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“HOW HIGH’S THE WATER, BOB?”

Fifty years ago, **BOB DYLAN** and **JOHNNY CASH** holed up for two days in Columbia’s fabled Studio A in Nashville. The sessions, never officially released until now, caught these two titans of American music at pivotal moments in their respective careers. With the release of *Travelin’ Thru, 1967 – 1969: The Bootleg Series Vol 15*, the full story of this legendary summit can finally be told. Graeme Thomson examines the latest revelations from the Dylan archives, hearing tales of velvet suits, trips to the circus and nocturnal shenanigans at the Black Poodle in Printer’s Alley. “There was an incredible electricity,” says one eyewitness.

Photo by AL CLAYTON/SONY MUSIC ARCHIVES



"He was very nervous": Dylan duets with Cash on "Girl From The North Country", *The Johnny Cash Show*, May 1, 1969

IT is May 1, 1969, and Bob Dylan is launching his new album, *Nashville Skyline*, with a taped appearance on the inaugural episode of *The Johnny Cash Show*. He hasn't appeared on American television since *The Steve Allen Show* in February 1964. The five years that have since passed resemble a compressed lifetime in which Dylan has morphed from folk prince to generational spokesman; from Judas rocker to enigmatic recluse. Later this year, *Rolling Stone* will describe him as "the most secretive and elusive person in the entire rock and roll substructure".

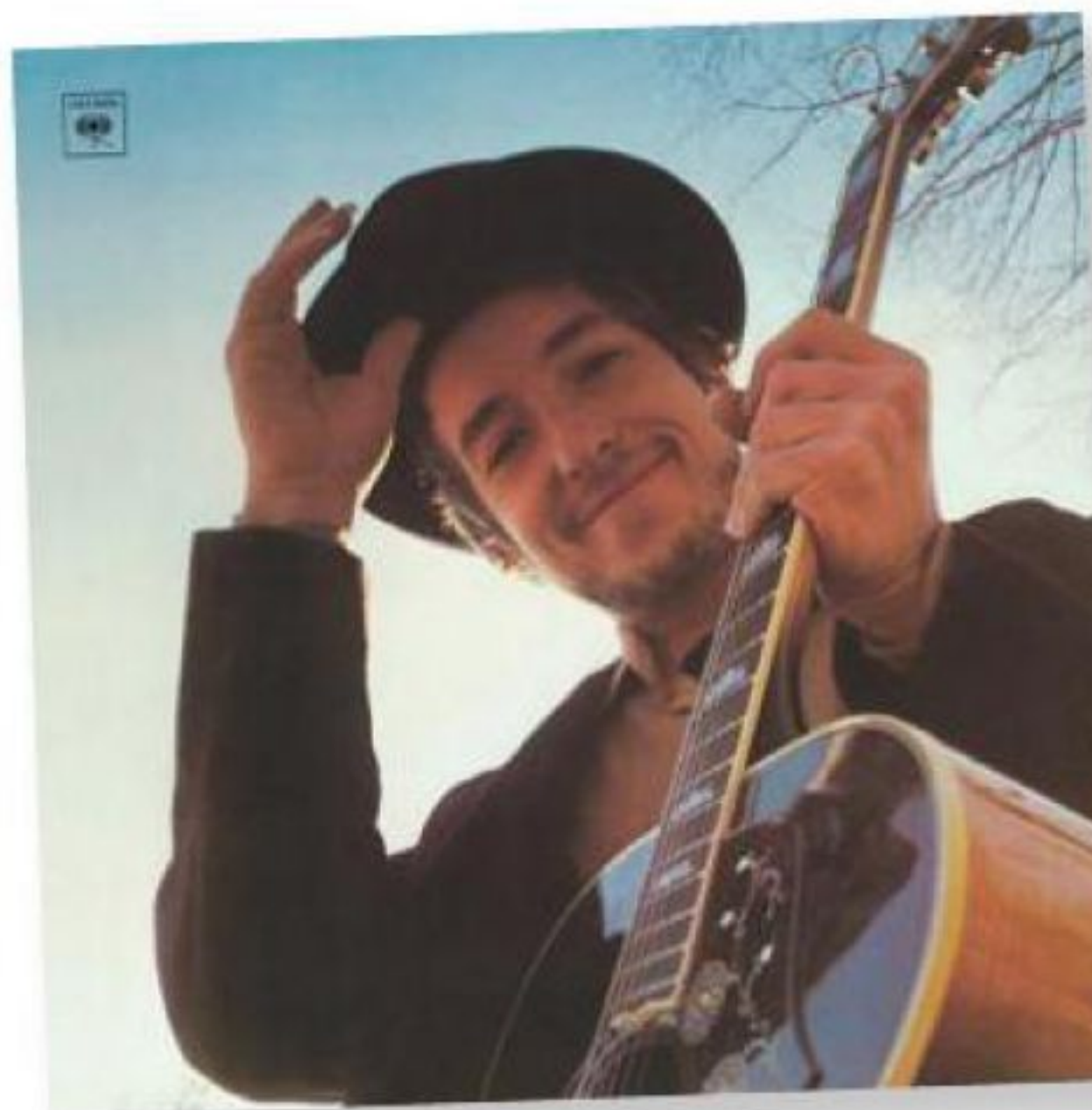
On *The Johnny Cash Show* he emerges from a period of hibernation as an amiable country crooner, singing simple songs of heart and homestead in a mellifluous voice a million miles from the accusatory snarl of old. The show is taped at the Ryman Auditorium, home of the Grand Ole Opry and epicentre of the country music establishment. Also appearing are Joni Mitchell and 'The Ragin' Cajun', fiddler Doug Kershaw, as well as Fanny Flagg, a comedienne telling risqué jokes in a flurry of pink chiffon. Cash is a friend and recent collaborator, yet when Dylan arrives for the taping in the afternoon he is riddled with anxiety.

"He was very nervous," Doug Kershaw recalls. "I had on a velvet suit, and he asked if I had any more. I said yes. Actually, I had a whole wardrobe. He wanted to see them. He came to my hotel room before the show, and he was trying on every one of my velvet suits. He thought he was underdressed, he just didn't feel right. Eventually, I said, 'You know what? Why don't you be Bob Dylan and I'll be Doug Kershaw.' 'How come, Diggy?' He always called me Diggy. I said, 'You look great just how you are.' He's Bob Dylan! I was trying to make an impression; he really didn't have to. So that's how he went on – just as himself."

Dylan has presented many versions of himself to the public over the years, but the one we hear on *Travelin' Thru*, Volume 15 of his monumental Bootleg Series, can perhaps lay claim to being the least mannered. The three-disc boxset covers outtakes and rarities from

the music Dylan recorded in Nashville between October 1967 and May 1969, encompassing two albums – *John Wesley Harding* and *Nashville Skyline* – as well as a two-day recording marathon with Johnny Cash. In both quantity and symbolic weight, the latter tracks form the heart of the set.

Received wisdom tends to cast Dylan in this period as a conservative artist, drawn to simplicity, playing well within himself. *Travelin' Thru* reveals a tale far more complex and colourful. It makes clear the extent to which Dylan's Nashville foray reframed him. It gave him a mainstream pop profile while freeing him from his past and distancing





“DYLAN IN NASHVILLE... IT KIND OF MADE SENSE” WS ‘FLUKE’ HOLLAND

him from the tumult of the present. It offered another way to confound and confuse expectations without driving himself to dangerous extremes. It sealed a historically meaningful friendship with Cash and reconnected him to the passions and mysteries of his youth. It also shows more flights of fancy and eccentric twists and turns than the previously released material from this period might suggest.

Less familiar are the frequent moments of playfulness, the sheer uncomplicated joy on display. Included on *Travelin' Thru* are the three songs Dylan performed on *The Johnny Cash Show*. Looking young and handsome in a plain suit and open-necked shirt, he plays two songs by himself – the plaintive “I Threw

It All Away” and easy rocking “Living The Blues” – before he and Cash sit down together for an acoustic duet on his 1963 ballad “Girl From The North Country”. Smiling and crooning on a set cursorily decked out to resemble a ranch house, Dylan seems remarkably at home. Being himself appears to suit him.

“You know, it wasn’t anything that we thought was strange, Dylan being in Nashville,” insists Cash’s drummer, WS “Fluke” Holland. “We were happy for him to be there; it made a kind of sense. If you think about types of music – country, rockabilly, rock’n’roll, blues, whatever – I don’t really know what you’d call the type of music that Bob was doing. It was always something different, but always him.”

DYLAN’S decision to use Nashville as the centre of his recording operation in the late ’60s was primarily influenced by two people: his producer, Bob Johnston, and Johnny Cash. The former was a Texan songwriter, producer and label executive who also guided Cash and Leonard Cohen during that period. “Bob Johnston was an interesting cat,” Dylan wrote in *Chronicles*. “He had fire in his eyes. He had that thing that some people call ‘momentum’.”

As for Cash, Dylan had adored him since he’d first heard “I Walk The Line” in 1957. “[It] sounded like a voice from the middle of the earth,” he later wrote. “It was so powerful and moving. It was profound... deep and rich, awesome and mysterious all at once.”

Cash, meanwhile, was an early adopter of Dylan. As soon as he’d heard *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan* in 1963, he sent its creator a congratulatory note, sparking a correspondence that continued until Cash’s death in 2003. In a typically audacious show of

“YOU CAN’T EDIT IT OUT”

Bootleg Series co-producer **Steve Berkowitz** talks *Uncut* through Volume 15: “This is Bob Dylan’s life”

“**T**HERE’S a guy in the Dylan office called Parker Fishel who has done a spectacular job in organising the files. It has become a cross between what’s in the Dylan vaults and what’s in the Sony vaults. We gather them together and see what they are.

“About a year ago, Dylan’s representative Jeff Rosen said, ‘Let’s focus on ’69 and Nashville.’ So Parker and I went through everything. Over the years regular review and tape maintenance goes on. ‘Do we have this, do we have that? Where is it, can we hear it?’ There are various vaults, physical and virtual. Sony has a vault in Iron Mountain in Pennsylvania. It’s like *The Planet Of The Apes*. It’s a super dome way below the ground, fire- and air- and pressure-controlled. They’re very secure, well-maintained places. There are armed guards! They work 24 hours a day, everything is barcoded and easy to find. If I were to call Iron Mountain before 4pm today, by tomorrow at 10am the tape or object would be in the studio.

“Parker and I started creating some digital files for listening, then myself and [mixing engineer] Steve Addabbo began mixing on June 10 this year. We mixed for approximately 20 days at Addabbo’s studio in New York and then edited, EQ’d and mastered with Mark Wilder at Battery Studios for an additional 20 days.

“Addabbo and I have been doing this for many years now, and the communication – verbal and non-verbal – is very good. It’s like we’re jamming! We do this hand in hand with the Dylan office; there’s give and take and back and forth. I feel artistically involved but ultimately this is Bob Dylan’s music, and life, and the answer will come from that office regarding what’s going to happen. Bob has called me on occasion, but I do most of my discussion with Jeff – and answers come back.

“There is an editorial point of view with each box, but we don’t shape this thing. Our decisions are based on what the artists did. This time, the decision came down

that we weren’t going to do a lot of repeat tracks, that we’d be able to tell the story in parallel to the albums Bob put out. Three LPs is about the size of a really good listen, it tells the story and flows chronologically. We didn’t leave anything better out for any reason. [*The sessions*] didn’t ramble on, there weren’t hundreds of takes. At other times with Bob in Nashville, compositional recordings were taking place, and songs were being invented as he was going. Here, clearly, there were songs before he went in.

“*John Wesley Harding* is not a very well-recorded record. It’s a difficult one sonically, there’s an incredible amount of compression being hit in the original recording, and a lot of guitar leaks into the vocal track. But so what! It is what it is; you can’t edit it out. The moment of creation is not inhibited by any technical adjustment.

“From the ...*Skyline* sessions, the version of ‘Tell Me That It Isn’t True’ is incredibly different and wonderful. A lot of times people go, ‘Woah, he changed his mind, I wonder why?’ Well, here’s a musician going in and playing and checking himself out, wondering how this or that would be. If you have these great musicians around you, why not give it a go? It seems to me that Bob usually chose the right version; that the music and the version raised its own hand.

“The Bob and Johnny stuff had been bootlegged and available for some time. Parts were there, parts weren’t, but nobody has ever accessed back to the real tapes and heard the bits in between, like we did. Some parts are taken from the multi-tracks, and some are from the safety quarter-inch mono running in parallel. They would let the safety tape run all the time in the studio at a slower speed in case they missed something on the multi-track. We picked up some things

on that and added it in at the correct chronological spot. We also had to use some expert engineering to bring up the volume of the studio chatter. It was so good to get that feeling of being in the room.”





Johnny Cash with bluegrass mandolinist Frank Wakefield (left) and Bob Dylan at the Newport Folk Festival, Rhode Island, July 1964



“BOTH OF THEM WERE STORY-TELLERS”
DOUG KERSHAW

approval, he promptly appropriated the structure of Dylan’s “Don’t Think Twice, It’s All Right” on his brilliant, swaggering, dubiously primal single, “Understand Your Man”.

The pair first met shortly afterwards, at the 1964 Newport Folk Festival. Cash played to the folk cognoscenti and Dylan gave him the recently written “Mama, You Been On My Mind” and also “It Ain’t Me Babe”, both of which Cash recorded on his 1965 album *Orange Blossom Special*. “Johnny and I would talk a lot about the fact that music is not a competition or a contest,” says Doug Kershaw. “He was wide open. He didn’t judge. If he liked something, he didn’t mind admitting it, and he loved Bob Dylan. Both of them were storytellers – the best.”

A year later, on May 11, 1966, filmmaker DA Pennebaker captured the two men – both seriously fried – playing Cash’s “I Still Miss Someone” backstage at Cardiff’s Capitol Theatre. A little over two

months further down the line, Dylan had his motorcycle accident in Woodstock. He cleared his diary and laid low in the Catskills. The spring and summer of 1967 were spent making music with The Band in Woodstock. Among the torrent of covers and originals they recorded were three songs by Cash, including “Big River” and “Folsom Prison Blues”, tracks he revisited during the Nashville sessions.

If Dylan had come a long way in a few years, then Cash’s music had clearly travelled with him. Cash was adaptable, an emblem of old and new America, both rebel and traditionalist. His songs were plain-spoken yet tapped into poetry, allegory and myth, ever-present aspects in Dylan’s own writing, which he was now striving to present in a more concise way. “What I’m trying to do now is not use too many words,” Dylan said. “There’s no line you can stick your finger through. There’s no blank filler.”

Cash lived just outside Nashville and had been recording there since he left Sun for Columbia in 1958. As their bond grew, he had invited Dylan and his family to stay with him at his house in Old Hickory Lake, Hendersonville. “John was trying to lure Dylan down to Nashville, to be part of that whole scene,” says Bob Elfstrom, Cash’s friend and director of the exemplary 1969 documentary, *Johnny Cash! The Man, His World, His Music*. “He even wanted Dylan to live near him out in Hendersonville. I remember him talking about that. They had extraordinary respect for one another, it was something I heard John and [his wife] June commenting on.”

Dylan was no stranger to Music City. Although *Highway 61 Revisited* was a New York record, at the behest of Johnston he had recorded “Desolation Row” in Nashville, with multi-instrumentalist Charlie McCoy adding improvised acoustic guitar accompaniment. “I didn’t even know I was

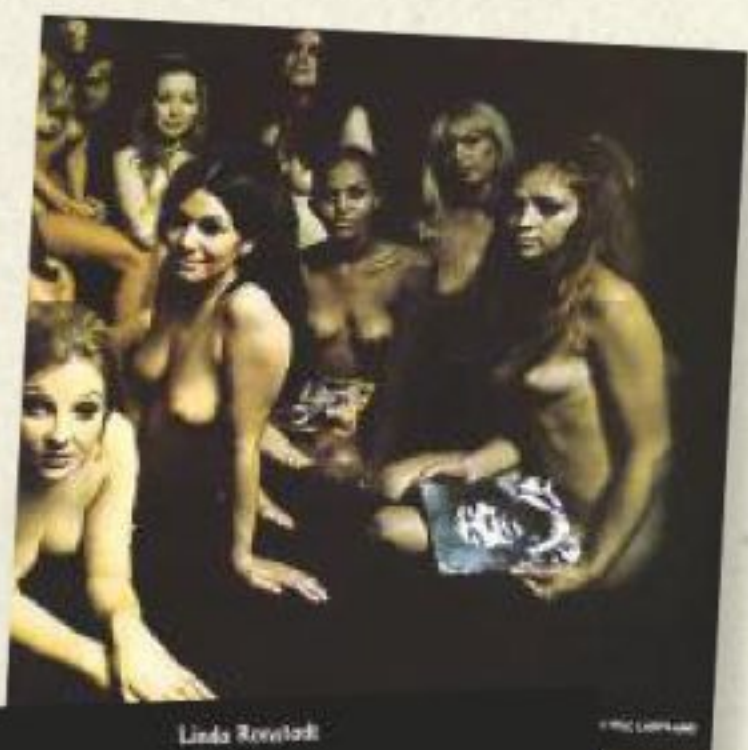
DAVID GAHR/GETTY IMAGES

NASHVILLE BYLINE

Five classic covers of late-’60s Dylan

“ALL ALONG THE WATCHTOWER”
JIMI HENDRIX,
ELECTRIC LADYLAND

TRACK, 1968
Hendrix amplifies Dylan’s simmering sense of dread to turn a low-key three-chord strum into an articulated apocalyptic howl, powerful enough to eclipse the original. Dylan agreed, writing in *Biograph*, “Since he died, I’ve been doing it that way.”



CAPITOL, 1969
A loose-limbed, all but definitive country-rock reading from Ronstadt’s debut album: drawling steel guitar, mountain-man fiddle, laid-back drums and a typically spectacular vocal performance.

“WICKED MESSENGER”
THE FACES,
FIRST STEP

WARNER BROS, 1970
Rod Stewart’s Bob Dylan obsession was evident from as far back as the



opening track on the Faces’ 1969 debut. It’s a thick, heavy reading of Dylan’s ominous parable dominated by Ian McLagan’s Garth Hudson-esque organ and Ron Wood’s searing guitar riff.

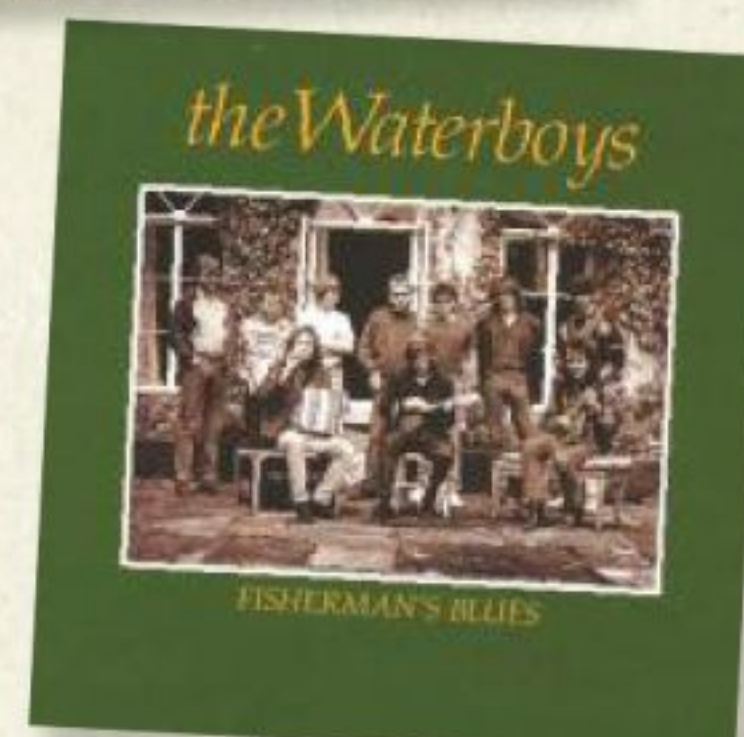
“LAY LADY LAY”
THE ISLEY BROTHERS,
GIVIN’ IT BACK

T-NECK, 1971
From cotton to silk. On an album of covers from the rock and pop genre, The Isley Brothers offer a revelatory reading which stays true to the spirit of the original song while transforming Dylan’s blue-collar song of seduction into a slinky soul ballad.



“GIRL FROM THE NORTH COUNTRY”
THE WATERBOYS,
FISHERMAN’S BLUES
COLLECTORS EDITION
ENSIGN/CHRYSALIS,
2006

This offcut from the mammoth *Fisherman’s Blues* sessions is lovingly moulded into that album’s signature style, though there are echoes of Dylan’s *Desire* in the swirling fiddle and tumbling drums. Topped off with an impassioned vocal from Mike Scott.





Dylan and Bob Johnston back in the Columbia studios to record double album *Self Portrait*, May 1969

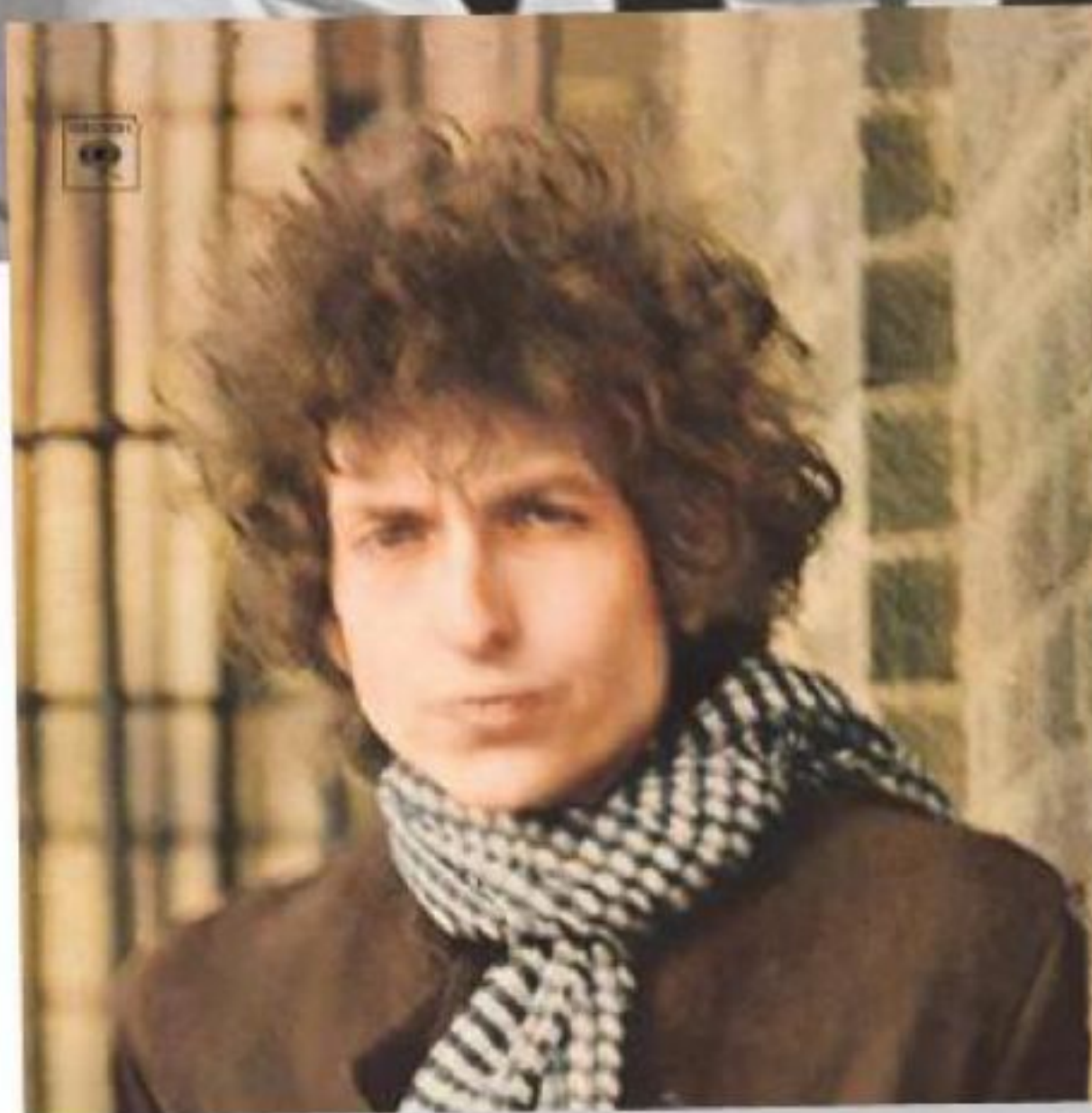
playing!” says McCoy. “I thought I was going over to meet him, and he said, ‘Oh, why don’t you grab that guitar and play along?’”

Blonde On Blonde had been completed in Nashville, using a potent mixture of New York rock players and Nashville session men. “*Blonde On Blonde* was like a marathon,” says McCoy. “I don’t know how many hours we spent in the studio recording that album. In Nashville, we weren’t used to that. The normal sessions here were very efficient and very short. He comes in with a 14-minute ballad at four in the morning, and everyone is trying to stay awake.”

Crucially, the next time Dylan came to town to record, he was willing to bend to the Nashville method: fast, organised sessions, cutting songs that were already finished. His life and mood had also altered. “Bob’s sounds and Bob’s songs had changed,” The Band’s tour manager during that time, Jonathan Taplin, tells *Uncut*. “When they were on the road in ’66, it was very brash. With *John Wesley Harding* and *Nashville Skyline*, it’s very different. It’s not angry or accusatory. He was in a loving marriage, there were kids running around. The idea of domesticity and having children was part of it, rather than being an asshole rock musician with your shirt open.”

IN October 1967, Dylan took a train from New York to Nashville. He booked into the Ramada Inn and played Bob Johnston his new compositions. Comprising simple, dream-like fables, weird frontier songs, folk ballads and parables scored with religious imagery, they were seemingly disconnected from anything Dylan had done previously. He unveiled none of them during the *Basement Tapes* sessions.

Dylan later said that on *John Wesley Harding* he was chasing the sound that Gordon Lightfoot had achieved on his second album, *The Way I Feel*,



“BOB’S
SOUNDS AND
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CHANGED”
JONATHAN TAPLIN

which featured *Blonde On Blonde* veterans Charlie McCoy and drummer Kenny Buttrey. “But we couldn’t get it,” he told *Rolling Stone* in November 1969. “It was an attempt to get it, but it didn’t come off. We got a different sound... a muffled sound.”

“*John Wesley Harding* was like a throwback,” says McCoy. “It was all scaled down and it went very quickly. In the back of our minds was, ‘Oh, another Dylan session, we’ll make a lot of money here!’ Nope, didn’t happen! I think it took us nine-and-a-half hours in total. He was better prepared for Nashville. The first time he was on unknown ground and probably didn’t know what to expect, there was trial and error as the recording went along. I think this time he came back much more comfortable.”

“I had heard about the motorcycle accident, and we were wondering what to expect when he came back in, but it was pretty much the same as before. But easier, because there were fewer musicians, the songs were all written, he knew us all, and he was ready to do it. It just flowed and everything was relatively simple. He’d play the guitar and sing the song, and we’d take notes. You listened real good, memorised on the spot and come up with something.”

Featuring Dylan on vocals, acoustic guitar, piano and harmonica, alongside McCoy, Buttrey and Pete Drake on occasional steel guitar, the sessions took place on October 17, November 6 and November 27, 1967. *Travelin’ Thru* features two outtakes from day one, and five from day two. Though Dylan was well prepared for these sessions, the outtakes reveal there was room for some musical and melodic shifts from take to take. “What’s the name of this one, Bob?” asks Bob Johnston over the studio microphone. “Name of this one is, ‘As I Went Out One Morning,’” Dylan replies, before launching into a radically different first take of the song. ➤



Rendered here as a slow, sinister waltz, it's reminiscent in feel to "One More Cup Of Coffee" from *Desire*.

Take four of "I Pity The Poor Immigrant", meanwhile, is driven by a pounding 4/4 beat, a strange echo of The Byrds' early incarnation of folk rock. Dylan struggles to latch onto the melody, which is markedly different from the released version, but seems to be having fun trying. On the second take of "I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine", the musicians add an extra beat between each line, and Dylan tries out a different lyric towards the end of the final verse: "I awoke in anger, without a place to stand or hide," he sings, for the time being at least, neither "alone" nor "terrified".

The extraordinarily adept musicians take these relatively minor differences in their stride. Their role was simply to allow Dylan to find his way – even if that way wasn't always clear. "I was the middleman between the artist, the producer and the musicians," says McCoy. "We'd run a song and I'd go to Bob to try to get some ideas of what he had in mind, and he didn't offer any suggestions! About the sum total of what he said to me over five albums was, 'Hey, why don't you grab that guitar and play along?' and, 'I don't know, man, what do you think?' I told Bob Johnston, 'I'm asking questions, he won't answer, so I'm going to do what I think is right and if he doesn't like it, hopefully he'll say something.'" Offering only occasional suggestions, Johnston simply allowed the sessions to unfold. "He knew he was dealing with a genius and he was smart enough to back off and let Dylan do his thing," says McCoy.

Back in Woodstock with the master tapes, as he would six years later with *Blood On The Tracks*, Dylan began to harbour doubts about whether the music he had made was too stark and austere. He discussed with Robbie Robertson the idea of adding electric overdubs, but ultimately decided to leave the tapes unadorned. "The whole time Dylan came here, we never overdubbed anything," says McCoy. "Everything was live. What we played, that's what ended up on the record."

Released on December 27, 1967, the 12 songs on *John Wesley Harding* barely broke the seal on Dylan's enigma. Its inscrutable fables surrendered precious few clues, although the two closing tracks – "Down Along The Cove" and "I'll Be Your Baby Tonight" – pointed towards the more easy-going sound and sensibility of his next record. There was no tour, and only one live appearance. On January 20, 1968, Dylan and The Band played three Woody Guthrie songs at a memorial concert for Guthrie at the Carnegie Hall. Oddly, these performances have no place on *Travelin' Thru*. Closer to the helter-skelter circus spirit of the *Basement Tapes* than the spare nature of *John Wesley Harding*, perhaps they belong to another story.

More revealing intimations of how Dylan had been spending his time away from the spotlight became evident when he returned to Nashville to record in February 1969. He did so armed with a handful of bucolic country-flavoured songs essaying romantic love, conjugal lust, domestic harmony and a pinch of easily digestible



Dylan and The Band perform at the Woody Guthrie memorial concert in New York City's Carnegie Hall, January 20, 1968



**"WE NEVER
OVERDUBBED
ANYTHING.
EVERYTHING
WAS LIVE"
CHARLIE MCCOY**



heartbreak. He had written most of them in the month leading up to the recording.

He returned to Studio A, with Johnston producing and Buttrey, McCoy and Drake augmented by guitarist Kelso Herston and bluegrass stalwart Norman Blake. Bob Wilson came in on keyboards. "It was pretty much the same, we had a little more instrumentation," says McCoy. When guitarist Wayne Moss couldn't make one session, Johnston drafted in an old friend, Charlie Daniels, for the day. At Dylan's insistence, he ended up staying for the entire sessions.

According to Daniels, "*Nashville Skyline* didn't take a lot of direction. The music was coming out of him, and it just flowed like a stream. If he had a riff or something specific he wanted, he would ask for it in a certain place. Other than that, he'd stand and play with his guitar, and everybody would start chiming in and interpreting it. Most of the stuff would come with the first interpretation. If Dylan can get it in the first take, he wants it on the first take. He didn't want to play that thing 20 times. There was no floundering around trying to find arrangements or anything."

The evidence of the eight ...*Skyline* outtakes featured on *Travelin' Thru* largely backs up Daniels' recollection. There are no radical reinventions, but there is joy in the detail. Of particular note is the first take of "To Be Alone With You", a wonderfully loose tilt, with crackling guitar and an exceptional vocal.

"Tell Me That It Isn't True", meanwhile, is endearingly light and flighty. Dylan claimed the song was written for Jerry Lee Lewis as a "jerky, kinda polka type thing", but ended up "real soft and mellow". On *Travelin' Thru*, it lands somewhere in the middle. An early version of "Lay Lady Lay" is more intimate, devoid of Buttrey's bongos and cowbell. Daniels was particularly struck by the beauty of that song. "It made such a profound impression on me. The chord progression he was playing, I'd never heard before."

The one previously unheard composition from the sessions, "Western Road", starts so quickly the

engineer fails to capture the opening seconds. A slow, free-associating 12-bar loosely based on an old blues, "Going To Chicago", recorded by Jimmy Rushing and Dizzy Gillespie, among others, it wouldn't have sounded out of place on *Blonde On Blonde*, or indeed *Time Out Of Mind*. It's a fun vamp, but it's not hard to see why Dylan decided it might not fit with *Nashville Skyline*. The fact that the version included on *Travelin' Thru* has a truncated introduction indicates that it may not have been attempted more than once.

"Western Road" also features a harder vocal than is typical of the album, suggesting Dylan may have been shaping his voice to suit the more countryfied material. The musicians who had worked with him previously picked up on the change; he now crooned with a light, melodious tone, which he attributed to stopping smoking. "I noticed that, and wondered if it was a Nashville influence," says McCoy. "You know, he really did have a genuine love and knowledge of that kind of music."

SHORTLY into the *Nashville Skyline* sessions, Bob Johnston set up a studio summit with Dylan and Johnny Cash, backed by Cash's live band, The Tennessee Three: guitarist Bob Wootton, bass player Marshall Grant and drummer WS 'Fluke' Holland.

Cash was on the crest of a wave. He had recently overcome the worst of his drug addiction, while Johnston had helped resurrect his wayward fortunes with the groundbreaking *At Folsom Prison*, one of the biggest records of 1968. Later in the month, he recorded *Live At San Quentin*. By the end of 1969, he'd be as famous as he ever would.

CASH & DYLAN: BEYOND NASHVILLE...

DYLAN and Cash remained close after their 1969 connection. Bob Elfstrom recalls Dylan attending a private screening of his Cash documentary and having dinner with him and June Carter Cash in New York during the same period. "We all met with Bob in the Plaza Hotel and walked to some fancy restaurant nearby to have dinner," he says. "The maître d' instantly recognised both Dylan and Cash and was incredibly effusive, tripping over himself. Then he happened to notice that Sara Dylan was pregnant and wearing maternity slacks, and he wouldn't seat us in the restaurant! We had to walk out and go to some other restaurant and have a very mediocre meal. We all had a good laugh about it."

Dylan biographer Clinton Heylin wrote that the pair had another session planned for 1970, which seemingly never occurred, but their paths crossed again when they were both in Israel at the same time in 1971: Dylan on a private trip, Cash filming *The Gospel Road*. At the 30th-anniversary concert held for Dylan at Madison Square Garden in October 1992, Cash and June performed "It Ain't Me Babe". The pair continued to correspond until Cash's death in 2003.

Stretched over two consecutive days, the duo sessions mark the high-water mark of the interaction between two artists with much in common but also fascinated by what made them different. On the night of February 17, they cut three songs together. Documentary maker Bob Elfstrom was invited along; his footage of the pair singing "One Too Many Mornings" appears in *The Man, His World, His Music*. "Neither of them could remember the lyrics, and the session had to stop for an hour if not longer," Elfstrom recalls. "They had people dashing around the building to find a copy of the lyrics so they could do the song."

The lightly bearded Dylan sports a pale-brown work shirt; Cash is wearing a blue dress shirt. They stand facing each other in the centre of the studio, both playing acoustic guitars. There is little eye contact as they trade verses and negotiate the key changes on a song that had originally appeared on Dylan's 1964 LP *The Times They Are A-Changin'*. The mood feels a trifle stilted, until Cash adds the suffix "Bob" at the end of a line, Dylan responds, they crack up, and things begin to loosen up.

"The general impression I had was that it was highly improvised," says Elfstrom. "They would go and listen to playback and then try something else. Very casual. They were having fun together." Sadly, the rest of the footage Elfstrom shot that night has vanished. "I've never been able to track it down," he says. "As far as I know, all that survives is what's in the Cash film."

This light-hearted mood sustains throughout the takes featured on *Travelin' Thru*. The highlight of the first night is a mash-up of Dylan's "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right" and Cash's brazen

Two Bobs for Cash: Dylan, the 'Man In Black' and Johnston in the studio, Nashville, February 1969





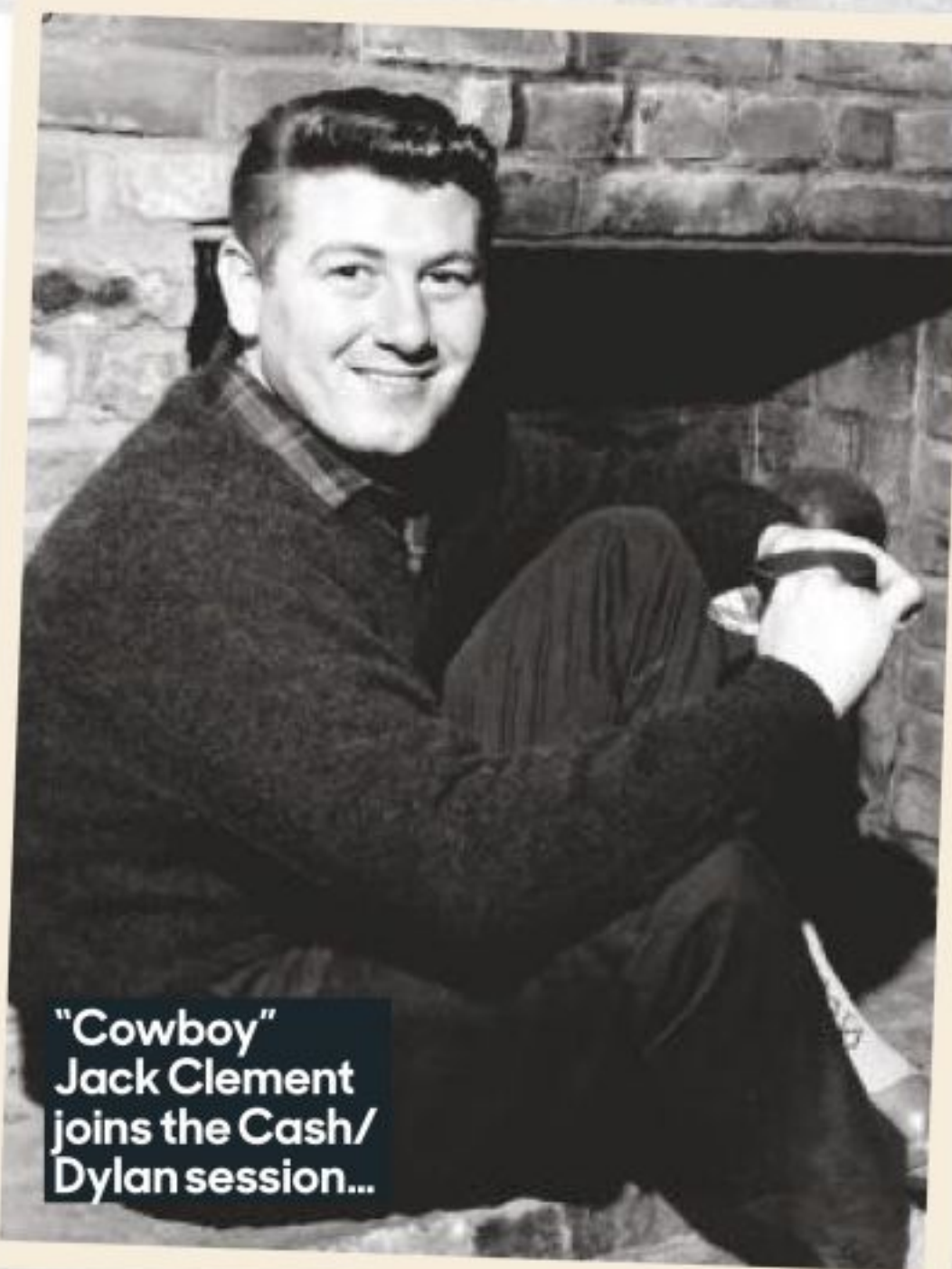
doppelgänger, “Understand Your Man”. The men sing their own compositions separately before, at Cash’s behest, they swap, singing the other’s song simultaneously over the same chord pattern. “Do you know it?” Cash asks Dylan with a chuckle, adding, “We both stole it from the same song...” – a reference to the fact that the melody was liberally ‘adapted’ from Paul Clayton’s 1960 song, “Who’s Gonna Buy You Ribbons When I’m Gone?”

It’s a revelatory moment, as Cash’s daughter Rosanne Cash acknowledges in the sleevenotes to *Travelin’ Thru*. “To hear them sing each other’s words, in rounds, weaving in and out of each other, Bob more confident in playing with the notes and phrasing than Dad, Dad directing the form, is genuinely endearing, a little wacky and creatively hazardous, yet it works... It’s the quintessence of their joy in each other’s presence.” Later, they sit in the control room, listen back and laugh. Cash chews a red biro. The clock on the wall reads 20 minutes to midnight.

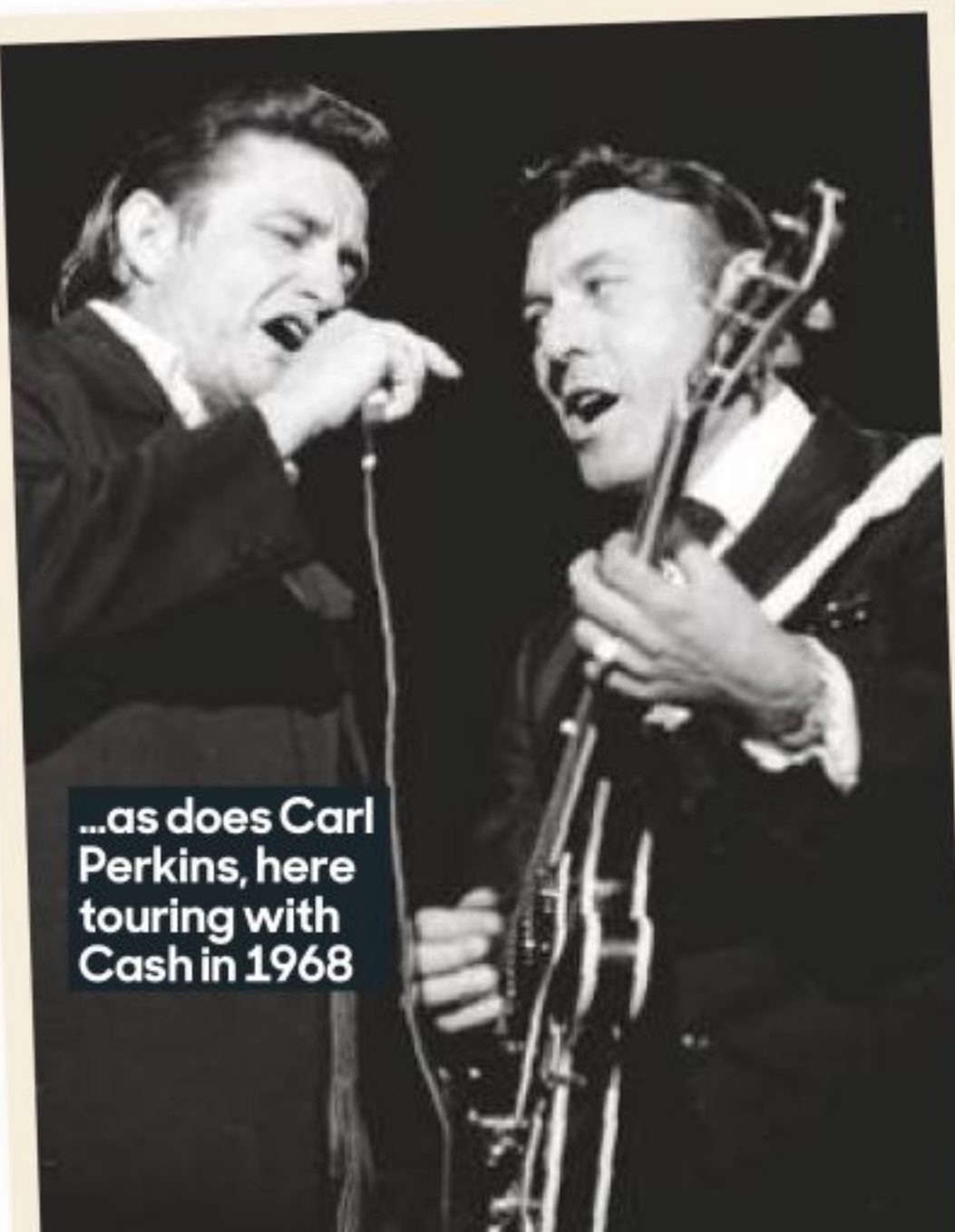
They convened again the following day, cutting further versions of their own songs alongside old country tunes, rock’n’roll staples, traditional standards, religious hymns, Jimmie Rodgers blue yodels and much else besides. “It was kind of like a Sun Records session,” says WS Holland, who played drums on both days. “We go in, and nobody knew exactly what they were going to do or sing. We were more or less cutting up and having a big time, and not really all that serious about being really good. We didn’t think too much about what we were doing.”

Talking to *Rolling Stone* in November 1969, Dylan balked at the interviewer’s suggestion that he might release an album of Cash duets. “I believe that we would both have to go back into the studio and record some more songs,” he says. He’s right, yet the sessions are far from throwaway. “I Still Miss Someone” seems tentative on the second attempt, but by the fifth take it’s solid: the harmonies are passable, and Dylan sings the alternate verses sweetly. Bootleg Series co-producer Steve Berkowitz confirms that there are further takes in the vaults of these songs, suggesting a concerted effort to get usable versions.

Yet in Cash, Dylan had also found a man who shared his love of making music on the hoof. “We didn’t ever



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really know what John was thinking when he went into a session,” says Holland. “He liked to be spontaneous. He did things on impulse, and often it worked really good.”

Travelin’ Thru shines a fascinating light on the dynamic between the two friends. As the session rolls on, it becomes clear that Cash is the dominant figure. As well as being the older of the pair by nine years, and the more established artist, “This was his hometown and he was hosting the whole thing,” says Elfstrom. “Dylan was a bit of a guest there.” Steve Berkowitz is even more succinct: “Columbia, Studio A, Nashville. It was his place.”

On the tapes, you hear Cash generate the fuel that keeps the session running. He’s a fount of ideas, demands, suggestions, ad libs and cornball jokes. It’s almost jarring to hear Dylan being so compliant, yielding readily to direction. On “Mountain Dew”, Cash says, “You know, this would be real funny if you talked off a verse...” and Dylan duly gives it a good-natured stab. Later the Man in Black asks, “What religious songs do you know, Bob?”, prompting Dylan to offer a strangled “amen” in response to Cash’s earnest testifying. On “Careless Love”, there’s much light-hearted messing around with numbers relating to various firearms. There’s further joshing on “Five Feet High And Rising”: “How high’s the water, Bob?” jabs Cash. “How high’s the manure, Bob?”

It is June Carter Cash, chipping in from the control room, who first suggests they try “Girl From The North Country”. Dylan isn’t sure; it was a long time ago, he says. There follows a wonderfully fragile first rehearsal, Cash cradling the words like a newborn, coaxing Dylan into participating.

During the second day, some auspicious visitors drop by. Songwriter and producer “Cowboy” Jack Clement comes in to say hello, prompting a tilt at Clement’s “Guess Things Happen That Way”, a pop hit for Cash back in 1958. “I don’t know the words to this,” says Dylan. “You’ll have to lead this one...”

Carl Perkins had joined Cash’s touring troupe in 1968 and was recording an album in Studio B while Cash and Dylan were next door. His arrival prompted a nostalgic gallop through three old Sun Records staples, Perkins contributing guitar to his own early rock’n’roll classic “Matchbox” as well as Elvis Presley’s “That’s All Right Mama” and “Mystery Train”. Dylan is game, while Cash seems ready to combust. In the coming days, Perkins will match a loping rhythm to a scrap of lyric Dylan had in his back pocket, before adding some improvised words. “Your song. Take it. Finish it,” said Dylan. Their co-write, “Champaign, Illinois”, ended up on Perkins’ next album, *On Top*.

Travelin’ Thru also yields the first ever recorded version of “Wanted Man”, a tongue-in-cheek outlaw song written by Dylan with Cash squarely in mind. A week later Cash used it to kick off his set at San Quentin. He must have done his homework in the interim, because in Nashville the song is a mess, both men tripping over the endless list of cities where the authorities are seeking help with their enquiries. Even then, Cash is alive to improvisation. The last two cities he ad libs are Hibbing and Dyess – the two men’s respective hometowns. “Cash is very present in there,” says Berkowitz. “He seems that he’s just rattling off songs, but he’s right there. He was a dynamic human being, you can always hear that.”

The sessions end with a Jimmie Rodgers medley which illustrates that rapt fandom – both men idolised the Singing Brakeman – does not necessarily translate into musical gold, especially when it

BOB DYLAN

comes to yodelling. Indeed, the notion of a whole album of duets was probably fatally scuppered by the fact that neither Cash nor Dylan blended as duet partners. "They worked in different registers, phrased idiosyncratically, and rarely sang anything the same way twice," writes Colin Escott in the liner notes. "If the Everly Brothers were consummate duettists, creating subtle overtones between their two voices, Cash and Dylan were two guys singing together."

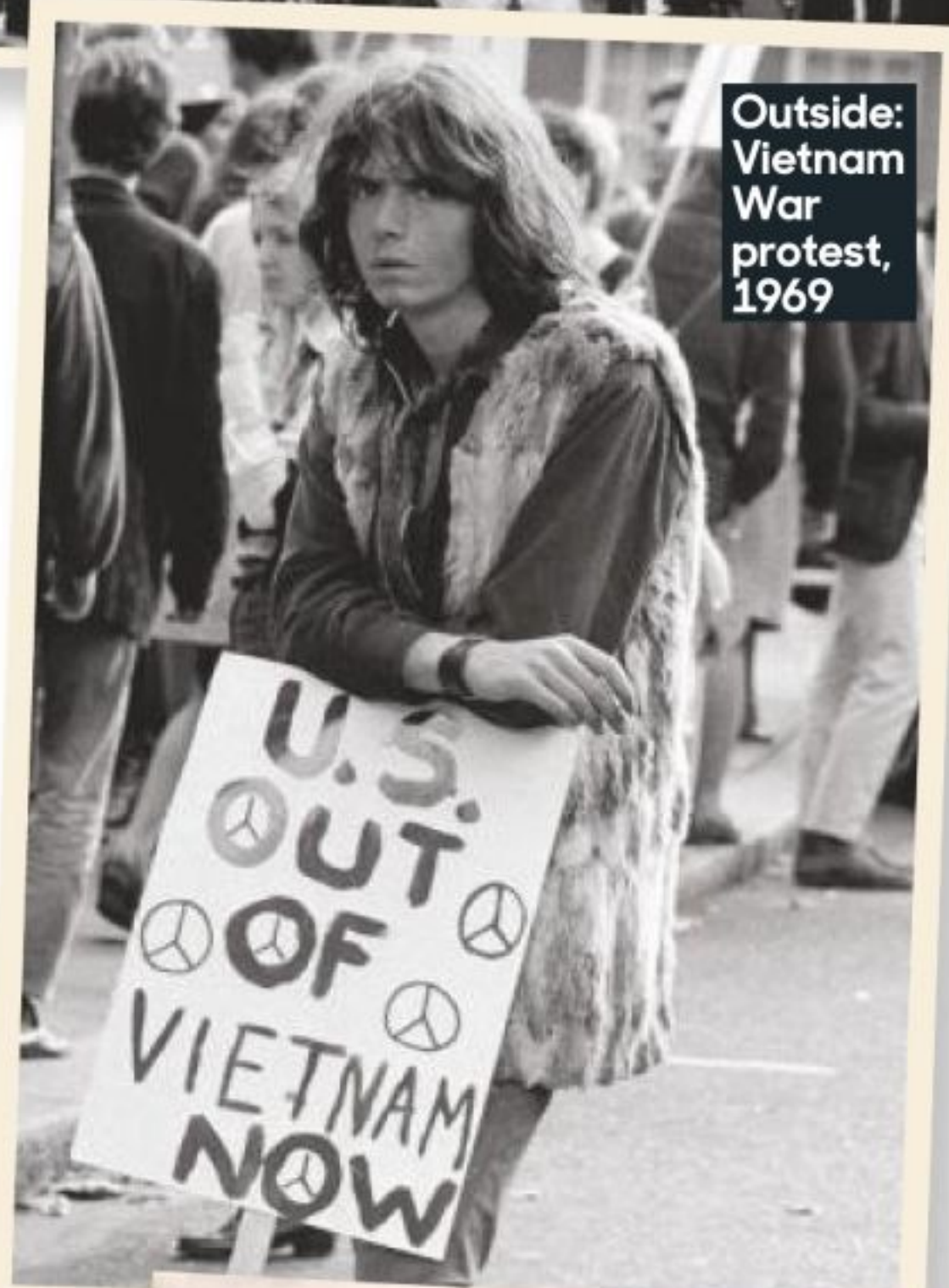
"It's a recording of two guys doing a song pull on a porch – except it's *those* two guys!" says Steve Berkowitz. "There is clearly a joy and mutual respect. They're liking doing this – and they know a lot of songs! They've had incomparable success, but they really love playing and they love music. They're doing this American history thing, just calling it out like brothers or cousins. It's a beautiful thing to hear that moment of creation."

Nashville Skyline wrapped 10 days after it began, on February 21. In the end, only "Girl From The North Country" from the Cash sessions was included on an album that clocked in at a mere 27 minutes. "First thing you knew it was in the can and over with," says Daniels. "He booked 15 sessions and we didn't use anywhere near that amount. It was such a pleasure. He was very warm, he was smiling and having fun. That characterised the sessions."

In and out of the studio, Daniels encountered a man who seemed at ease with himself and his surroundings. "One day I took my son to a circus in Nashville, and I looked across to the other side of the ring and there was Bob Dylan with Bob Johnston. You don't really equate Bob Dylan with the circus! I went over and said hello. Another time, we went over to Johnston's boat, which was moored at this long wooden dock. There had been a lot of rain, and water had flooded over the dock, so I took Bob across on my back! He



Inside: Cash at San Quentin State Prison, Feb 24, 1969



Outside: Vietnam War protest, 1969

was just like a regular guy. It was all very friendly and personable."

The album was released on April 9, 1969. In the age of Vietnam, the Black Panthers and Charles Manson, Dylan was singing about country pie and his big brass bed. The record company wanted to call it 'Love Is All There Is'. In certain circles, *Nashville Skyline* seemed an unforgivable abdication. "He was looked upon as a spokesperson for that generation, a leading figure," says McCoy. "For some people, it begins to weigh on them."

Cash recognised that Dylan's heart now lay somewhere else. His poem – "Of Bob Dylan" – appeared on the back cover and acknowledged the manner in which his friend was drawing from traditional sources, including from Cash himself, to better articulate his present circumstances. "There are those who emulate/At times, to expand further the light/Of an original glow."

THE impact of *Nashville Skyline* was bolstered by Dylan's first TV appearance for five years. Although it was in many respects an old-fashioned variety turn, *The Johnny Cash Show* on ABC was also a place where country culture met the

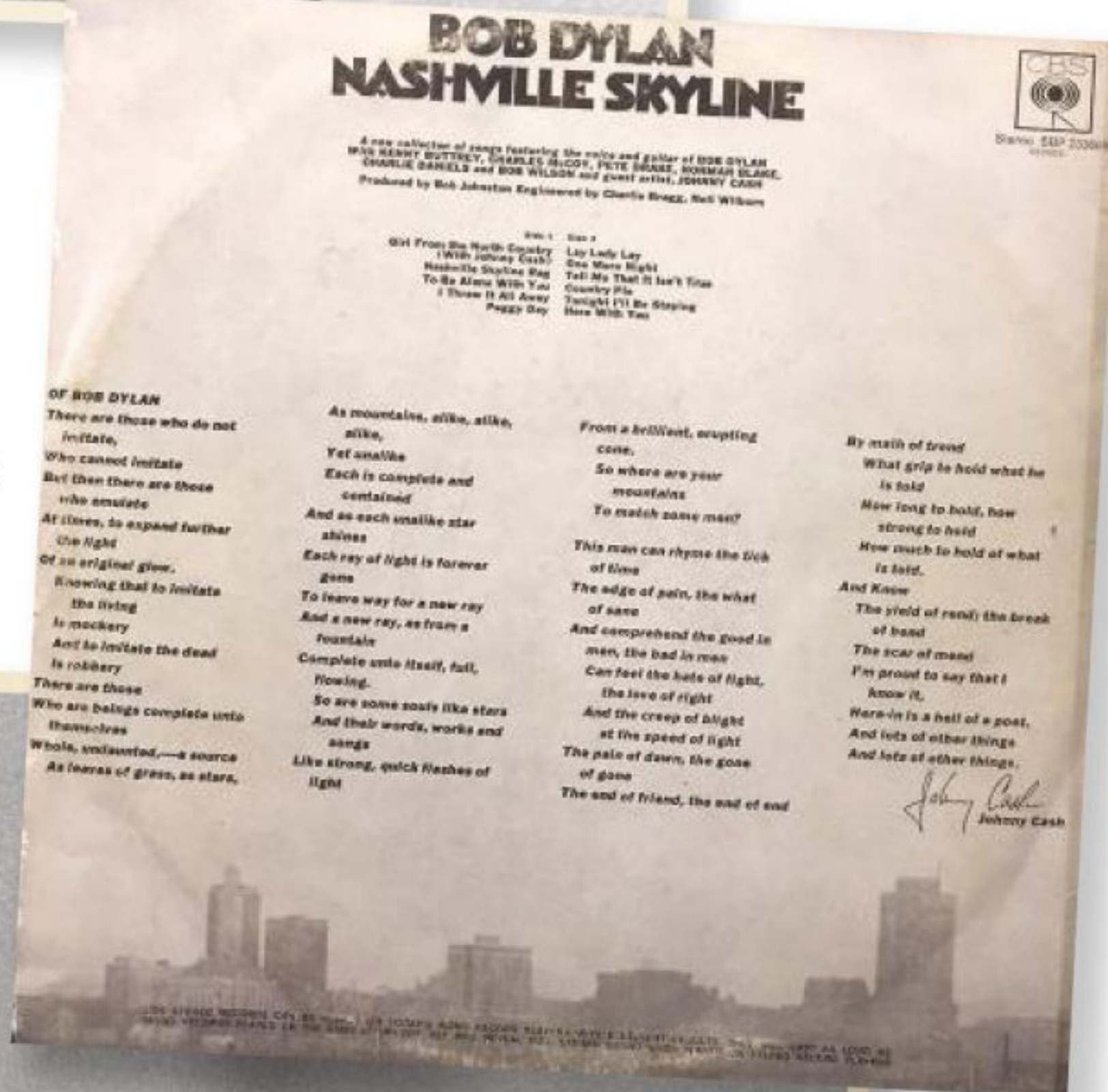
counterculture, where pop and rock met folk, where tradition met resistance and red met blue. Perhaps only Cash at that point in his career could have brought it all together. He loomed over it like some vast redwood under which almost anyone could gather and exchange ideas. "Three things happened that made Johnny Cash a superstar," says Holland. "The two prison shows, and then the TV show. It skyrocketed him into superstardom. So many people came on that show, it was a big deal."

It was important to Cash that Dylan appear on the inaugural show, which taped on May 1, 1969, and was broadcast five weeks

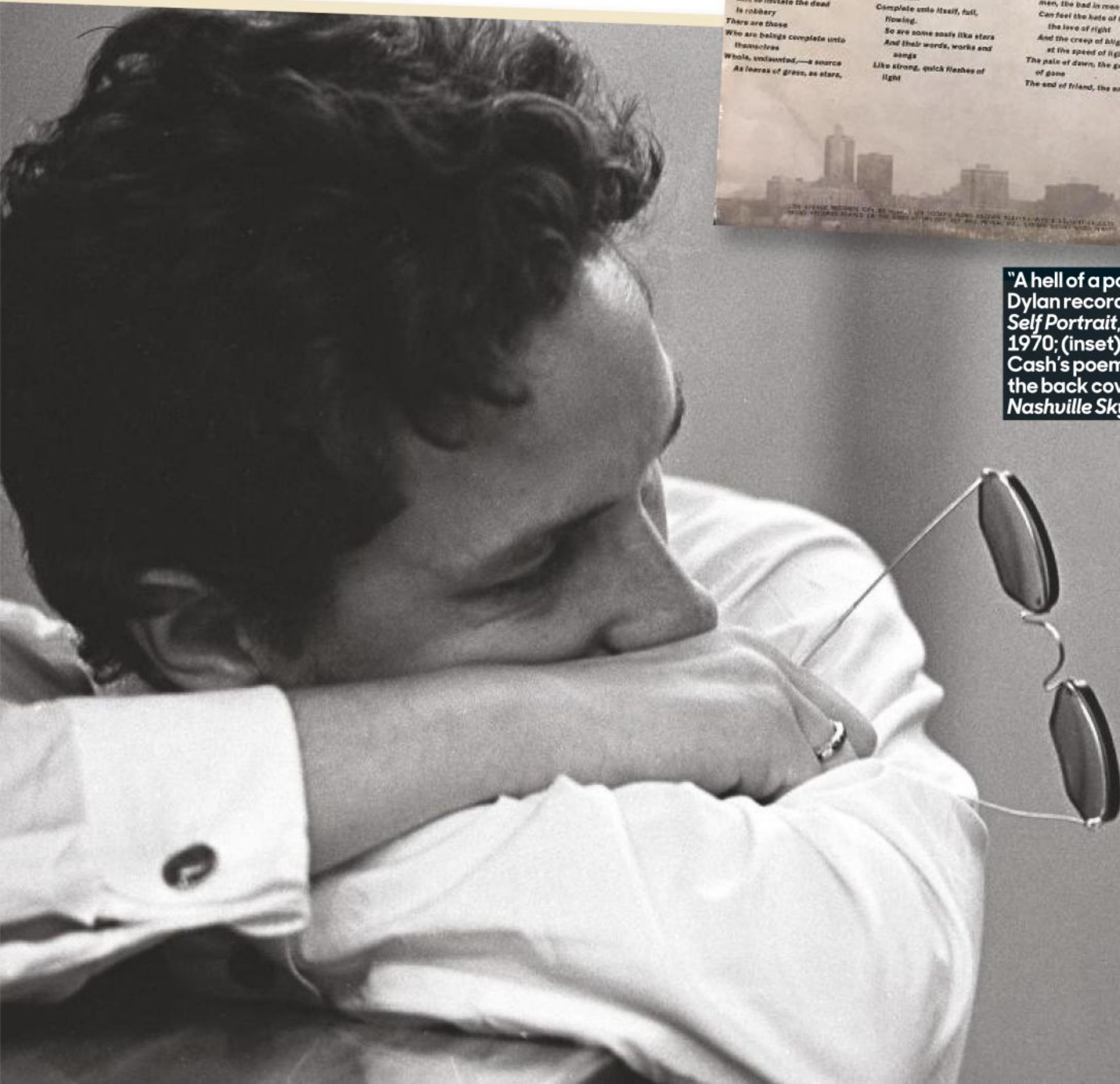
later, on June 7. And it is a mark of the esteem in which Dylan held Cash that he agreed to do so. He hated appearing on television, felt numbed by its rote repetition and harsh glare.

"It was a different thing for him," says Charlie Daniels, who was part of his backing band that night. (*Travelin' Thru* credits Charlie McCoy on guitar, but both men confirm it was Daniels.) "He was not as loose and relaxed as he was in the studio. There was no problem, but it was not as much his home territory. Everything was time sensitive and had to be blocked in the afternoon and shot at night. It was a much more controlled situation."

Nonetheless, he performed well. His duet with Cash on "Girl From The North Country", two-and-a-half months after the *Nashville Skyline* sessions, is considerably more together than the version released on the album. The symbolism, too, was strong. Here were two of America's great individualists, singing together in public, bridging some great perceived



"A hell of a poet": Dylan recording Self Portrait, April 1970; (inset) Cash's poem on the back cover of Nashville Skyline



cultural divide. The performance, writes Rosanne Cash, “sealed the terms and permanence of the revolution”.

Afterwards, he and Cash went to see Doug Kershaw play at the Black Poodle in Printer’s Alley. “How impressive was that?” says Kershaw. “It made me comfortable that they were there, because it was their choice. There was an incredible electricity that night.”

Two days later, Dylan’s Nashville story came to an end. Late on the night of May 3, 1969, he cut his final sessions in the city, recording several tracks that ended up on *Self Portrait* – and a handful that wouldn’t. Two outtakes are included on the tail end of *Travelin’ Thru*: a truly wild version of Cash’s classic “Ring Of Fire”, which prefigures the punk-gospel fervour of his late-’70s work, and a breakneck ride through “Folsom Prison Blues”. The circle was complete.

In the 50 years since, he has never again recorded in Nashville, but the legacy of that period has rolled on. It’s now clear that something of the spirit of the Cash sessions informed *Self Portrait*, which can be viewed as a continuation of the two men’s freewheeling approach to the songs they loved, regardless of critical kudos or genre. The appeal of vocal harmonies had stayed with him, too. He returned to the idea on his version of Simon & Garfunkel’s “The Boxer”, on which he overdubbed his own harmony vocal to sing – erratically – with himself. “It was beautiful, and very honest,” says Kershaw, who played on *Self Portrait*. “I respect him for saying, ‘Let me sing for you the things I learned and loved.’”

Certainly, he has rarely sounded so enchanted with the simple magic of music-making as he did during his time in Nashville.

Going there had been a gamble, yet the risk paid off, both commercially and creatively. In September 1969, “Lay Lady Lay” became Dylan’s biggest hit for over three years, giving him a Top 10 single in America and the UK, and reaching the kind of heartland audience his other songs simply could not penetrate. *John Wesley*

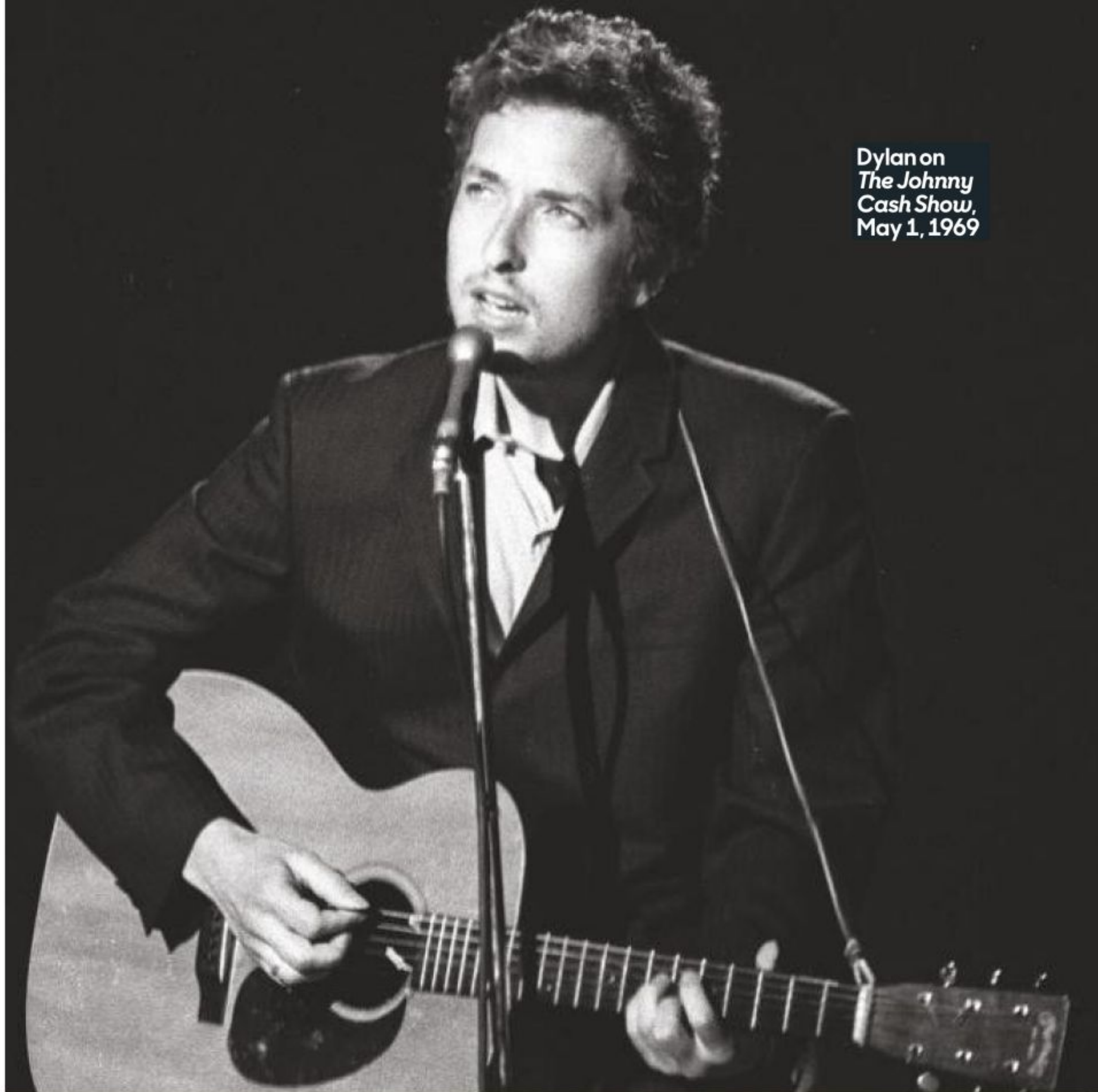
“I’M NOT PROBABLY AS AWARE OF THAT CHANGE AS YOU ARE” BOB DYLAN

Harding went to No 2 in the US, *Nashville Skyline* to No 3. Both albums reached the top spot in the UK.

More significantly, by swerving the Summer of Love and its slipstream and instead camping out in plainer pastures, Dylan once again broke new ground for those in his wake. “After Bob, everybody else in that genre of music came to Nashville, the floodgates opened,” says Charlie McCoy. “The scene drastically changed.” The 18 months between the recording of *John Wesley Harding* and *Nashville Skyline* coming out saw the release of such pioneering works as The Byrds’ *Sweetheart Of The Rodeo*, The Flying Burrito Brothers’ *Gilded Palace Of Sin*, The Band’s debut and Buffalo Springfield’s first two albums. All owed something – often a lot – to Dylan’s latest change.

Reflecting in late 1969 on the arc of the journey he’d undertaken over the preceding three years, Dylan said, “I’m not probably as aware of that change as you are.” For him, it was all part of the process. “I learned a long time ago you never try to predict what Bob is going to do,” says Charlie Daniels. “People say that he’s constantly reinventing himself, but I don’t think that’s it. He just touches on different facets that he has inside him.” In other words, Dylan didn’t ‘go country’ between 1967 and 1969. The music he gravitated towards was already part of him. It was simply a matter of travelling through. 🎸

Bob Dylan (featuring Johnny Cash) – Travelin’ Thru, 1967 – 1969: The Bootleg Series Vol 15 is released on November 1 by Columbia Records and Legacy Recordings



Dylan on
The Johnny
Cash Show,
May 1, 1969

TRAVELIN’ THRU: THE BOOTLEG SERIES VOL 15

DISC 1

JOHN WESLEY HARDING SESSIONS – ALTERNATE VERSIONS

- 1 Drifter’s Escape – Take 1
- 2 I Dreamed I Saw St Augustine – Take 2
- 3 All Along The Watchtower – Take 3
- 4 John Wesley Harding – Take 1
- 5 As I Went Out One Morning – Take 1
- 6 I Pity The Poor Immigrant – Take 4
- 7 I Am A Lonesome Hobo – Take 4

NASHVILLE SKYLINE SESSIONS – ALTERNATE VERSIONS AND OUTTAKES

- 8 I Threw It All Away – Take 1
- 9 To Be Alone With You – Take 1
- 10 Lay Lady Lay – Take 2
- 11 One More Night – Take 2
- 12 Western Road – Take 1
- 13 Peggy Day – Take 1
- 14 Tell Me That It Isn’t True – Take 2
- 15 Country Pie – Take 2

DISC 2

THE BOB DYLAN – JOHNNY CASH SESSIONS

- 1 I Still Miss Someone – Take 5
- 2 Don’t Think Twice, It’s All Right/Understand Your Man – Rehearsal
- 3 One Too Many Mornings – Take 3
- 4 Mountain Dew – Take 1
- 5 Mountain Dew – Take 2
- 6 I Still Miss Someone – Take 2
- 7 Careless Love – Take 1
- 8 Matchbox – Take 1
- 9 That’s All Right, Mama – Take 1
- 10 Mystery Train/This Train Is Bound For Glory – Take 1
- 11 Big River – Take 1
- 12 Girl From The North Country – Rehearsal
- 13 Girl From The North Country – Take 1
- 14 I Walk The Line – Take 2
- 15 Guess Things Happen That Way – Rehearsal
- 16 Guess Things Happen That Way – Take 3
- 17 Five Feet High And Rising – Take 1
- 18 You Are My Sunshine – Take 1
- 19 Ring of Fire – Take 1

DISC 3

THE BOB DYLAN – JOHNNY CASH SESSIONS

- 1 Studio Chatter
- 2 Wanted Man – Take 1
- 3 Amen – Rehearsal
- 4 Thee – Take 1
- 5 Jimmie Rodgers Medley No 1 – Take 1
- 6 Jimmie Rodgers Medley No 2 – Take 2

LIVE ON THE JOHNNY CASH SHOW

- 7 I Threw It All Away
- 8 Living The Blues
- 9 Girl From The North Country (Duet with Johnny Cash)

SELF PORTRAIT SESSIONS – OUTTAKES

- 10 Ring Of Fire
- 11 Folsom Prison Blues

WITHEARL SCRUGGS

- 12 Earl Scruggs Interview
- 13 East Virginia Blues
- 14 To Be Alone With You
- 15 Honey, Just Allow Me One More Chance
- 16 Nashville Skyline Rag