

A CERTAIN PERIOD OF SINGING:

A NEWLY REVEALED '63 RECORDING UN-WRITES A MYTH SURROUNDING THE MAKING OF 'TALKIN' WORLD WAR III BLUES'

by James O'Brien

Sometime around the start of the gig, that Sunday evening in 1963, someone went downstairs at Club 47, in Harvard Square, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and performed a typical before-show task. They turned on a reel-to-reel recorder.

Upstairs, a microphone – probably suspended from the ceiling, according to Betsy Siggins, who helped manage the club at the time – began to pipe the sounds of that week's hootenanny down to the equipment in the cellar. Under the mic, that April 21: Eric Von Schmidt, Jack Elliott, and others.¹ The others happened to include Bob Dylan.



Club 47 - 1958

Dylan was in the Boston area having just completed a two-day run of performances at Café Yana, a club outside Kenmore Square.² It was a crucial month in his career; he was an artist in the middle of massive changes. Other than playing his first concert at Town Hall in New York, nine days earlier, Dylan had agreed to bring on Tom Wilson as his new producer, and he was about to go into Columbia's Studio A to address a problem with his newly pressed album, *"The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan"*.³ The label was recalling early copies of it from promotional outlets and shop shelves.⁴ The issue with it revolved around one song: *'Talkin' John Birch Paranoid Blues'*.

Even prior to the collapse of Dylan's May 12 appearance on the *Ed Sullivan Show*, which would come in connection with the singer-songwriter's desire to perform *'John Birch'* on the air, Columbia foresaw legal problems with the song's inclusion on the second LP: lawyers worried that it could prompt a libel suit from the John Birch Society.⁵ And so, Dylan was to return to the studio on April 24 – the idea being that he would record something else to replace *'John Birch'* on the now-withdrawn platters. On April 21, with that session still some seventy-two hours away, he arrived at Club 47 with a lyric in his head: *'Talkin' World War III Blues'*.

When he performed the song, that day, the reel-to-reel captured it all. Though the tape has never been available to

the public – kept and protected by Siggins since the club closed in 1968⁶ – it has recently been restored and transferred into the digital realm by audio experts at Harvard University. As she has shared it, for the purposes of this article, a new understanding of how *'Talkin' World War III Blues'* came to be is now possible.

That is, since at least 1986, critics have speculated that Dylan wrote *'Talkin' World War III Blues'* in the studio, or mostly in the studio, and that it represents some kind of on-the-spot or improvisatory feat. Listening to the tape of his April 21 performance, it becomes clear that none of this is the case.

It was not halfway-done, on April 21, as Robert Shelton describes it, in "No Direction Home".⁷ It was neither spontaneously written in the studio nor some partially worked out idea, as Heylin writes about it in "Behind the Shades Revisited" and also *"Revolution in the Air"*, and as William McKeen puts it, in "Bob Dylan: A Bio-Bibliography".⁸ And if it was composed specifically for the studio sessions, as Todd Harvey suggests in "The Formative Dylan", it was so fully formed, by April 24, that Dylan would sing essentially the same words on the Columbia take as he did at the Cambridge club, several days before.⁹

Unfortunately, the mythology surrounding the song's genesis has crept into the history of the music of the time; it can be found in books about artists other than Dylan. For one example, there is Tim Riley's "Tell Me Why: A Beatles Commentary", of 2002, where he refers to "the improvised narrative of Bob Dylan's *'Talkin' World War III Blues'*" (10) It is an example of the nasty tendency that biographical and historical misinformation tends to exhibit: once in print it keeps showing up in new places.

Granted, the Club 47 reel-to-reel wasn't available to historians of Dylan (or anyone else) in 1986, or the 1990s, or the 2000s, but it is also the case that biographers and historians writing about *'Talkin' World War III Blues'* do not explain their assertions that the song was made up in the studio, wholly or partially on some spot. And so, this article is intended to correct the record.

The recently discovered and restored Club 47 tape reveals that Dylan possessed a finished version of the song as early as three days before Wilson flipped any switches in New York City. And while the song, musically and lyrically, would turn out to be a somewhat fluid piece as time went on, the looser and more improvisatory elements that critics have attributed to its creation on April 24 only manifest, if one judges by bootleg-album evidence, months after the song was pressed and released on vinyl. Further details about the history of the tape itself come at the end of this article, but first the matter of the song.

April 1963: Unveiled Recordings and the Well-Known Track

If the Club 47 tape starts at the beginning of his performance, then Dylan's musical performance on Sunday, April 21, 1963, began with a harmonica. Its opening blast doubles with Eric Von Schmidt's own harp, and the two begin a kind of musical sparring, good-humoured in the manner of their playful teasing of each other during Von Schmidt's introduction of Dylan to the room.

Von Schmidt plays and sings the lead. The lyric is in part that of *'Glory, Glory, Hallelujah (Lay My Burden Down)'*, an American spiritual, but the pair sings some different words from those typically associated with it. Von Schmidt and Dylan sing "body" rather than "burden," incorporating it into lines other than the song's nominally titular refrain – additions such as: "I'm going home now to meet my mother, when I lay my body down."

Dylan shout-sings echoes to his colleague's words, his voice just behind Von Schmidt's in the mix. Their harps tangle in the air. It's an aggressive rendition, loud and a little bit chaotic. The recorder in the basement registers the crowd's response: they love what they hear.

The tape doesn't quite tell what happens next, but something changes – there's a jump from applause to quiet. Dylan is apparently alone before the same audience, presumably in the same room on the same date – it sounds like the same room and show, and Siggins says that it is, and that she was there, by way of confirmation – and he is talking to them about what he should play next. He begs off a request, saying he doesn't remember the song. A chair scoots across the wood or tile floor. Dylan tries out a bit of harmonica; he plucks a string.



Dylan with Siggins at Club 47

"Here's a song," he says, suddenly closer to the microphone. "This is a talking one. I always have to talk songs when I ... in a certain period of singing. When you can't sing 'em to good, I sing talking ones. This is called *'Talkin' World War III Blues'*."

A little laugh, someone claps, Dylan gives a warbling run up and down the harp, and the guitar begins. To the ear, what is initially different from *"Freewheelin's"* *'Talkin' World War III Blues'* has to do with the music coming from Dylan's strings.

On the album, Dylan picks his way into the song along a "descending melodic motif" – as Harvey describes it¹¹ – and he then comes back up along a series of ascending notes, accenting almost every following chord with a kind of

syncopated attention to the low notes, descending and ascending. Richard J. Scott writes that the structure of the song is a C-F-G7 chord progression, and that the "alternate bass notes" augmenting the three-cord structure is the case in many talking blues.¹² The bass notes are particularly individuated throughout Dylan's studio performance on April 24, sounding almost like a second guitar playing along with his flatpicking.

Live, on April 21, Dylan plays *'Talkin' World War III Blues'* another way. No initial descending run of notes, but a flat-picked part that simply starts, and then continues in a workmanlike movement from chord to chord. There is an emphasis on the bass strings in some places, but very little in the way of the more complex descending motif – except once, at the 3.58 mark in the recording, when Dylan comes out of a harmonica break by playing roughly half of the purely picked section that is heard at the beginning of the April 24 rendition.

Dylan often played the song in concert, from 1963 until the spring of 1965. Its final known performance was on May 9, 1965.¹³ Listening to what he played after the two initial April dates, one hears no descending note intro and few of the more individuated bass notes. This is the case, in performance, on April 25, May 10, July 26, and October 26. In almost every case, when the pronounced bass notes do sound in the song, they come toward the middle or last half of the performance (although, at the Newport Folk Festival performance of July 26, he hits them early on with greater definition).

His musical approach varied in the months to come. In a Canadian television broadcast of February 1, 1964, Dylan more prominently features the alternating bass notes, starting close to the beginning of the performance, and he gives them some emphasis as well on November 25 and November 27. On October 31, at Philadelphia Town Hall, he was again flatpicking with fewer moments of individuated notes. As late on the timeline May 9, he plays it in the simpler flatpicking form, with just the occasional hint of bass-note accents. And so, it was a fluid thing, how Dylan treated the music of *'Talkin' World War III Blues'*. It may be the case that he simply gave the guitar a different kind of attention in Studio A, and then tended to perform it in a simpler style throughout its subsequent performance history.

As for what he sings, on April 21, the song starts like this:

One time ago the craziest dream came to me
I dreamt I was walkin' in World War Three
I went to the doctor very next day
To see what he had to say
He said it was a bad dream

[harmonica]

I wouldn't worry about it none, though
Them dreams are only in your head

[harmonica: partial]

He said

Four elements in this example – lineation, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization – are based on what is given in "Lyrics 1962–2001". While multiple sources indicate that Dylan did not directly participate in the assembly and editing of that volume, he did authorize it, and the book carries forward most of the details found in the earlier-

published material that was included with Dylan's documented participation in "Writings and Drawings", back in 1973.¹⁴

(Whether the 1974–1985 writings published in "Lyrics 1962–1985" are also the result of his participation is a matter in need of further clarification, but that would be a separate enterprise from this, and is not relevant to the present examination.)

In the case of *'Talkin' World War III Blues'*, long-standing problematic details have been well attended to in the collection of 2004. For example, the comma that, since 1973, has intruded between the words "Rock-a-day" and "Johnny" is no longer included.¹⁵ While the book does not provide still-needed answers to questions about the origin of certain variant lyrics – which may be the product of both erroneous transcription and earlier authorial intervention – and while there are examples of inconsistent terminal punctuation to be found in some lines, in what it gets right, "Lyrics 1962–2001" serves well as a base text for presenting *'Talkin' World War III Blues'* on the page.¹⁶ The aforementioned issue of variant lyrics in the printed collections is from this point forward set aside, in this article, but it remains a matter for further consideration.

When it comes to variants found by comparing the April 21 and April 24 recordings, however, what is heard on the first date clearly differs in some ways from what Dylan sang three days later. Not radically different ways, but by degree. Examples come as early as the first verse. The following lines can be heard in the *"Freewheelin'"* performance of April 24:

One time ago a crazy dream came to me
I dreamt I was walkin' in World War Three
Went to the doctor's the very next day
To see what kind of words he could say
Said it was a bad dream
I wouldn't worry about it none, though
Them old dreams are only in your head

The variants of lyric: "the craziest" of April 21 becomes "a crazy" on April 24; it is "doctor's" instead of "doctor" (and the "the" is included before "very"). Also, the "he said" of the "bad dream" line, on April 21, is truncated to one simple "said" on April 24. Furthermore: "what he had to say" is expanded to "what kind of words he could say", and "them dreams" becomes "them old dreams". There is no final "he said", on April 24.

Similar examples include the first line of the sixth verse. On April 24, Dylan sings it as: "Down the corner by the hot-dog stand / I seen a man". Whereas at Club 47 he takes a little longer to paint the scene: "Well, down on the corner I saw a man / Turnin' around with a hot-dog stand".

This is not to suggest that these examples, indicative of the kind of variants one finds throughout the two recordings, are of the kinds that comprise completely distinct *versions* of a work. Rather, the sense, if not every detail, of the narrative remains the same in both. The lyric of the studio version is still identifiably the lyric of the Club 47 performance (and vice-versa), and while Dylan may have consciously substituted lines and wordings and music, a portion of these differences may also be due to the incidental differences that can manifest in live performance.

Among these kinds of incidental variants may be the altered sequencing of the verses themselves. Between the April 21

and April 24 recordings, changes in ordering can be shown by the following list (the verses are indicated by their first lines, as performed):

April 21

(v7) Well, I remember
~ newspaper ads

(v8) Well, I spied
me a girl . . .

(v9) Well, I looked in
a Cadillac window

April 24

Well, I spied me a girl . . .

Well, I seen me a Cadillac window

Well, I remember seeing some ads

From the first known to the second known performance, Verse 7 becomes Verse 9, Verse 8 becomes Verse 7, and Verse 9 becomes Verse 8. And this kind of variant is not confined to these two recordings, either. Dylan changes the verse sequencing, and he also varies the number of verses, in several subsequent live performances. For example, on July 26, 1963, Dylan drops all of the lines from "I wouldn't worry about it none" through to the end of Verse 3. He also eliminates Verse 7 and swaps the ordering of verses 8 and 9. Even in the studio, as Harvey has noted, across five studio takes of *'Talkin' World War III'*, there are not only variant sequencings, but also omissions from what can be discerned to be the song's maximum twelve-verse length.¹⁷

Other variant lyrics include changes to the food requested in the line "Gimme a string bean, I'm a hungry man". On or about February 1, 1964, the string bean becomes a TV dinner. It stays that way through the end of the year, but by 1965 bootlegs reveal that the entirety of the fifth verse is gone from Dylan's live performances of the song.

Another detail that changes is that of "Fabian." In the seventh verse of the Club 47 iteration – this being the ninth verse of Dylan's studio track – the wanderer of the song's post-apocalyptic city turns on his record player. "It was Fabian," sings Dylan on April 21, "singing, 'Tell Your Ma, Tell Your Pa / Our Love's A-gonna Grow, Ooh-wah, Ooh-wah'". Three days later, in the studio, Dylan changes the name in the line to "Rock-a-day Johnny".

One way to contextualize this change is to note that "Rock-a-day Johnny" is a less topical choice than that of the real-world singer. Fabian was, by 1963, associated with studio trickery and industry misdoings. In or about 1959, he testified before Congress as part of the government's radio-payola scandal hearings, revealing that his voice had been electronically altered to sound better on his albums.¹⁸ The incident represented a kind of turning point in Fabian's career (or perhaps it only happened to coincide with a downturn already underway). The point is, Dylan was probably not singing the name with reverence, come April 1963. But then, why change it to something else on *"Freewheelin'"*? Perhaps the already litigation-sensitive lawyers at Columbia wanted to avoid replacing one potential enemy – the John Birch Society attorneys – with another, in the form of a controversial pop star.

"Fabian" soon returns, however. Dylan sings the name on April 25, 1963, at The Bear in Chicago; on July 26 at the Newport Folk Festival; and also on October 26, at Carnegie Hall (where the title of the song referenced also transforms, becoming: "Ah, You Love Me and I Love You / Our Love's A-gonna Grow, Shoo-be-doo, Shoo-be-doo").

Come Halloween, at Philharmonic Hall in New York, 1964, however, Dylan jettisons "Fabian" for Motown's Martha and

the Vandellas: "talkin' about *'Leader Of The Pack'*". But then, on or about November 25 it changes again, this time to The Shangri-Las – the group that actually made a number-one hit recording of *'Leader Of The Pack'*" in 1964.

By April 7, 1965, the line had morphed one more time, and it is Donovan about whom Dylan sings. The record player no longer works, and the English songwriter can be found hiding in a closet.

Another noteworthy and flexible section of *'Talkin' World War III Blues'*, as early as the April 21 and April 24 recordings, comes at the end of the song, where Dylan works out a kind of concluding equation.

"Well, half the people can be part right all of the time," he sings on April 21. "All the people can be half right some of the time / But all the people can't be all right all of the time / Abraham Lincoln said that".

On April 24, he puts it this way: "Half the people can be part right all of the time / And some of the people can be all right part of the time / But all the people can't be all right all of the time / I think Abraham Lincoln said that".

In these two cases, Dylan is constructing his song's kicker via different variables, but the outcome is basically the same. He would continue to do so. Sometimes, in later performances, he adds a fourth line to the section – one more permutation of how many can be how right, how much of the time – and he persists in playing with the names that he checks. Halloween, 1964: Carl Sandburg replaces Lincoln. There he remains until April 7, 1965, when, in England, Dylan brings T.S. Eliot into the song. On May 9, 1965, the last time Dylan is known to have played *'Talkin' World War III Blues'* to an audience, he sings: "But all of the people can't be all right all of the time / T.S. Eliot said that". He goes out on a poet, rather than a politician.

This is not to say that, back on April 21, 1963, the lines of *'Talkin' World War III Blues'* were not *at all* in flux, rather it is to point out that the structure and concepts of the song were essentially intact as early as that date, at least. It is also helpful to re-emphasize the point that the fluidity of the lyric is only apparent within parameters defined by its twelve known verses, and that this structural underpinning is fully in evidence as early as the Harvard Square show.

Given these details, taken together with what can now be heard on the Club 47 reel-to-reel, critics should be able to construct a fresh understanding of the genesis and the subsequent variations of *'Talkin' World War III Blues'*. As early as April 21, the lyric was a twelve-verse structure, very close to what Dylan would record on April 24. It wasn't until months later, live on stage, that he introduced anything like significant – and sometimes perhaps-spontaneous – changes to its words.

A Brief History of the Club 47 Reel-to-Reel (April 1963–December 2011)

The history of the reel-to-reel itself is marked by good fortune. Club 47 closed in 1968. Before Siggins left, at the very end, she was savvy enough to gather up those basement tapes from the shelves of the venue's office. By that time there were more than two-dozen of the recordings.

"I didn't know the value of them," said Siggins. "Did I know what was on them?"

For a time, she said, she didn't give it a great deal of consideration; they were more or less a footnote for her, a piece of the past that ended up moving with her from place to place.



Betsy Siggins, Bob Dylan, and Maria Muldaur Boston 2009

The tapes went with Siggins from Cambridge to her next home in Washington, D.C., where she lived from 1968 until about 1973. They were then stored in a closet at her Manhattan apartment, wrapped in plastic bags while she ran food pantries and homeless shelters in the 1980s and early '90s. Eventually, hoping to have the music on the tapes transferred to a more stable format, she handed the reel-to-reels to Rounder Records, a Massachusetts-based folk music label. There they stayed until about 2001. None of the intended work on the tapes was completed at that time.

Siggins moved back to the Boston area in 1996. First, she took on the directorship of Club 47's rebirth as a non-profit version of the extant folk club Passim – a venue that had operated since 1968 as a for-profit on the very spot of the old club. Then, in 2009, Siggins left Passim and separately founded the New England Folk Music Archives. Having gathered the reel-to-reels back from Rounder, and with a Grammy grant to fuel the process, she brought the tapes to Harvard University's Audio Preservation Studio for the long-wanted cleanup and cataloguing process.

"I decided that that would be a good way to take the music that was the soundtrack to my life and see if we could get them into a format, so that we could use them both academically and in a public way," she said.

Siggins has worked with the university and other experts to identify and preserve the music on the Club 47 tapes. Not only does the reel-to-reel that includes *'Talkin' World War III Blues'* also contain Dylan's duet with Von Schmidt on *'Glory, Glory'*, but also there is a partial recording of Dylan singing *'With God On Our Side'*. (The history of that song's performance starts, as far as it is known, on April 12, 1963).¹⁹ *'With God'* cuts off just before the last line of the sixth verse, but there are some variant lyrics already evident before it does – not radical differences, but of the kind probably related to the incidentals of performance. One notes that Dylan refers to the piece as *'With God On My Side'* before he starts singing.

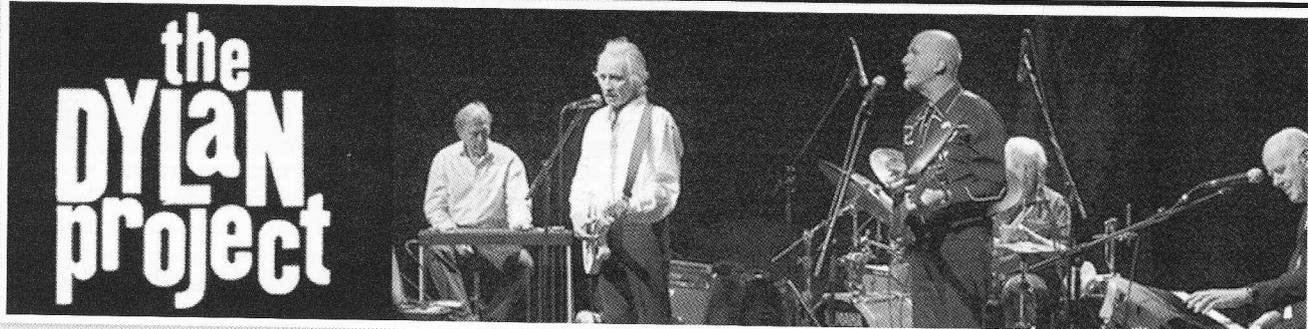
Siggins said that talks have been underway regarding the inclusion of parts of the Club 47 recordings in a soundtrack to an in-production documentary about the music of the Folk Revival. At the time of this article, the reel-to-reels were still generally unavailable for further research or public access, except by specially approved request. All inquires about the material should be made only through the staff of the New England Folk Music Archives.

NOTES:

1. Clinton Heylin, *Bob Dylan: A Life in Stolen Moments* (1996), 43.
2. Ibid.
3. *A Life* (1996), 42–43.
4. Heylin, *Revolution in the Air* (2009), 141.
5. Ibid.
6. E-mail correspondence on April 21, 2011, with music journalist and author Scott Alarik.
7. Shelton (2003), 156–57.
8. Heylin, *Behind* (2003), 116; *Revolution* (2009), 141–42; McKeen (1993), 89.
9. Harvey (2001), 110.
10. Riley (2002), 155.
11. Harvey (2001), 111.
12. Scott, *Chord Progressions for Songwriters* (2003), 100.
13. BobDylan.com: Songs: Talkin' World War III Blues (accessed November 8, 2011).
14. *Behind* (2003), 337.
15. In a personal communication on March 9, 2010, Christopher Ricks said he had been asked by Jeff Rosen to think about the inconsistencies of punctuation in the proofs of *Lyrics 1962–2001*. The process began close to the time of the book's publication.
16. Ricks emphasized, in personal communication on March 9, 2010, the late-stage of the production process when changes to punctuation were introduced to *Lyrics 1962–2001*. Some inconsistencies (he acknowledges) either survive or have been newly created.
17. Harvey (2001), 111.
18. Coase, "Payola in Radio and Television Broadcasting," *Journal of Law and Economics* (1979), 287. See also: Unterberger, "Fabian," *All Music Guide to Rock* (2002), 384.
19. Michael Krogsgaard, *Positively Bob Dylan* (1991), 19.

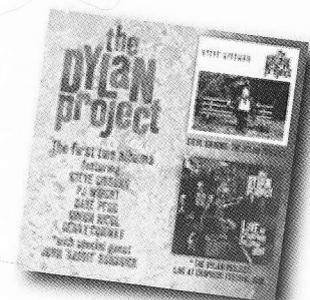
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