

Who Governs the Musical Canon?
The Case of Bob Dylan's Great American Songbook Recordings

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Musicologists offer various theories about the formation of musical canons, which are catalogs of music compositions considered to be culturally significant. Some scholars suggest that a musical canon is constructed by outside authorities. Others argue that it is determined by tradition. Still others propose that a canon results from the collective efforts of multiple contributors. To this we can add yet one more alternative, a blended theory that makes room for both authorities (critics) and contributors (composers, lyricists, and performers). When authorities determine what belongs in a musical canon, they consider songs that have already been written in light of the songs' historical and cultural value. When various contributors compose and then perform and record covers of certain songs over a long period of time, they (the collective performers) form a canon through the process of musical borrowing and reworking. Together, several types of actors create a canon through their diverse activities, all of which create a blended process of canonization.

Considering canon formation as a multi-layered theory with diverse actors who work together leads us to Vincent and Elinor Ostrom's theories of (1) polycentricity, (2) frameworks, theories, and models, and (3) voluntary association. Vincent's challenge to "understand how patterns of polycentricity might extend to the whole system of human affairs" can be applied to the affairs of music composition, performance, and scholarship.¹ We must also recognize, as Elinor did, that "scholars are slowly shifting

¹ Vincent Ostrom, "Polycentricity: The Structural Basis of Self-Governing Systems," in *Choice, Rules and Collective Action*, ed. Filippo Sabetti and Paul Dragos Aligica (Colchester, UK: ECPR Press, 2014), 48.

from positing simple systems to using more complex frameworks, theories, and models to understand the diversity of puzzles and problems facing humans interacting in contemporary societies,” which allows us to examine the Great American Songbook and Bob Dylan’s contributions to it with a rather sophisticated model that contains multiple levels of analysis.² Finally, we see that voluntary association, which both Ostroms addressed, sustains the Songbook beyond the lifetime of any one of its contributors.

What is the Great American Songbook?

We must first consider the question, what is the Great American Songbook? The Great American Songbook Foundation, founded in 2007 by Michael Feinstein, answers the question this way:

The “Great American Songbook” is the canon of the most important and influential American popular songs and jazz standards from the early 20th century that have stood the test of time in their life and legacy. Often referred to as “American Standards,” the songs published during the Golden Age of this genre include those popular and enduring tunes from the 1920s to the 1950s that were created for Broadway theatre, musical theatre, and Hollywood musical film.³

Ann van der Merwe writes: “The American Songbook is an unofficial collection of songs, most of which were written in the United States between the 1920s and the 1950s. . . .

While there is no definitive list of selections in the songbook, there is general consensus about its contents and the important musical traits these songs share.”⁴

² Elinor Ostrom, “Beyond Markets and States: Polycentric Governance of Complex Economic Systems,” in *Choice, Rules and Collective Action*, ed. Filippo Sabetti and Paul Dragos Aligica (Colchester, UK: ECPR Press, 2014), 167.

³ “What is the Songbook?,” The Great American Songbook Foundation, May 29, 2019, <https://thesongbook.org/about/what-is-the-songbook/>.

⁴ Ann van der Merwe, *The American Songbook: Music for the Masses* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 1.

Despite the legitimate ambiguities that van der Merwe recognizes—evidenced by the phrases “unofficial collection of songs” and “no definitive list of selections in the songbook”—there are many attributes that scholars generally agree upon. The Songbook contains songs with words and music written by lyricists and composers. The songs, as popular music, were rooted in vaudeville and musical comedy and later flourished in revues, musicals, and movie musicals. Musicians in big bands and jazz ensembles performed these songs in dance and concert halls and on radio broadcasts and phonograph records. Sheet music, for a time, also promoted the American standards.⁵

The early activities of creating and performing songs fueled the music industry, dubbed Tin Pan Alley. Max Morath describes the synergy between creators, meaning the lyricists and composers, and interpreters, who are the musicians who perform and record the songs. He writes: “The inherently collaborative relationship between songwriter and performer invited the kind of innovation that allowed these songs to find their best expression, unburdened by the imprint of any one previous artist.”⁶ Collaboration between a song’s creators and interpreters, then, yields a variety of performances. Interpretation continued in the decades following a song’s genesis as artists—such as Dylan, Bing Crosby, Rosemary Clooney, Louis Armstrong, and Willie Nelson, among others—collectively produced a limitless number of versions of the song.

⁵ Though the Songbook is a collection of pieces which many musicians collectively utilize, it is not a commons in the Ostromian sense of a limitless natural resource that must be managed carefully.

⁶ Max Morath, *The NPR Curious Listener’s Guide to Popular Standards* (New York: Berkley Publishing Group, 2002), 4.

“Star Dust” and “Stardust”

Bob Dylan treats his Great American Songbook recordings to the same practice followed by generations of musicians, which is to imprint the standards with his own unique stamp. He models his versions on the melodies and harmonies of the original songs, which is why the songs sound familiar to our ears. Then, he adds his own personality to the standards through musical style, which he conveys through texture and rhythm.

For his third album on *Triplicate*, called *Comin’ Home Late*, Dylan recorded “Stardust,” which was composed by Hoagy Carmichael in the mid-1920s. If we think of the songs that have moved into the Great American Songbook as the cream of the crop of American standards, then “Star Dust” is easily in the top one percent. Will Friedwald writes that by the 1960s, “Star Dust” “had been recorded at least five hundred different times and its lyric translated into forty languages.”⁷ In 1999, NPR included the song in their top 100 list of American musical works in the twentieth century. The 1927 recording by Hoagy Carmichael and his Pals has not only been inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame, but has also been included in the National Recorded Registry, where it is preserved by the Library of Congress. This is a song with a significant cultural legacy.

For his legendary recording, which took place on October 31, 1927, at Gennett Records in Richmond, Indiana, Carmichael assembled a seven-man jazz band. He himself played the piano for his mid-tempo instrumental jazz piece. The lyrics by Mitchell Parish were written and added in 1929. The recording begins with a brief guitar introduction. A

⁷ Will Friedwald, *Stardust Melodies: The Biography of Twelve of America’s Most Popular Songs* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2002), 3.

sixteen-bar verse with trumpet solo precedes two statements of the chorus, one by the band with the saxophone soloing out the melody, and the other a piano solo by Hoagy. The entire band then plays a coda comprised of the last sixteen bars of the piece, or what we would call the second half of the chorus.

Bob Dylan released “Stardust” as a single in digital format on March 10, 2017, three weeks before he released *Triplicate*. The makeup of his band differs significantly from Carmichael’s. Dylan is backed by five band members who create the style and sound of a country song rather than a jazz piece. Dylan restricts himself to vocals only on *Triplicate*, leaving the instrumentals to his band. “Stardust” begins with an introduction in which the first sixteen bars of the chorus are soloed out on the guitar. The verse is left out entirely. Dylan then sings an entire chorus of the song, followed by an instrumental coda, again with guitar solo, comprised of the last eight bars of “Stardust.”

Dylan both models his “Stardust” upon Carmichael’s that is, melodically and harmonically—and deviates from the model to establish his own interpretation. Like the guitar introduction in Carmichael’s original recording, Dylan’s guitarist performs the introduction, which is significantly longer than Carmichael’s. Carmichael and His Pals perform two choruses while Dylan and his band present one. Both versions use music from the last half of the chorus as closing material; Dylan’s coda, at eight bars, is half as long as Carmichael’s. Dylan imprints “Stardust” with his own style by modifying Carmichael’s structure—for instance, eliminating the verse—and rendering the song with a sound derived from old country music rather than early jazz.

With “Stardust” and *Triplicate*, Dylan turns to established songs that were composed decades ago, some before he was born. This is a practice that Dylan has

maintained throughout his career, starting with his eponymous first album from 1962. By engaging with a legendary song and a historic musical style—old country—Dylan asserts that what is old can still be new.

“Lifting Them Out of the Grave”

Each performance or recording of an American standard creates a new interpretation of the original composition. As countless performers, including Bob Dylan, interpret a standard, they produce innumerable versions of that work. When composers and performers use existing music to create new music, they conscientiously interact with historical artifacts to yield fresh re-workings of a standard. Their interpretations establish the Great American Songbook as a flexible canon of the most important American musical songs of the twentieth century.

By covering American standards for *Triplicate*, Bob Dylan participated in the millennia-old practices of using pre-existing material to produce new creative works. There is an identifiable musical process at work, one that J. Peter Burkholder calls musical borrowing and reworking. Burkholder created a typology that describes how composers use existing music, one of which is modeling, and he delineates several aspects of modeling. These are “modeling a work or section on an existing piece, assuming its structure, incorporating part of its melodic material, imitating its form or procedures, or using it as a model in some other way.”⁸ We have seen several of these techniques at work in “Stardust” as Dylan alludes to many of Carmichael’s structural elements, such as the guitar introduction and instrumental coda, and retains the melodic

⁸ J. Peter Burkholder, “The Uses of Existing Music: Musical Borrowing as a Field,” *Notes* 50 (March 1994): 854.

and harmonic material. Dylan's cover—all covers, in fact—can be considered a type of modeling.

Triplicate is not Dylan's first album of covers of American standards, but rather the third in a trilogy that includes *Shadows in the Night* and *Fallen Angels*, released in 2015 and 2016, respectively. Speaking of *Shadows in the Night*, Dylan said, "I don't see myself as covering these songs in any way. They've been covered enough. Buried, as a matter a fact. What me and my band are basically doing is uncovering them. Lifting them out of the grave and bringing them into the light of day."⁹ By claiming to uncover the standards, Dylan asserts agency over the process of revitalizing a musical canon.

On one hand, Dylan is right to recognize that his interpretations of the standards help to enliven the Songbook canon, and he does so with the voice of authority or, to use Joseph Kerman's term, the critic. But Kerman distinguishes between a canon and a repertory: "A canon is an idea; a repertory is a program of action."¹⁰ Canons are determined by critics while repertories are defined by performers. In Kerman's theory, the power to establish and maintain a canon resides with the critic. Anne Shreffler, by contrast, uses the terms canon and repertory interchangeably, allowing her to connect the contents of a canon to the mutability of the canon: "a canon's contents—what's in and what's out—is by its very nature amorphous."¹¹ As Shreffler equates canon and repertory

⁹ Bob Dylan, "Hear Bob Dylan's 'Stay With Me' from New Covers Album," *Rolling Stone*, May 29, 2019, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/hear-bob-dylans-stay-with-me-from-new-covers-album-182207/#!>

¹⁰ Joseph Kerman, "A Few Canonic Variations," *Critical Inquiry* 10 (Sept. 1983): 107.

¹¹ Anne Shreffler, "Musical Canonization and Decanonization in the Twentieth Century," original English version. Published in German translation as "Musikalische Kanonisierung und Dekanonisierung im 20. Jahrhundert" (translated by Fabian Kolb) in *Der Kanon der Musik: Theorie und Geschichte. Ein Handbuch*, hrsg. von Klaus Pietschmann und Melanie Wald (Munich: Edition text + kritik, 2013), 10.

by using them as synonyms for each other, we can, by extension, create a more equivalent relationship—what the Ostroms would describe as polycentricity—between the roles of critic and performer in canon building. This gives canonical agency to the performer, as well. By integrating Kerman’s and Shreffler’s theories—either of which are, on their own, too simple to grapple with the complexity of the Songbook canon—we can create a multi-layered theory that helps us to achieve a richer understanding of the dynamic processes involved in creating and sustaining a canon. We can argue, then, that both critic and performer are, as Vincent Ostrom puts it, “formally independent but choosing to take each other into account, functioning in mutually accommodating ways,” as they engage with the musical canon or, in our case, the Great American Songbook.¹²

We can thus observe that Bob Dylan seems to simultaneously fulfill both roles in a modified way. As the critic, he evaluates his own musical work in light of the Songbook canon since these are the pieces that, as Max Morath puts it, “have earned a life of their own, an established niche in American music.”¹³ As the performer, Dylan follows a program of action by creating contemporary versions of canonical pieces that help these songs to continue to live their lives.

On the other hand, Dylan’s contributions to the Songbook are not sufficient to vivify the standards. Ongoing interpretation is necessary to preserve and renew the American standards. Canonization is only possible when many people record these songs, as Shreffler explains: “The number of performances and recordings of a work . . . reflects the desire of musicians to perform them, of large companies to invest in them, and of

¹² V. Ostrom, 45.

¹³ Morath, 35.

audiences to listen to them.”¹⁴ What Shreffler and Morath both recognize is that a twentieth-century canon like the Songbook resulted from the activities of numerous performers who performed and recorded its contents over a substantial length of time. The interactions between performers create what Vincent Ostrom terms “rich assemblages of associations” between people who, as an aggregate, organically determine which songs represent the best in twentieth century American music.¹⁵ Thus, the critic becomes one member of the canonization process, rather than the sole determiner of the canon, and the Great American Songbook is sustained as performers engage in a continual process of interpreting and evaluating the standards. Dylan’s interpretations are essential to this process, but so are his associations with other performers within the canon if the Songbook to survive beyond his lifetime.

Bob Dylan interacted with the Great American Songbook as he recorded his trilogy of albums devoted to American standards from 2015 to 2017—*Shadows in the Night*, *Fallen Angels*, and *Triplicate*. By covering these standards, which means to model them on existing songs like “Stardust,” Dylan participated in the process of musical borrowing and reworking. Dylan perceives his agency as an interpreter who gives life to these songs and enlivens the canon of American standards, thus fulfilling dual roles as critic and performer. The canonization process for twentieth century American music must occur as aggregates of people—performers and critics alike—voluntary associate with each other within the canon to continue the process of musical borrowing and reworking, which reinvigorates the Great American Songbook.

¹⁴ Shreffler, 9.

¹⁵ V. Ostrom, 45.

To engage with the Songbook, Dylan temporarily left the world of songwriting, an activity that ultimately garnered him the 2016 Nobel Prize in literature, to sing the texts created by other lyricists. In fact, Dylan won the Nobel Prize while he was in the middle of recording the standards. He chose not to play the guitar, harmonica, or piano, devoting his full attention to the melody and lyrics. His entry into a genre that he once claimed to have killed supports Roger Scruton's observation that some "ageing pop stars . . . develop . . . by returning to the Songbook."¹⁶ As Dylan entered the world of the Songbook, he came full circle by creating albums of songs written by other lyricists and composers, just as he did on his eponymous first album over fifty years ago. Thus, Dylan established himself as an interpreter of American standards and claimed responsibility for ensuring the viability of the Great American Songbook.

Vincent and Elinor Ostrom's ideas can help us understand Dylan's sense of agency towards sustaining the Songbook in the dual roles of critic and performer. Lin's approval of scholars moving away from simple theories towards more sophisticated ones stemmed from her own desire to understand problems and solutions in their complex reality. Her posture helps us musicologists recognize that we can build a multi-layered theory of canonization. Thus, music scholars can observe the agency of both critics and performers as they invigorate the canon of American standards in a polycentric way. The Great American Songbook cannot be sustained by Dylan's efforts alone, but requires the voluntary associations of musicians with each other as they create covers of the American standards. As we pursue Vincent's exhortation to expand polycentricity to all areas of human affairs, including music scholarship, the Ostroms' theories illuminate the rich,

¹⁶ Roger Scruton, *Music as an Art* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2018), 244.

complex human relationships that are created when performers engage in the dynamic process of musical borrowing and reworking.