

The Monk's Record Player: Thomas Merton, Bob Dylan, and the Perilous Summer of 1966

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This book charts the lives of Thomas Merton and Bob Dylan during the mid-1960s. It more specifically explores Merton's recourse to the life and work of Dylan during March – July, 1966. Merton readers won't struggle too much in recalling that these months, as his journals lay bare, are perceived as some of the best and worst in Merton's own life, and they are paralleled to some degree in Dylan's own struggles during the 1960s. In Hudson's words, this is a 'selective biography' (p. 7), so that events in Merton's life are juxtaposed with events in Dylan's life by way of 'Dylan Interludes' (e.g. pp. 52-61). We move in and out of both their lives, sometimes fast-forwarding, sometimes rewinding, sometimes staying in a groove, without too much concern for traditional narrative continuity. The account at times resembles – as the *Foreword* notes – a 'Mad Hatter's tea party' (p. xiii). Readers, however, shouldn't be put off by this eclectic approach. It's actually great fun! Hudson is a Dylan scholar and so he knows his material, with the occasional if mostly forgivable blip on the Merton side. The book is stimulating and, in my view, never dull. Rather than dwelling too much on riddles or nonsense poetry, akin to the Mad Hatter, Hudson manages to bring together a wide range of important themes and reflections. At times sympathetic, at times insightful, at all times self-assured, Hudson has an eye and an ear that seeks to understand the emotional and spiritual dynamics of Merton's life in moments of deep self-critical scrutiny. To the book's credit, the tumultuous 1960s, with its political, social and religious upheavals, is always our backdrop. It means we never simply view two isolated individuals, but always understand them in the bigger human story as it unfolds.

Of course it's the year 1966 that draws Hudson's attention more than any other. In Part II of the book, 'She Speaks Like Silence: March to July 1966' (pp. 65-117), readers are treated to lovely close-up views of Merton in the setting of the hermitage. 'He lowers his binoculars. The deer have wandered off in the direction of Monk's Creek. As the full moon rises, flooding the woods with shadows, the wind feels colder. Time to go inside.' (p. 65) This intimate insight into Merton's life, albeit through an imagined observer, contrasts with the book's first part, 'Utopian Hermit

Monk' (pp. 15-61), which offers broader insights, probably more helpful for readers new to Merton. Hudson, albeit briefly, covers Merton's past and measures the bearing it has on his life during the 60s. Whilst in need of more detail, it does usefully set the scene for Part II, which observes the intense days and weeks of March – July, 1966, also the period when Merton met a young nurse known as M. Whilst Hudson does note the significance of this encounter, he places the friendship against the wider backdrop of everything else that is happening in the heady 1960s. By Part III, 'The Lonesome Sparrow Sings' (pp. 121-198), the author pays a bit more attention to Dylan's own life, using the period July 1966 – October 1968 as the chronological post-script to the heady and emotional scenes detailed in Part II.

Part II notes that among the books exploring Merton's romance, 'few chronicle his musical interests at the time [and] if ever a story needed an audio accompaniment – a soundtrack – to be fully appreciated, it is this story.' (p. 100) How does Merton use what he reads in the re-shaping of his own life? How far does Dylan really structure Merton's own thinking and writing? What's a record player doing in a Cistercian monk's hermitage? Addressing these kinds of questions on the bigger platform of a nation going through social and cultural change, Hudson unpicks the bearing that Dylan's life, writing and music has on Merton. In so doing, he uncovers something of the emotional extremes Merton experiences during 1966. These are never simply presented as private crises, Hudson always showing how the personal anguish Merton feels is tied to social upheaval, human rights and the struggle for peace. Hudson doesn't rehash what's already been said. Whilst this period in Merton's life has been well documented, Hudson arranges his exploration through the eyes of the 'writer-activist-monk' as he reads, celebrates and takes sustenance from Dylan. Dylan's own life, which is far from straightforward at this time, affords Merton precious moments of solidarity. Dylan's 'folk-protest persona' (p. 57) is, for Merton, one which resists the dominant culture's oppressive levelling of individuality. This 1960s troubadour embodies critique, someone whose work moves beyond the constraints of cultural norms, exposing them as forms of social control. Dylan, for Merton, is prophetic, subversive and fresh. His work generates pleasure and connection at the same time as it helps Merton unravel the absurdities he is having to confront (pp. 88-99). Hudson, however, doesn't confine himself to Dylan in Merton's deciphering of his own life and times. Jacques Maritain, Joan Baez, beat poetry, civil rights, Martin Luther King, Vatican II, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Zen, TD Suzuki, Gregory Zilboorg, and many more, all get a mention. Among them, Hudson also mentions

John Coltrane's influence (180-83), one which is perhaps more abiding for Merton than Dylan. But that's a different story.

The effect of this bricolage ensures Hudson's account isn't simply repeating or restating what has already been said about both men. The book's inflection is one which reflects all the time something of Merton's monastic and contemplative journey, proposing that solitude, for Merton, 'was the path to greater oneness with others.' (p. 193) Hudson's references to music, people, events, and the cultural milieu of the decade are never wasted. They all serve to underline Merton's own insights into his journey, one where in finding himself, he realised that this was always through other people. 'After settling into the hermitage, he found an ever-widening circle of relationships [yet] he did indeed find a fundamental unity with the world. And an ever-deepening love for God.' (p. 193)

Hudson is in no doubt that Merton and Dylan remain two of the most 'brilliant and controversial' figures of the last century. Of course Dylan is only one of many influences in Merton's life at this time. These broader musical connections are worth underlining, perhaps more than Hudson's necessarily selective biography is able to do. So, too, Hudson's coverage of Merton's monastic vocation and some key facts about his life. The book's slant on the vows, and on monasticism more generally in Part I, are a little cloudy and uncertain. Merton, for instance, possessed English (and not French) citizenship before American naturalisation. And Merton's brother's full name was certainly John Paul (and not Paul); and the Cambridge/Clare College period was eight months (as opposed to Hudson's two years). In my view, the book is a must for any Merton or Dylan fan. Hudson's focus concerns the ways in which Dylan, as folk-icon, minstrel and rebel, allows Merton to find connections in his own life. If you are looking for standard biographical accounts of either Merton or Dylan, then you'll be a little disappointed. Do read the book, however, if you want to re-imagine or ponder a little more how Merton and Dylan (might have) spent the summer of 1966. Through Dylan, but also through figures such as John Coltrane, Albert Camus, Thich Nhat Hanh and others, the 'writer-activist-monk' is more able to understand the world outside the monastery, more able to understand himself, and more able to come to terms with the experience that, in making new friendships across a huge assortment of people, Merton enriches his own search for God.

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