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Bob Dylan: Annotated Bibliography (Third Place)

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The main point of my research project was an influence on Bob Dylan’s work: Blind Willie McTell. McTell was a famous early blues singer that largely influenced Dylan’s participation in blues music. His voice, sound, and lyrics are evident in many of Dylan’s later works. After the passing of Willie McTell, Dylan wrote a tribute song to pay homage such a large influence in his life. The song titled ‘Blind Willie McTell’ acknowledges that, “No one can sing the blues / Like Blind Willie McTell” after every verse.


The main argument made by Attwood in this article is against Dylan’s tribute song. Attwood acknowledges through his work that although ‘Blind Willie McTell’ is, “not only a perfect song, with not a word out of place, the classic recording that we have is itself wonderful” (1). Attwood is debating and attempting to explain why this work wasn’t released at the time that it was created. He suggests that Dylan wasn’t satisfied with his presumably perfect work, and perhaps it is due to the fact that the actual lyrics of this song, “ha[ve] nothing to do with the music of Blind Willie McTell” (3). Attwood argues that the vague references and the name calling of Willie McTell are not directly related to the story telling aspects of the song.
I found this piece to be an interesting contrast to most of the research I found when analyzing this song. Attwood questions the direct correlation between the lyrics of Dylan’s song to the influence of McTell’s. I liked using this source because it wasn’t the typical, repetitive article that I found, however I did find myself questioning the legitimacy. When listening to McTell’s music and the song ‘Blind Willie McTell,’ the influence is obvious in the musical style and voices of the artists. The direct lyrical connections are indeed less direct, but after the research done, I was able to find hints of McTell’s life and work. Although I may not agree with Attwood, I do find his position interesting and a contrast to the rest of my research.


Beviglia is giving a detailed review on Dylan’s song, ‘Blind Willie McTell,’ in his article for American Songwriter. He begins with the explaining that Dylan, “was sitting on a treasure trover of unreleased classics,” and later released them all in an album titled Bootleg Series in 1991 (1). Beviglia describes Dylan’s technique when writing the song as creating a, “brilliantly structured and eloquently rendered,” piece in awe of Blind Willie McTell (3). His review of the whole album, but particularly this song, was full of positivity and praise to both of the artists. He continues to elaborate on details of the song and how the story of McTell is told, but ends his article questioning by Dylan left the song to stand alone on his album instead of showcasing the song in one of his more famous albums.

During my research I wanted to look at both a positive and negative review of Dylan’s blues inspired song. However, the verdict that was reached about this song was pretty much praise around the board. His song paying homage to Blind Willie McTell was widely popular and this review by Beviglia is one of the most loving responses. Although hardly anyone has
something negative to say, his words are and ideas about the song are backed up by quotes from
the song and the history of the making. I found his article to be helpful when explaining the
general view of Dylan’s tribute song and I agree with the opinions Beviglia has about the song
and Dylan’s failure to better inform his audience on such a great work.


Michael Gray created an encyclopedia on the various aspects of Bob Dylan’s life and what
shaped it. In this section, Gray encompasses the life of Blind Willie McTell and how his work
influenced Dylan. When Gray discusses the techniques of Willie McTell, he speaks with
positivity and describes McTell as, “explod[ing] every archetype about blues musicians” (449).
Gray establishes a legendary feeling that McTell creates through his music and his style, as well
as the types of performances he participated in and how his career was not the most successful,
but one of the most important in blues music. When relating McTell to Dylan, Gray discusses
Dylan’s song about the famous musician but also discusses more than the musical influences he
had on Dylan, such as religion.

I found this chapter of the encyclopedia to be very useful to my research because of the
extended history given about McTell. This section is a chronological line of McTell’s life and
music. He discusses multiple influences of McTell’s and how his life shaped his music. This
history further explains his music and the power his music has, which can help explain why
Dylan was so deeply influenced by McTell. The direct parallels between the two artists are
useful and unbiased information that I have used in my project to explain the meaning behind
Dylan’s famous song about Blind Willie McTell.

This section of Catharine Mason’s scholarly paper is explaining how Dylan’s work was largely influenced by numerous factors of blues music. The main focus on this particular area of influence is the language used in both blues songs and Dylan’s own work, but also factors in the aspects of, “vocal texture and color, singing behind the beat, and the use of twelve-bar rhythms” (1). Mason primarily includes details of Dylan’s later career in the 90’s and specifics of Blind Willie McTell’s influence on Dylan’s voice. Mason encompasses the idea of one of McTell’s most famous pieces, ‘Broke Down Engine,’ from the notes of Dylan. She quotes Dylan in saying that, “Broke Down Engine” is a Blind Willie McTell masterpiece” and includes his interpretation of the song and how Dylan used this piece to influence his sound on later works.

The work of Mason was interesting for my project because of the direct correlation she makes when describing McTell’s influence on Dylan. Specifying the song that had the largest influences on Dylan was helpful when comparing the sound of the music and voices of the two artists. One factor that did concern me when reading this article, however, was the opening line: “It may seem to be stating the obvious when pointing to the fact that Bob Dylan's songs carry the voices of master blues singers,” because Dylan is not primarily or solely a blues musician, as Mason is insinuating. His later works do obviously have the influence of blues music, but to say that Dylan is voicing master blues work could be an over statement and cloud the actual facts that are correlated with Dylan and blues. That being said, I overall think that this paper was very informative with specifics of musical correlations and quotes that help validate Mason’s point.
In this selection of Howard Sounes book, he is piecing together Dylan’s life while on sabbatical. Dylan came to recording sessions with a wide variety of songs to record for his upcoming album, *Infidels*, one of these songs being ‘Blind Willie McTell’. Sounes describes this song as, “simply one of the greatest songs he [Dylan] had ever written” (354). The purpose of the chapter is to exemplify how this song depicts a strong and compelling tribute to the blues singer and his African American heritage. This specific piece is unique because Dylan is specifically naming the person he is paying homage to and expressing his appreciation towards the musician in a semi story-like song.

I found this source to be useful because of the way it explains the purpose of the song. Sounes describes the scene by using quotations in which a popular journalist asks why this song wasn’t on the album, to which Dylan simply replies, “Didn’t make it,” (356). This caused a strong reaction because, according to Sounes and many others, ‘Blind Willie McTell’ is one of Dylan’s best pieces. I found this information to be odd because if Dylan was writing and recording a tribute song about a musician he so passionately cared about, I questioned why it wouldn’t have made the album. I still think that the message delivered in the song and the meaning behind it are very endearing and important, but Dylan’s decision leaves me questioning how much he truly cared about the song.