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"... Long Before the Stars Were Torn down...": Sam Shepard and Bob Dylan's "Brownsville Girl"

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“... long before the stars were torn down...”: Sam Shepard and Bob Dylan’s “Brownsville Girl”

In 1975, Bob Dylan invited Sam Shepard, the young playwright who had ignited the Off-Broadway and London theatre scene, to go on tour with him in order to write scenes and dialogue for a film of the Rolling Thunder Revue. Despite his admiration for Dylan, Shepard, who had just returned to the U.S. after four years in London and was about to move into a horse ranch, was reluctant to accept the task. However, Dylan’s business manager persisted and in the autumn of 1975, Shepard headed east to take part in the legendary tour. In his account of the invitation, Shepard, whom Dylan had never met, was stunned that Dylan wanted him for the job. Yet looking back, it appears natural that Dylan would hire the man who worked with Michelangelo Antonioni on *Zabriskie Point* (a 1970 film about love and the American counter-culture movement), who had written and produced *The Tooth of Crime* (his 1972 play about two rock ‘n’ roll legends in a dynamic verbal battle), and who repeatedly writes about American history and life with such an honest awareness of the iconography perpetuating the myths of its democratic origins.

The film of the Rolling Thunder Revue was never produced, which Shepard blames on the incompetent film crew and overall chaotic nature of the tour,¹ but the journey the two men took led Shepard to write three texts. Along with publishing *The Rolling Thunder Logbook*, his account of the legendary tour, Shepard wrote a one-act play called *True Dylan*, which

appeared in the July 1987 issue of *Esquire* magazine. This one-act was born out of the work most telling of their mutual respect for each other's genius – “Brownsville Girl,” which they co-wrote in 1985 and which Dylan recorded on his 1986 record, *Knocked Out Loaded*. “Brownsville Girl” bears many of Shepard's and Dylan's trademarks: popular culture references to the old West and Westerns (in this case the 1950 classic *The Gunfighter*), the presence of a mysterious woman, and a journey leading to disappointment. In the song, Shepard and Dylan explore the stars torn down by the death of the “West” – a death brought on by the increasing modernization of America. When singing “Brownsville Girl,” Dylan, in his haunting, disenchanted voice, speaks to us as a survivor who remakes the world and himself continually. Like Dylan, Shepard, too, has become an iconic figure – a cowboy playwright who continues to woo cosmopolitan theatre-goers. The lyrics to “Brownsville Girl” attest to Shepard's and Dylan's reworking of the theme of America's refusal to give up the notion of a “true West,” and this failure, according to Shepard and Dylan, has paralyzed the protagonist and by extension has corrupted our nation.

In a 1987 interview with *Rolling Stone* magazine, Shepard described “Brownsville Girl” in the following way:

It has to do with a guy standing on line and waiting to see an old Gregory Peck movie that he can't quite remember – only pieces of it, and then this whole memory thing happens, unfolding before his very eyes. He starts speaking internally to a woman he'd been hanging out with, recalling their meetings and reliving the whole journey they'd gone on – and then it returns to the guy, who's still standing on line in the rain. (Cott 198)

Shepard's account of the song may seem oversimplified, as the scholar de Castro argues. However, in his typical conversational style, Shepard does not eliminate the underlying theme. “Brownsville Girl,” as Shepard's understated account reveals, is explicit in its depiction of the iconic hero's isolation and disappointment. Dylan's storytelling vocals add to the protagonist's struggle to remember the plot of the Gregory Peck film, *The Gunfighter*, which opens with a lone cowboy, “riding ‘cross the desert” and ends with his being “shot down by a hungry kid trying to make a name for himself.”² Jimmy Ringo, Peck's character, who was based on John Wesley Harding, is a gunfighter whose fame haunts and traps him. Like so many of the Westerns that speak to Shepard, *The Gunfighter* is atypical of

its genre; there is very little action in the film as Ringo finds himself waiting in a bar, hoping to see the mother of his child so that they may begin a new, quiet life together.

Perhaps both Shepard and Dylan's love for Westerns drew them to *The Gunfighter* and the legendary John Wesley Harding. Both men, neither of whom financially depends on acting, have chosen to appear in Westerns. In *Purgatory*, a 1999 film about violent outlaws who, in a purgatorial otherworld, have the opportunity to gain redemption by keeping peace there, Shepard plays Sheriff Forrest/ Wild Bill Hickock. In Sam Peckinpah's 1973 film *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, Dylan, along with composing the film's score, is cast as Alias, a young man who winds up becoming a follower of Billy the Kid. As the name Alias suggests, this mysterious character's identity shifts—from that of an observer (the first shot of him is of someone watching Billy escape the clutches of the law) to an active participant in aiding Billy's flight. Like many of Peckinpah's films, *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* deals with the encroaching modern world which threatens to corrupt and even destroy the West. In this film, the law, rather than the outlaws, is corrupt. Billy dies because, as he reveals early on in the film, the world is changing, but he will not. After Garrett answers Billy's inquiry as to how it feels to sell out to the encroaching modern forces, Billy responds, "Times change. I don't." *Purgatory* and *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, *The Gunfighter*, and Dylan's 1968 song "John Wesley Harding" (which mythologizes Harding as a good man who "trav'led with a gun in ev'ry hand" but "was never known/To hurt an honest man,"³) capture the themes which appear in "Brownsville Girl," most notably a man's redemption through love and his lamentation of the dying West.

Drawing on *The Gunfighter*, Shepard and Dylan question the validity of a "true West," a concept that Shepard grappled with most notably in his 1980 play *True West*. Throughout *True West*, a play set in the kitchen alcove of a suburban home in Los Angeles, two brothers, both working on film scripts, are brought to the point where they no longer believe that anything around them is "real." Austin cries out to his brother: "There's nothing real down here, Lee. Least of all me" (49). The antagonistic brother, Lee, who is working on a ridiculously stupid Western, moreover, believes that the last real Western was *Lonely Are the Brave*, a 1962 film that questions whether there ever was such a thing as the West. Jack Burns, a romantic

cowboy played by Kirk Douglas, is warned by his unrequited love that the West he lives in doesn't exist. "Perhaps it never did," she laments. For Shepard, the "true" or the "real" is always in quotation marks. He is hyper-aware of the myths we have created – myths of heroic and just battles for territory. And, although he finds himself at times attracted to these myths, his attraction is always critically hesitant. What draws Shepard and Dylan to *The Gunfighter*, then, is not only Ringo's tragic death – the death of a star – but also the way in which Ringo, whilst dying, creates a myth that the "hungry kid," who shot him down, must live by. Instead of letting the town hang Hunt Bromley for shooting Ringo in the back, Dylan, echoing the dialogue of the film, sings: "Turn him loose, let him go, let him say he outdrew me fair and square" ("Brownsville Girl").

Throughout Shepard's works, the myth of the West is aligned with American history, current politics and identity. In, for example, his political satire of 2004 *The God of Hell*, Shepard conveys the idea that American iconography, such as the American flag, sugarcoats the fact that our country is founded on violence and violation. However, the slimy government official, Welch, who tries to sell American flag cookies to a farmer's wife, fails. Shepard likewise presents the myth of the American spirit as being ridiculous in his 1991 vaudeville nightmare, *States of Shock*. The Colonel, whose costume is a mixture of military uniforms from the American Revolution to the First Persian Gulf War, defines Americans as "the bravest stock. The Pioneer. The Mountain Man. The Plainsman. The Texas Ranger. The Lone Ranger" (162), but throughout shouts "WITHOUT THE ENEMY WE'RE NOTHING," revealing that ultimately the myths which make up "the bravest stock" are founded on politically driven hatred and violence.⁴ While *States of Shock* and *The God of Hell* offer profound revisionist images of American history in order to critique current political turmoil, a task that Howard Zinn would be proud of,⁵ Shepard, in a recent interview with *New York Magazine*, problematically and perhaps somewhat absurdly reveals that his anger over the current "Republican fascism" (Simonson)⁶ stems in part from Bush's "exploitation of cowboy tropes" (Kachka 2008). Shepard says: "For George W. to be construed as a cowboy is about as far from the truth as you can possibly get. It's ruined the reputation of Texas, which actually has more authenticity than many, many states—not in Dallas" (Kachka 2008). Shepard's statement suggests that

authenticity – the “true” or “real” – has been “torn down,” rather than having never existed, as post-modernist critics of Shepard, and Shepard’s *True West*, would have us believe.⁷ In fact, Shepard reveals a nostalgic side of himself in his defense of the cowboy image and Texas – a side of him that searches for authenticity and origin which he believes is masked by this false image of heroism.

Dylan goes further than Shepard, throwing even his own “identity” into the post-modern void. In his memoirs, *Chronicles*, Dylan, aware that America was changing rapidly, recalls that he needed “some kind of new template, some philosophical identity that wouldn’t burn out” (73). He went through several names before “Bobby Zimmerman was killed in 1964 on the Bass Lake run” (79). The name he stuck with, he insists, was not inspired by Dylan Thomas but rather Matt Dillon of *Gunsmoke*: “Then sometime later, unexpectedly, I’d seen some poems by Dylan Thomas” (78). *I’m Not There*, the 2007 film about Dylan’s life, visually illustrates this shifting identity. Six actors, varying in age, race, nationality, and gender, depict different stages of Dylan’s life, ultimately leaving the viewer without any sense of who Dylan was or is. Dylan proves, according to Greil Marcus, that “One could make oneself up, ... but only if, whatever one’s sources, the purest clay was always evident, real American red earth” (19-20).

Like Dylan, Shepard’s identity as the “rock ‘n’ roll cowboy mouth”⁸ – an image which attracted Dylan to Shepard—is shaped out of the same American past. Throughout the *Rolling Thunder Logbook*, Shepard sees in Dylan a kindred spirit when he recalls Dylan’s fascination with historic places. There are accounts of him and his crew at Plymouth Rock, at the last Shaker village, and photographs of Dylan and crew on the Mayflower which Shepard claims “looks like it’s jumped right out of that painting of *Washington Crossing the Delaware*” (36). The historic stops and Dylan’s playful reenactment of the past, for Shepard, become a symbol of rediscovery – a rediscovery of what it means to be American in the highly charged Vietnam War Era.⁹ These key moments are interspersed with the turmoil of contemporary American injustice, most notably evident in Shepard’s entry in the *Logbook* about the benefit concert for Hurricane Carter, which became an opportunity for Dylan to reshape American justice.

In Shepard’s account of Dylan’s involvement with the benefit concert for the release of Hurricane Carter, he does not praise the efforts of Dylan.

Shepard uses this opportunity to further expose America's problematic obsession with myths and icons. Bitterly, Shepard reveals that in America "Nothing's important or has any value until it's blown up in 'bigger than life' proportions" (163). He continues:

I keep coming back to the idea that it's a black man that the concert's being given for. A benefit for a black convict initiated by a white singer with black support. It's too sticky to figure out. Ali's been trying to trump up support for Carter for quite a while. Before Dylan even. But it took Dylan to get this whole thing together. (*The Rolling Thunder Logbook* 164)

For Shepard there is an irony in both the grandeur of the event and the race politics that generate it. The benefit becomes an Epcot Center of "justice," and in this display Dylan becomes a mythic hero of sorts. It is Dylan's image, not the cause, that becomes important.¹⁰ While Shepard at times is also drawn in by Dylan's presence, here he recognizes the tragedy of it. The American people and legal system will not take note of its wrongs when a black man, even one as prominent and iconic as Mohammed Ali, speaks, but when Dylan, a white folk singer and cultural icon, takes the stage, all listen. In all fairness, the public's attraction to Dylan, rather than Ali, is not merely racially motivated. Dylan, unlike Ali, conjures up images that remind the public of a very particular American dream. Dylan sings of cowboys from the old West and modern times, who, when trying to take a stand, are brought down in the process.¹¹

Along with questioning the historical myths that shape America and its people, Shepard and Dylan tackle the myth we call the American Dream; in "Brownsville Girl" this is done through a comparison between old Western romances and the modern-day romances along the border towns of Texas. Each time Dylan, the songster, recalls the film, he is reminded of the Brownsville girl whose "memory ... keeps callin' after [him] like a rollin' train." The reason this particular woman haunts the protagonist is, of course, love, or more specifically, a lost love. Ringo from *The Gunfighter* risks death to convey his love to Peggy – a love that was lost as Peggy left Ringo – but a love that for Ringo represents the dream of settling down with a family and living off the land. Unlike Ringo, who dies before his dream is realized, Shepard and Dylan's protagonist is haunted by his failure and fear. While love is tied to the American dream and redemption, the narrator often fears that very dream because family, as witnessed in Shepard's plays, is

also a source of violence. Afraid, the protagonist in "Brownsville Girl" rationalizes: "Way down in Mexico you went out to find a doctor and you never came back./ I would have gone on after you but I didn't feel like letting my head get blown off."

The reason the Brownsville girl crosses into Mexico to find a doctor is never explicit; however, through Shepard's canon of work we may discern the significance of her travels to Mexico. In Shepard's *True West*, Austin recalls that his father hitchhiked to Mexico in order to have his teeth extracted. He did not have enough money to have the procedure done in America. The description of him, however, is one that makes us question the safety of the journey and the dental treatment he receives. Austin reveals that their father winds up alone and destitute in Mexico with his gums sewn up. His journey west and extraction of teeth make up pathetic images of a dying father.

Whereas the protagonist's assertion that he did not want to get his head blown off may seem extreme, in much of Shepard's work Mexico serves as a wild territory not yet tamed. In his 1976 play *Curse of the Starving Class*, American life is described as a "zombie" existence. Emma, the teenage daughter of the play's dysfunctional household, dreams of escaping to Mexico like "That guy who wrote *Treasure of Sierra Madre*" (149). Albeit an escape from her suburban nightmare because Mexico remains a place not yet corrupted by modernization, it is ultimately an imaginative territory symbolizing danger, as seen in Shepard's later play of 1998, *Eyes for Consuela*. The ghost of Consuela demands that her lover bring her the blue eyes of Henry, a white tourist who, after fleeing his "known world," seeks to return to his wife, home, car and internet (*Three Plays* 172). Yet Shepard was no expatriate; he remains torn, as is evident in the frequency with which his characters cross both sides of the border. In "Opuestos" (1996), the protagonist reassures his lover that while he goes to Mexico to witness dangerous and exciting cockfights, he always returns to her in America because ultimately she represents the opposite – security and domesticity.

Looking at Shepard's canon, where Mexico is an imagined space that is violent and uncivilized, two assumptions for the Brownsville girl's flight into Mexico are possible. She either travels into Mexico to escape modern domesticity (which her life will inevitably become) or she travels to Mexico

for an abortion, an extraction of sorts and death of new potential. Both readings point to the protagonist's lack of courage. He must live with the fact that he did not have the courage to raise a family or go with her to Mexico. He fears a life without the comforts of home, no matter how corrupt America, according to the song's character Ruby, is becoming. And he fears the American dream of family life. Afraid, he allows her and the potential dream she offers him to disappear.¹²

Shepard's motif of the bitter disappointment ripe in America resonates throughout "Brownsville Girl." Not only is the protagonist "broken-hearted," but Ruby, who lives on the "wreckin' lot" with her absent lover Henry Porter, also reveals her crushed dreams. She says: "Welcome to the land of the living dead. ... Even the swap meets around here are getting corrupt." Disappointed by her zombie-like life and the corruption of her world, Ruby gently scolds the protagonist and his girl: "Ruby just smiled and said, 'Ah, you know some babies never learn.'" Here, Shepard and Dylan reveal modern America's corruption. We need only to think of the unjust arrest and retrials of Hurricane Carter. Even though Dylan announced the court's decision to acquit Carter at the end of the concert (170), Carter was retried and sentenced before he was finally released in 1988. But as "Brownsville Girl" reveals, the corruption in the modern world was founded on the very myths that Americans love – myths of younger generations usurping their forefathers.¹³ In the story within a story, *The Gunfighter's* Ringo is both the corrupted and corrupter of his world. On the one hand, Hunt Bromley, representing a younger generation that will do anything, even shoot a man from behind to make a name for himself, brings Ringo down. On the other hand, Ringo corrupts the modern world by allowing the young gunfighter to go on living; Ringo perpetuates the mythology of the Wild West, of a young man who was able to take on a giant.

Corruption exists everywhere – especially in Hollywood. Film icons, according to Shepard and Dylan, have been torn down by a new type of film industry, an industry devoid of the stellar performances of Peck and his like. Although Shepard's and Dylan's performances in films are nowhere near the quality of Peck's, the roles they have chosen reveal their tribute to and respect for a tradition of Westerns that Gregory Peck and directors like Sam Peckinpah have made. While Peck's film career died down as he aged and new faces made their way into the film industry, the Brownsville girl

herself will not be replaced. She is not described as a "star," but rather we learn in the chorus that she has "teeth like pearls shining like the moon above." She is a natural satellite with the ability to show the protagonist "all around the world." Yet unable to follow her into unknown territory – Mexico – the man waiting in the movie line keeps himself from completing his journey.

In the song's conclusion, the protagonist reveals that once he "sat through [the movie] twice" but he doesn't "remember who [he] was or where [he] was bound"; in essence, the protagonist tries to place himself in the film. Which character did he play? Where was he headed? Inevitably, he could have been Ringo, but instead he is no one. To him, it "Seems like a long time ago, long before the stars were torn down." Again ending on a note of disappointment (now the stars have been torn down), Shepard and Dylan reveal that the protagonist is lost – this time because he does not know what happened to his lover. The "truth" remains hidden to him. Through the love story and the reference to the Western, Shepard and Dylan, here, reveal the difficulty of origin – the truth of the matter at hand – because memory skews everything. Myths replace facts and mask both imaginary and actual landscapes and identities. Shepard recalls an episode on the Rolling Thunder Revue that highlights this concept. "Tonight," Shepard writes, "Dylan appears in a rubber Dylan mask that he picked up on 42nd Street. The crowd is stupefied. ... is this some kind of mammoth hoax? An imposter!" (109), Shepard imagines the crowd wondering. This mask both stood as the mythic Dylan as well as brought about confusion as to who Dylan was. Ultimately, for Shepard, the authentic, the real, that which is uncorrupted by the stories we create, is unattainable, and unknowable, even though it exists. For Dylan, as his donning of the Dylan mask suggests, the "real" or "authentic" is non-existent, a façade – identity, for Dylan, is the mask.¹⁴

Shepard places Dylan in the same category as Gregory Peck and Ringo; he is an icon whose stellar magnificence has the potential of one day being torn down by some younger, and for Shepard, less skillful musician. However, thus far, Dylan has survived perhaps because unlike the stars of the past, he continually remakes himself, as Shepard highlights in the *Log-book* and as Dylan's song of 1963, "The Times They Are A-Changin'" testifies. Shepard writes, "Dylan is an invention of his own mind. The point

isn't to figure him out but to take him in" (98). Dylan, as Marcus reveals, has "a greater collection of masks" than most performers (220) and as such a greater chance of surviving the changing world. In *True Dylan*, Shepard portrays Dylan as elusive. The characters' names suggest that they are based on Shepard and Dylan. Sam has the opportunity to interview Bob, but he finds that when he rewinds his tape to listen to their conversation about the lack of authenticity in James Dean's final scene in *Giant*, among other topics, there is only a Jimmy Yancey piano solo on the recorder. Albeit never having been performed, *True Dylan* lends itself as a footnote to the *Logbook* and "Brownsville Girl." This one-act, and Shepard through it, suggests that, for icons like Dylan to remain on top, to continue shining in the chaotic world of fame, they must continue to remake themselves; they must prevent becoming static. Likewise, to be American, then, for Shepard and Dylan, is never to settle, never to become content, and never to allow oneself to be defined. The mythic heroes of the West and icons such as Dylan, for Shepard, aid us in our quest to be American, but to keep these myths and icons from remaking themselves is the very corruption that can destroy us.

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Notes

¹ Throughout the *Rolling Thunder Logbook*, Shepard criticizes the film crew's inability to capture the musicians' impromptu skits. Shepard recalls, and agrees with the assessment, that the musicians viewed the film crew as "buffoons" (81).

² All citations from "Brownsville Girl" are taken from Bob Dylan/Songs <<http://www.bobdylan.com/#/songs/brownsville-girl>>. *The Gunfighter* is included in *Fox Western Classics*.

³ All citations from "John Wesley Harding" are taken from Bob Dylan/Songs <<http://www.bobdylan.com/#/songs/john-wesley-harding>>.

⁴ For an excellent analysis of *States of Shock*, see Stephen J. Bottoms' *The Theatre of Sam Shepard: States of Crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), 243-63.

⁵ Howard Zinn, historian and author of *The People's History of the United States*, among other alternative histories, continues to challenge conventional ac-

counts of U.S. conflicts. His work argues that historical narratives do not account for "true events" but rather serve to maintain America's identity as a democratic and just nation—a notion Zinn questions.

⁶ In an interview with *Playbill's* Robert Simonson, Shepard explains that *The God of Hell* was a critique of America's current "Republican fascism." Shepard had hoped that his play and other similar efforts would have enough force to lead to Bush's defeat.

⁷ See, for example, Megan Williams, who argues that Shepard's characters realize "that identity and the past are only myths to be performed and manipulated" (57) and Asly Tekinay, who defines Shepard's political drama as nihilistic.

⁸ I am using this term to allude to both Shepard's 1971 play *Cowboy Mouth* and his 1972 play *The Tooth of Crime*. Both feature musician-types, and in both, violence and survival make up a large part of the characters' struggles.

⁹ Shepard moved to London in 1971 to escape the Vietnam War. Despite fleeing the painful unrest in America during this time, Shepard's thoughts turned to his homeland. Prior to his move to England, his plays were deracinated. Once in London, plays such as *The Tooth of Crime* and *Geography of a Horse Dreamer*, bear the mark of his nationality.

¹⁰ This is not to say that Dylan took the cause lightly. Marcus explains that Dylan understood "moral, generational, and racial divisions" as rooted in "Americans defining themselves not as who they were but as who they were not" (8).

¹¹ In "John Wesley Harding," "He [Harding] took a stand./ And soon the situation there/ Was all but straightened out." But the lyrics depict another story of injustice. Here, a man who always lent a "helping hand" and never made a "foolish move" winds up the victim of a younger gunman's desire for fame.

¹² Shepard seems to be in love with the myth of the American family, but repeatedly portrays family life plagued with the same type of violence which America was founded on. For an excellent discussion of the American Dream, family and violence, see Matthew Roudané.

¹³ Rather than finding an old, free democracy in American history and folklore, what Dylan discovers is that such claims are reached by mistake (Marcus 89).

¹⁴ Marcus recalls a similar episode in his description of Dylan's 1966 London concert. Captured partially on the Basement Tapes, the London crowd violently shouted: "TRAITOR. SELL-OUT. MOTHERFUCKER. YOU'RE NOT BOB DYLAN" (7). For more on the significance of masks and Dylan, see Marcus's *The Old, Weird America*. Editor's note: For another author's fictional take on Dylan and identity within the context of science fiction rather than westerns, see Michael Bishop.

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