

D - nice piece, this

ONE STEP BACK

Greil Marcus

Just a Song, Luring the Listener to a Road Not Taken

frost, match...

In 1997, Jakob Dylan's band, the Wallflowers, sold four million copies of its second album, "Bringing Down the Horse." Led by the hit single "One Headlight," it stayed in the Top 10 for most of the year and, sustained by the single "Three Marlenas," the album is still on the radio.

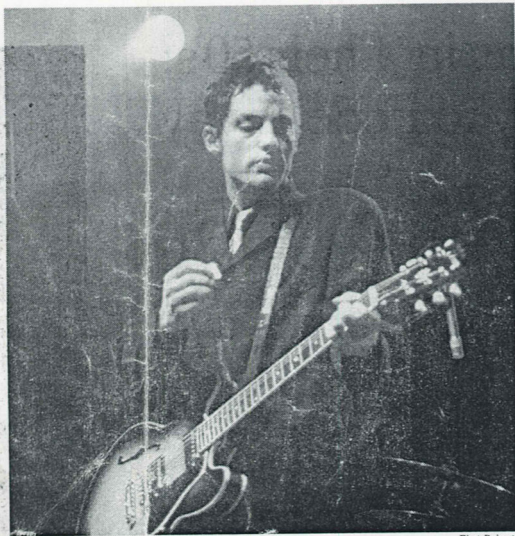
Thirty-five years after the release of his first album, Bob Dylan, Jakob Dylan's father, was all over the news. Death-scare headlines circled the globe in May when he was hospitalized for a heart infection. In September, he performed for the Pope in Bologna, Italy. In October, he released "Time Out of Mind," his first album of original songs in seven years, to universal critical acclaim. In December, he was honored at the Kennedy Center in Washington.

This confluence of circumstances prompted a major metropolitan daily to send out calls to various they-should-knows asking if in 35 years Jakob Dylan would loom as large as his father does today.

Why should he? It's a dumb question; it's also irrelevant. Because so much money is at stake, pop music seems to be about careers. But beneath the surface, perhaps on the level where the money is made, pop music is really about a social fact. At any moment, anyone might have something to say that the whole country, even the whole world, might want to hear, and maybe only one such thing. The ruling values of pop music might seem to be situated in the accumulation of fame and riches. They might be found in the way a song can turn your day around and then disappear.

A singer reaches you with a song. He or she has no responsibility to reach you with another one, and you have no responsibility to respond if he or she tries. Heard or overheard, a song — on the radio, in a bar, hummed by someone standing next to you in line — diverts you from the path your day has taken. For an instant, it changes you. But you can forget about it as surely as you may feel shadowed until you hear it again.

Or, rather, you may try to forget about it. You may not be allowed to. A hit song you don't like is an oppressive mystery. Granted that almost every female person of my acquaintance considers Jakob Dylan the cutest thing currently walking on two legs, what was he doing dully offering "One Headlight" until spring turned into fall? It was like watching



Ebet Roberts

Jakob Dylan: "I'm going right through heaven's gate."

someone do a jigsaw puzzle with four pieces, over and over again. As omnipresent hit singles go, "One Headlight" was too flat to be more than a mild headache, and of course you could always change the station. It takes a great single, like Hanson's "MMMBop," the most ubiquitous record of last year, to produce a migraine. You need a piece of music so delightfully catchy, so insidiously marvelous, that you can't change the station, a song you can't stop hearing even if you turn the radio off.

That was the story in a skit built around Hanson's recent appearance on "Saturday Night Live." The three teen-age Hanson brothers enter an elevator. Suddenly two terrorists (the guest host Helen Hunt and the cast member Will Ferrell) rush in, shut the door and hold the boys at gunpoint. "MMMBop" has driven them insane, and they want nothing less for Hanson. Earplugs in place, the terrorists stop the elevator between floors, put "MMMBop" on a CD player set to "repeat," and wait. It takes only an hour or so for the

first Hanson to crack; his mouth jerks up in a horrible grin. A few hours later a second Hanson succumbs. The third just keeps on happily tapping his feet. Mr. Ferrell takes out his earplugs; a smile spreads over his face, and he too begins to move. Realizing he's gone over to the other side, Ms. Hunt has no choice but to execute him on the spot.

That's one way to settle the mystery of a hit single. But some singles, like the Wallflowers' current "Three Marlenas," are mysteries that intensify until they finally float off the airwaves and disappear into the air.

The song walks in and out of the struggles of people who have no money and expect none. Jakob Dylan plays the simplest cadence on his guitar, never varying it. A piping organ makes the people you're hearing about seem bigger than their small lives, even heroic. Then all the orchestration falls away, and only the guitar is left, counting off the time. The whole piece pauses, and the singer says the hell with it. He's going to get a car and drive it, with the top

down and the radio on. The eavesdropping tone of his descriptions of other people is replaced by a bitterly casual James Dean vehemence. "I'm going right out of state," Mr. Dylan says. "Now, I ain't looking back until I'm going/ Right through heaven's gate."

He stretches the word "heaven" as far as it will reach. He bets all he has on that word and the next, but without tipping his hand. Though his face remains impassive, the phrase "heaven's gate" works as a magnet, pulling in metaphors from every direction, filling up the hole that has opened in the music.

The hole is filled with 39 members of Heaven's Gate, the seekers who killed themselves last March, well after "Three Marlenas" was recorded but before it reached the radio and stuck there. It is filled with Genesis 28:17, where Jacob, in terror, dreams his way up his ladder to "the gate of heaven" and with "Hark! hark! the lark at heaven's gate sings," from the seduction song in Shakespeare's "Cymbeline."

Mr. Dylan's song is filled with the slowly building disaster of the 1980 Michael Cimino movie about the Johnson County War, where "Heaven's Gate" were words painted on a tented roller rink in Sweetwater, Wyo., in 1892. In that roller rink, for what it's worth, the musician T-Bone Burnett, the onetime Bob Dylan accompanist who produced the Wallflowers' "Bringing Down the Horse" (Interscope), was the leader of the film's "Heaven's Gate Band."

Merely working in culture, with all questions of intent moot, Jakob Dylan has called up these metaphors. With his song weighted by events he could never have foreseen and analogues he may never have known, he creates the sense that wherever the singer in his song is going, he isn't coming back. It's as if he expects to find heaven's gate closed and even hopes it will be, so he can drive right through it and break it down.

Listening, you can almost see it happen, but the picture won't come into focus. So you listen harder every time you come across the song, wanting nothing more than to go all the way into the mystery that has presented, until finally you just get tired of trying. The day comes when you find the song playing and you hear nothing at all. Like so many singles, the record has gone back where it came from, wherever that is.