to minimize and evade under hateful and intense political pressure-and under oath. Soon after he returned to New York, via Chicago, for the winter, Copland had his own reckoning with the Popular Front. But the first great musical sensation to come out of the Composers' Collective group and Copland's circle of friends after 1935 involved another young composer, Marc Blitzstein-who, many years later, would have a direct and profound impact on Bob Dylan, independent of the Popular Front folksingers. Born to an affluent Philadelphia family in 1905, Blitzstein had been a prodigy and made his professional debut at age twenty-one with the Philadelphia Orchestra, playing Liszt's E-flat piano concerto. Like Copland, Blitzstein had studied piano and composition in Paris in the 1920s with the formidable Nadia Boulanger, but after the onset of the Depression, living in New York, he found himself attracted to the radical theater more than to the concert hall. He felt a special kinship with the founders of the left-wing, socially conscious Group Theatre, including Harold Clurman (who had shared an apartment with Copland in Paris), Clifford Odets, and Elia Kazan. In 1932, Blitzstein wrote a one-act musical drama, *The Condemned*, based on the Sacco and Vanzetti case, a leftist cause célèbre, that was never produced. Through the mid-1930s, as a member of the Composers' Collective, he wrote film scores and workers' songs, including a submission to the songwriting contest that Copland won. All along, Blitzstein had begun turning to concepts of populist, modernist, left-wing musical theater, blending Marxist politics with jazz, Igor Stravinsky, cabaret, and folk songs. Bertolt Brecht and his musical collaborators Hanns Eisler and Kurt Weill had conceived and advanced these ideas in Germany before the Nazi takeover in 1933, and Eisler and Weill had brought them to New York as political migrants. Earlier, Blitzstein had condemned Weill's music as vulgar pandering, but now he had completely changed his mind. In the late summer of 1936, working at what he called a white heat, he completed a new proletarian musical play, *The Cradle Will Rock*. A hard-bitten allegory of capitalist greed and corruption, capped by an uprising of organized steelworkers, *The Cradle Will Rock* was the first important American adaptation of the Brecht-Eisler-Weill style-and it caused a firestorm. As the show took shape, Blitzstein's sponsor, the New Deal's government-funded Federal Theatre Project, already suffering reprisals from conservatives in Congress, became panicky.

Practically on the eve of the first scheduled preview performance, the project, citing impending budget cuts, shut down the production and ordered the theater padlocked. Thinking fast, Blitzstein's collaborators—the young director Orson Welles and the producer John Houseman—vowed to defy the order, rented another theater, redirected ticket holders for the first preview to the new venue, and mounted an astounding sold-out debut. (The audience swelled into a standing-room-only crowd when the company invited passersby in for free.) The Actors' Equity union had forbidden the cast to perform the piece, just as the musicians' union had refused to allow its members to play in what had formally become a commercial production for less than union scale, and so, with Blitzstein himself playing the score from a piano onstage, the actors spoke and sang their parts from the house. The hastily planned, seemingly spur-of-the-moment debut was a political as well as an artistic sensation. After a brief run, Cradle reopened some months later, by popular demand, under the auspices of Welles and Houseman's new Mercury Theatre company, and ran for an additional 108 performances. Aaron Copland was among those present for the impromptu premiere, and it thrilled him. ("The opening night of *The Cradle* made history," he wrote thirty years later, "none of us who were there will ever forget it.") Defending the show against charges that it was nothing but leftist propaganda, Copland allowed that "a certain sectarianism" limited its appeal, but he praised its innovative combination of "social drama, musical revue, and opera," and its clipped prosody and score.* Copland, meanwhile, had moved away from the dissonant modernism of his earlier work, and he would soon venture beyond orchestral music to write film scores and ballets. But Copland's own new direction had more in common with the all-American folk-song collecting of Charles Seeger and the Lomaxes that would later strongly affect Bob Dylan than it did with Blitzstein's Brechtian musical theater (which would also affect Dylan's work). Theirs were two very distinct artistic responses to the times, made by two ambitious, left-wing American Jewish composers and friends, one who was destined for international fame, the other for relative obscurity. Yet their sensibilities were closely related, at least in the mind of Aaron Copland. Copland's new, more open and melodious composing style, which he adopted around 1935 and called "imposed simplicity," emerged in full in 1938, when he completed, for the impresario and writer Lincoln Kirstein, the music for a ballet, *Billy the Kid*, a stylized depiction of the outlaw's life and death. At Kirstein's suggestion, Copland consulted various cowboy song collections edited by John Lomax, looking for possible themes. Copland wound up choosing six cowboy songs and adapting them to his score. All of them appeared, at one point or another, in collections published by Lomax. Three—"Whoopie Ti Yi Yo," "The Old Chisholm Trail," and "Old Paint"—would in turn be recorded by Woody Guthrie in a famous series of sessions in 1944 and 1945 for the record producer Moe Asch, the founder of Folkways Records.