PRISONERS AND GUARDS:
BOB DYLAN’S COVERAGE OF THE AMERICAN JUSTICE SYSTEM

By

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To Lisa for supporting me, Wesley for inspiring me, and Audrey for motivating me
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This study examines four narratives of injustice in America’s criminal justice system: Emmett Till’s lynching in the Mississippi Delta; Hattie Carroll’s death at the hands of a Baltimore, Maryland, tobacco farmer; George Jackson’s troubled life and violent death inside the prison walls of San Quentin State Prison, and Rubin “Hurricane” Carter’s two-decades-long struggle for exoneration. These narratives are connected in many ways, one of which is that singer-songwriter Bob Dylan recorded a musical narrative of each of these stories.

This study argues that Bob Dylan’s music functions as a type of journalism, serving as an important, yet obviously flawed system of information transfer. The songs analyzed in this study demonstrate how music can work as different types of journalism, specifically as a retrospective, underground journalism, an obituary, and literary journalism. Dylan’s music doesn’t uphold the ideals of journalism, such as objectivity, detachment, balance, and accuracy. Instead, his music distorts, ignores, and reframes the facts to fit his vision of the events.

Using Kenneth Burke’s idea of “terministic screens” and the theory of framing, this dissertation examines the way people tell stories and the way language leads to multiple interpretations of a single event. By examining Dylan’s music and comparing it to different types of national, local, black, and underground news organizations, such as the New York Times, the
Jackson (Mississippi) Daily News, and the Baltimore Afro-American, this dissertation concludes that journalism can take place in many different forms. Dylan’s music, filled with factual flaws and dangerous exaggerations, tells stories in a way that the traditional news organizations, hampered by the ideals of objectivity and detachment, never could.
Sometimes I think this whole world / Is one big prison yard. / Some of us are prisoners / The rest of us are guards.

—Bob Dylan, “George Jackson”

In Money, Mississippi, a 14-year-old black Chicago boy was murdered in the heart of the Mississippi Delta, just for being black. In Baltimore, Maryland, a black mother of 10 was murdered when she was brutally beaten with a cane for being too slow at her job. In Oakland, California, a 19-year-old black man was jailed for stealing $70. Ten years later, he was assassinated in prison. In Paterson, New Jersey, a black man, full of potential, was framed and wrongfully convicted in a trial where the key witnesses were convicted criminals who later recanted.

Or so says Bob Dylan.

These four stories, which are presented in Bob Dylan’s “The Death of Emmett Till,” “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll,” “George Jackson,” and “Hurricane,” have been told and retold in newspapers, magazines, books, documentaries, feature films, and other art forms. Each time, the author or filmmaker tells one perspective on the issue. Bob Dylan’s music presents one of those perspectives.

This dissertation argues that Bob Dylan’s music works as a form of journalism. The term journalism is being used loosely, as the modern sense of journalism is only as old as the penny press, and the looser meaning of the term dates back centuries, as historian Robert Darnton argues. ¹ Dylan was able to take a narrative and package it neatly for mass consumption, a process similar to that of the New York Times, The New Yorker, or The Village Voice, three news

organizations with completely different audiences and goals. Dylan’s music retells these stories so that people all over the country come to know them.

More specifically, Dylan even conducts different types of journalism. Dylan’s 1963 “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll” functioned much more closely to modern journalism. He wrote the song about a month after William Zantzinger, Carroll’s accused murderer, was given a seemingly light six-month sentence. He performed it about a month after that, and within four months of the sentencing, the song grew legs when it appeared on the 1964 album *The Times They Are A-changin’*, one of Dylan’s most successful and revered albums. While the coverage differed significantly from the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, Dylan was performing a form of underground journalism and his “reporting” reflected the type of presentation common in those types of publications.

In “George Jackson,” Dylan writes a eulogy for the fallen black militant. Jackson was, by many accounts, a political prisoner, held for nearly a decade in prison after pleading guilty to a $70 robbery charge. After being accused of murdering a prison guard, Jackson, along with two other prisoners and three guards, was killed during a botched escape attempt. Some believe the entire incident was a planned political assassination. Dylan reportedly wrote the song slightly more than two months after Jackson’s death in 1971 and recorded and released the song a week after that.

In “Hurricane,” Dylan is arguing for a specific cause. In this case, he is in a more advocacy role. Like the pundits of cable news and independent bloggers who make up much of today’s news industry, Dylan had a goal, and in this song, a very specific one. He used his position as a pop star to bring attention to Hurricane Carter’s case. Stylistically, Dylan’s music more closely resembles the work of “new” journalists like Tom Wolfe, Gay Talese, and Hunter S. Thompson.
Finally, “The Death of Emmett Till” was written in 1962, more than six years after Till’s death in 1955. Rather than working as pure journalism spreading new information or “news,” Dylan’s song worked as a form of historical documentation and collective memory production. This is not unlike a journalist retelling historical narrative to make sense of the current cultural landscape, similar to the retrospective pieces that appear in newspapers on anniversaries of important historical or cultural events. While “The Death of Emmett Till” may be the weakest song of the group, musically and lyrically, it might be the most powerful song in that it now represents a lasting view of the Emmett Till narrative. And now a Google search of Emmett Till leads readers through Bob Dylan’s lyrics and a YouTube video feature images from the Till case set to Dylan’s song.

**Literature Review**

**The History of American Song**

As this dissertation touches on several topics, such as the role of music in documenting history, the role of music in social movements, the ideals of traditional journalism, and Bob Dylan’s history, it was important to consult the literature on those areas.

John A. Lomax was possibly the most important music historian in American folk music. He meticulously documented as many cowboy ballads, work songs, spirituals, and hymns as he could find. His collections were more than just collections of songs and tunes, but a view into the lives and times of those singers. Lomax recognized the important role that these songs played for the people who sang them. He wrote in the introduction to *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*:

> Illiterate people, and people cut off from newspapers and books, isolated and lonely, — thrown back on primal resources for entertainment and for the
expression of emotion, — utter themselves through somewhat the same character of songs as did their forefathers of perhaps a thousand years ago.²

John Anthony Scott’s *The Ballad of America* and Samuel L. Forcucci’s *A Folk Song History of America* document some of the important folk songs throughout American history. Beginning in the Colonial era through post-World War II America, these books highlight spirituals, marches, ballads, and folk songs that document American history. As this dissertation argues that Bob Dylan’s music works as journalism, it is valuable to point to some of these songs.

For example, during the Colonial period, songs were naturally of British origin, but often became adapted to fit the American outlook. “Soldier, Soldier, Won’t You Marry Me?” tells the story of a young woman who wants to marry a soldier, but he claims he can’t because he’s got no hat. She then runs off to get him what he’s missing. He tells her he can’t marry her if he has no coat. Again she runs off to get him a nice coat. At the end, he tells her he can’t marry her because he has “a wife and two babies at home.”³ This song documents the way that militiamen were forced to outfit themselves. Rather than telling the young lady he’s married, this “ill-clad colonial soldier” uses her to outfit himself for the militia.⁴

“The Death of General Wolfe” is a ballad that recounts the British victory of Quebec during the French and Indian Wars in the eighteenth century and the death of General James Wolfe “who died in the hour of triumph.”⁵ According to the song, when General Wolfe heard that Quebec had been overtaken, he replied, “I die with pleasure.” Samuel L. Forcucci wrote,

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⁵ Scott, 36.
“‘The Death of General Wolfe’ best illustrates the true function of the broadside ballad as a
dramatic-musical vehicle for the dissemination of newsworthy information.”6

There were many other issues facing the young country after the Revolutionary War. “The
Wisconsin Emigrant” documents the difficult decision for many to leave the comfortable life in
New England for the rich soils, but uncertainty of the West. The song consists of a conversation
between a husband and wife. The husband, who wants to head to Wisconsin, says, “While here I
must labor each day in the field / And the winter consumes all the summer doth yield.” The wife,
who wants to remain on the farm, says, “Oh stay on the farm, and you’ll suffer no loss, / For the
stone that keeps rolling will gather no moss.”7 Ultimately, the wife wins out, by convincing him
that the savage “Indians” will murder his family. This song demonstrates the difficult decision of
moving west as well as the racist view of Native Americans.

Another major issue facing the young country was slavery. This issue ultimately led to a
civil war. Slaves were known for their spiritual songs that helped them make it through the
difficult life as a slave. The spirituals often dealt with the concept of struggling through trials and
the ultimate reward in heaven. Slavery split the nation. Many people in the North thought it was
an immoral practice, and many in the South considered it their God-given right. Each side
produced its own songs to promote the war.

This conflict also produced important songs for the African Americans as they struggled
for freedom from slavery. “Many Thousand Gone” begins, “No more auction block for me.”8
“Oh, Freedom!” sings, “And before I’ll be a slave, / I’ll lie buried in my grave, / And go home to

6 Forcucci, 37.
7 Ibid., 162.
8 Ibid., 238.
my Lord and be free.”9 These songs show the new black American rising against the injustice, rebelling against the social norms that made slavery acceptable.

The twentieth century continued many of the same themes of the nineteenth century. There were more wars, more injustice, and more important issues to be told through song. Woody Guthrie chronicled the Ludlow Massacre of 1914. In April of that year 21 people were massacred by a Colorado militia. The story began with a mineworkers’ strike in Las Animas and Huerfano counties in Colorado. Company B of the state militia moved into the colony with machine guns and coal oil, killing 21 people, included 13 children. Guthrie sang, “You struck a match and the blaze it started; / You pulled the triggers of your Gatling guns; / I made a run for the children but the fire wall stopped me, / Thirteen children died for your guns.”10 Guthrie knew that this story needed to be recorded. Another important song came out of the coal mining industry. Florence Reece’s “Which Side Are You On?” urged the miners in Harlan County, Kentucky, to form a union. Reece sang, “Will you be a lousy scab, / Or will you be a man?” This song has been one of the most sung tunes championing labor organization.11

In the 1930s several folk music enthusiasts began to compile anthologies of folk music. John A. Lomax, Carl Sandburg, Charles Seeger, and John Jacob Niles are some of the prominent figures of this movement.12 This revival coincided with the Great Depression, an event that inspired many more folk songs. Woody Guthrie’s “This Land is Your Land” and Pete Seeger’s “If I Had a Hammer” were songs that dealt with the issues of the day: freedom, justice and poverty.

9 Ibid., 239.
10 Ibid., 280.
11 Ibid., 342.
12 Forcucci, 220-221.
Post-World War II America, especially after 1960, saw another revival of folk music. Young people were interested in “songs that emphasized freedom in its broadest and most idealistic framework.” Led by Guthrie, Seeger, Leadbelly and other great singers, young people were drawn to the honesty and idealism of this music. Bob Dylan arrived with “Blowin’ in the Wind” and other “protest” songs searching for an end to injustice and poverty.

Scott’s and Forcucci’s surveys are, of course, incomplete, even more so the review above. Scott’s book was published first in 1966 then updated in 1983. His book mentions Bob Dylan in passing and largely ignores the folk music revival of the 1960’s. Forcucci’s work, which was published in 1984, dealt with Dylan and the folk movement of the 1960s, but he was unable to obtain the rights to reproduce Dylan’s music. These books provide insight into the role that folk and popular music played in documenting American history. One cannot study the history of American folk music and not study American history.

The Role of Music in Specific Movements

James Smethurst studied the history of blues music. Blues music started out as a genre invented by African Americans, but had been co-opted by white people. Using the history of Elvis Presley’s “Hound Dog” as an example of the interconnectedness of black and white music, Smethurst tracked the song from its origin. It was written by two white men in African American blues style, then passed on to black blues singer, Will Maw “Big Mama” Thornton, before Presley recorded in 1956. Smethurst wrote, “In short, rather than illustrating the simple model of a white artist successfully ripping off a less successful African American artist, the history of ‘Hound Dog’ demonstrates how complex characterizing these cultural exchanges can be.”

13 Ibid., 231.
Smethurst supports the contention that music and culture, music and history, are interrelated. He argued, “The study of blues provides an opportunity for cultural historians to examine the unstable matrix of race, ethnicity, class, the ‘folk,’ and the ‘popular’ that makes up American culture.”

Rachel Rubin argued that commercial country music contains a lot of nostalgia, which can be linked to the migration of workers from the South to California during the Great Depression. California became a country music base, and many of those artists arrived during the migration described by John Steinbeck’s fiction and captured by Dorothea Lange’s photography. The nostalgia for home and for the Great Depression that can be found in singers like Merle Haggard shows that “cultural memory does not necessarily strive toward simple preservation,” but creates a past that is idealized or demonized, both for rhetorical purposes. In any case, history influences the music, and music documents the history.

Millie Rahn described the folk revival of the 1950s and 1960s as “an alternative to mass popular entertainment,” which “opened up an imaginative world and enabled a privileged generation to assemble its own canon of historical and contemporary American music.” In other words, for many young people, folk music created their cultural understanding of their country and the world. Many scholars claim this era died when Dylan plugged in his Fender Stratocaster at the Newport Folk Festival in 1965 and with it the idealism of the young.

15 Ibid., 64.


18 Ibid., 209.
folk revival was an important moment in the progression of rock ‘n’ roll as a force for something other than entertainment.

John C. Hajduk documented the popular music factory Tin Pan Alley’s struggle to write a great World War II song. He explained that Tin Pan Alley, which “had long exercised nearly complete control over popular music discovered that they no longer could define the nation’s tastes or consumption patterns.” Hajduk argued that writing a war song would have “provided [the music industry] a means to generate profits while self-consciously reinforcing their own cultural importance.” As the music industry changed, consumers were given many more choices, and Tin Pan Alley was unable to come up with the “winning” song for World War II.

Jerome Rodnitzky recognized “how directly music was tied to social change and how emotionally close Americans were to sixties music.” He also saw how conservative country music, such as Merle Haggard’s “Okie from Muscogee” and Guy Drakes’ “Welfare Cadillac” “made popular music an ideological battleground.” Rodnitzky wrote, “Music is still the best guide to understanding a decade that some historians will continue to label ‘the Age of Protest.’”

Benjamin Filene also explored the relationship between history and song. He concluded that folk singers served as “cultural ‘middlemen’ who move between folk and popular culture”

20 Ibid., 498.
22 Ibid., 112.
23 Ibid., 119.
and play an important role in shaping our perceptions of history.\textsuperscript{24} He contended that we move away from the idea of “folk music,” a term that creates fuzzy distinctions. Does folk refer to musical aesthetics? Must folk music deal with a certain type of topic? Rather than deal with these questions, Filene replaces the term “folk” with the term “vernacular.”\textsuperscript{25} This suggests songs that use “a musical language that is current, familiar, and manipulable by ordinary people.”\textsuperscript{26} This includes traditional folk music, as well as country, rock, blues, and pop. Vernacular music, for Filene, is music made by and for common people that communicates some type of message.

Filene also argued, against popular wisdom, that the electric music Dylan turned to in the mid-1960’s was not a turn away from the folk movement and social consciousness promoted by Pete Seeger, but “an extension” of it.\textsuperscript{27} Throughout his career, according to Filene, Dylan served as both a musician and historian, not only chronicling American history, but music history as well. He wrote, “As a folk stylist, then, Dylan strove both to absorb the essence of individual roots traditions and to stretch the boundaries of each genre. The ultimate expression of this goal came when Dylan tried to break down generic boundaries altogether.”\textsuperscript{28} Dylan represented everything that vernacular music was supposed to be about, both before and after his 1965 metamorphosis into a rock persona.

Filene concluded his book making a broad claim that supports the position of music’s role in documenting history. He wrote:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{24} Benjamin Filene, \textit{Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 5.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 4.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 185.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 227.
\end{itemize}
Most directly, these moments [iconic images of the folk movement throughout the twentieth century] shaped how Americans remember the country’s musical past. More broadly, they established that the backward glance can be more than nostalgic—that memory can create American culture anew.29

Cultural memory is composed of many items: books, films, newspapers, and so on. But these authors discussed above have shown how music plays a fundamental role in both creating and storing those memories. Kerran L. Sanger wrote about the role of music in the civil rights movement of the 1960s. She argued that “the freedom songs of the civil rights movement were examples of purposeful communication that enabled civil rights activists to set forth a definition of themselves.”30 Black people in the South had struggled to define themselves. They had been defined as someone else’s property, less than human, or second-rate (at best) citizens. Through the spirituals and protest songs, this community defined itself as a group of people who are demanding justice.

Sanger called songs “perhaps the most powerful rhetorical behavior of all in the civil rights movement.”31 As important and powerful as the speaking skills of leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. were to the movement, it was the singing that brought so many people together. One of the reasons for this is that singing is a “symbolic act,”32 which symbolized many important elements of the movement. These songs represented the lyrical meaning of the words. When they sang “We Shall Overcome,” they meant that they WILL overcome the oppression. Singing also represented a community. By joining voices, the activists demonstrated that this wasn’t an

29 Ibid., 236.
31 Ibid., 15.
32 Ibid., 19.
individual goal, but a communal goal. Singing also represented the nonviolent approach that they were taking to achieve social change.

Sanger concluded:

[Protest singers] continue to believe that the average person can make a difference, … that singers are teachers and preachers and able to open eyes. Theirs is ultimately a commitment to communication as a [sic] alternative to force, to a conviction that, if people will express their hope and dreams, and listen, and strive to understand, the world can be a better place and that we all can be better people. 33

By using song as the powerful means of communication, the activists in the civil rights movement knew they would be able to accomplish those goals so eloquently stated by Sanger.

Reebee Garofalo edited a book of essays entitled Rockin’ the Boat: Mass Music and Mass Movements that discussed popular music in such events as the Chinese student movement, the political unrest in what was known as East Germany, the women’s movement, and the civil rights movement. In his own essay on popular music and the civil rights movement, Garofalo argues that the musical changes in rock ‘n’ roll from 1954 through 1973 are more telling of what is happening in society than the lyrical changes. 34

Anita Krajnc compared the social activists of the labor and civil rights movements with the more current environmental movement. Both movements used a “mix of public education tools” 35 including theater and music. Krajnc argued that the environmental movement of today needs to implement some of the techniques for social change used by the labor and civil rights activists of past movements. All of the authors discussed above strengthen the premise of this

33 Ibid., 160.
dissertation that music is an extremely important part of American history, both in recording it and changing it.

**The Literature on Objectivity**

One of the key characteristics of traditional journalism is the concept of objectivity. Often, the media represent the public’s only access to information. They provide the only perspective the public receives.36 Members of the press strive to be objective, to keep their perspective accurate, but according to journalism scholar Gaye Tuchman, they use objectivity as a “bulwark between themselves and critics.”37 Tuchman argued that when journalists can’t verify a fact, they attribute that fact the source. He writes, “Newspapermen regard the statement, ‘X said A,’ as a ‘fact,’ even if ‘A’ is false.”38 He concludes that objectivity can be distilled down to rituals or procedures that “protect the professional from mistakes and from his critics.”39 This is supported in Walter Lippmann’s *Public Opinion* when he stated that news and truth are two entirely different things.40

Tuchman’s observations are confirmed by looking at journalism textbooks. In *Writing and Reporting News*, a book designed for a student’s first course in journalism, Carole Rich writes, “You need to use observation to gather facts and details about an incident, but you should not express your opinions about what you saw. In news stories, all opinions, judgments and

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38 Ibid., 665.

39 Ibid., 678.

accusations must be attributed to a source.”41 Young journalists are clearly told: Keep your emotions and thoughts out of it. Michael Schudson argues that journalists are supposed to “separate facts from values and to report only the facts.”42

Kevin Stoker argues that the rules of objectivity prevent journalists from telling the truth. He cites a case in which a journalist couldn’t find a credible source to confirm her hunch, which ended up being true and would have quickened the police investigation.43 Stoker argues for an “existential journalism,” which “focuses on the journalist as an autonomous moral agent who can choose to promote the overall welfare and freedom of others.”44 Instead, journalists must ignore social wrongs until they have a credible source to voice their concerns.

Nineteenth-century Germany philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche made a compelling argument against the modern conception of journalistic objectivity. Rather than being something that blinds a journalist, emotions are important ways of experiencing and knowing. He argues that the more emotions allowed into reporting, the better the reporter sees and experiences the event, the more well-rounded the picture, and ultimately, the more objective the reporting.45 Nietzsche argued that the attempt “to suspend the emotions” would be to “castrate the intellect.”46


44 Ibid., 12.


46 Ibid., 256.
Cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz seems to find the middle ground. Subjectivity and ambiguity are central to the highly interpretive field of anthropology, but Geertz argues that objectivity, though impossible, is still a worthy goal. He refers to Robert Solow’s comment that even though a perfectly aseptic environment is impossible, surgery should still not be done in a sewer. Geertz’s idea of thick description suggests that by getting more in depth and understanding the people inside the story, journalists can get closer to understanding and reporting the world they see. The concept of objectivity has become one of the most controversial and misunderstood ideals of traditional journalism, and something that voices outside of the journalistic tradition, like underground newspapers and folk singers, often reject.

The Literature on Bob Dylan

As this study will focus on four Bob Dylan songs, it is important to consider some of the literature about Bob Dylan. He has been one of the most written about cultural icons in American history, both academically and in popular culture. His poetic lyrics, his mysterious personality, and his traditional, yet innovative style have provided plenty of material for rhetorical scholars, popular music historians, and cultural studies practitioners.

Dylan is paradoxically one of the most visible and reticent stars in popular music. Playing upwards of 100 shows a year and releasing new material regularly, Dylan stays accessible to his fans. But he doesn’t want to talk about it. At his shows, he rarely acknowledges the audience and wants to keep his personal life to himself. He seems to resent academics and journalists interpreting his lyrics and prying into his life. Dylan said in a Rolling Stone interview in 1978, “I’m the first person who will put it to you, and the last person who will explain it to you.”

Scholars, journalists, and critics have written numerous books about Dylan. A recent visit to the University of Florida music library revealed 22 different books with Bob Dylan in the title on the library shelf, not including the books I already checked out or those in other parts of the UF library system. As a result, the academic literature and popular biographies form an important view into Dylan’s life and provide important insights into the creation of the songs in question that otherwise one might never get.

The literature on Dylan can be broken into two categories, scholarly and popular. In the academic realm, Dylan has been studied by philosophers, rhetoricians, musicologists, historians, and more. Christopher Ricks, a distinguished professor at Boston University and former professor of poetry at Oxford University, wrote *Dylan’s Visions of Sin*, a close analysis of Dylan’s lyrics focusing on his presentation of the seven deadly sins and the seven heavenly virtues. Rhetorical critics Alberto Gonzalez and John J. Makay described the rhetorical techniques Dylan uses during his Gospel music phase.49 *Slow Train Coming* and *Saved*, released in 1979 and 1980 respectively, were Gospel albums in which Dylan sang about his recent conversion to Christianity. Gonzalez and Makay explained that Dylan used extrinsic ascription when he borrowed from a combination of Christian images to appeal to Christian fans and intrinsic ascription when he tapped into his own musical and lyrical images to appeal to his current fan base. Gonzalez and Makay conclude this rhetorical ascription allowed Dylan to introduce a new form of material to his old, loyal fans.

Betsy Bowden examined two performances and interpretations of Dylan’s “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall”— one performed by Dylan in 1963 and one performed by Bryan Ferry 10 years

later. She concluded that “ambiguity on the page can allow for flexibility in performance.”

Bowden pointed out that the differences in instrumentation, arrangement, timing, and vocal inflection allow for a different interpretation of the song. Ferry’s mocking version of the song leads to a triumphant conclusion, quite different from the drowning singer presented in Dylan’s rendition. Bowden recognized that the interpretation of a text must be closely connected to the performance of that text.

Thomas O. Beebee also considered Dylan’s “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall.” Beebee referred to this song as an “apocalyptic ballad” because the song closely resembles the English ballad “Lord Randall” and because of its apocalyptic imagery. Dylan sings about his place in the community of singers rather than following the tradition of the folk movement where songs are about specific social topics. “Hard Rain” does not deal with a narrative story, as is traditional in ballad form, but rather with a series of images that point both to the political situation around him and to his place as a singer within that political situation. According to Beebee, the song is a combination of three ideas: the apocalypse, politics, and Dylan’s place as a singer.

James Dunlap compared the folk movement of the 1930s to the revival in the late 1950s and early 1960’s. He noticed that they came from two different philosophical approaches:

[A]n essentially rational and materialistic or orthodox communist-inspired approach [in the 1930s], on the one hand, and a more idealist approach on the other [in the 1950s and 1960s]. The former emphasizes self-evidently practical tools for change and promotes proper social organization, while the latter emphasizes feelings, symbolism, and independent thinking.


52 Ibid., 32.

Dunlap locates Dylan’s music “within the tradition of American idealism” promoted by Ralph Waldo Emerson a century earlier.\textsuperscript{54} For example, in Dylan’s “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll,” Dunlop argued that Dylan took an “accusatory attitude toward the people who would distance themselves emotionally from the maid’s death.”\textsuperscript{55} He wrote, “In the end, it’s not just the light sentence that offends Dylan; it’s his listener’s smug and intellectualized responses as well (complete with manufactured tears).”\textsuperscript{56} Here Dylan takes a different stance than many in the folk movement from the 1930s might have.

Even Dylan’s bootlegs have been the subject of academic discussion. George Lewis, who called Dylan “quite likely the most bootlegged artist in the world”\textsuperscript{57} categorized Dylan’s unauthorized bootlegs into five categories: studio outtakes/unreleased, rehearsal tapes, live performances, live compilations, and idiosyncratic sets. One of the reasons Lewis lists for Dylan’s rate of bootlegging is the fact that Dylan’s art is always changing. He rearranges his songs constantly, creating a demand for the newest version.\textsuperscript{58}

Dylan’s life has been captured in many popular biographies and critical books. These books inform this study in a number of ways. By consulting the detailed accounts of Dylan’s history, it becomes possible to place his work within the context of his career. In many cases, these biographies and popular works discuss how a song was written or where Dylan got his inspiration, in some cases making contradictory claims. That discussion has been invaluable. This section briefly touches on the popular works that have helped inform this study.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 560.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 561.


\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 111.

Greil Marcus, one of the best-known rock critics, has written two books dedicated to Dylan. *The Old, Weird America* examines the importance of the “basement tapes” made by Bob Dylan and The Band in the basement of The Band’s house in Woodstock, New York. Marcus explains how the folk community of the early 1960s envisioned “another country” and when Bob Dylan sang his folk songs, “he embodied a yearning for peace and home in the midst of

noise and upheaval, and in the aesthetic reflection of that embodiment located both peace and home in the purity, the essential goodness, of each listener’s heart.” The folk revival emphasized the song over the singer, the common good over personal gains. The rock ‘n’ roll music on Dylan’s Bringing It All Back Home, Highway 61 Revisited, and Blonde on Blonde directly opposed the “country” envisioned by his folkie friends. Dylan’s rock songs emphasized city over country, and capital over labor [...] the white artist over the black Folk, selfishness over compassion, rapacity over need, the thrill of the moment over the trials of endurance, the hustler over the worker, the thief over the orphan.

Marcus frames the resistance to Dylan’s rock music not as disputes over instrumentation and rhythms, not as competing musical tastes, but as a battle of ideologies.

Marcus also wrote Like a Rolling Stone, a tribute to and examination of Dylan’s monumental song of the same title. Marcus considers the song one of the most important rock songs ever written. As the subtitle of the book says, “Like a Rolling Stone” is an “explosion of vision and humor that forever changed pop music.” He referred to Dylan’s performances captured by documentary filmmaker D.A. Pennebaker during the spring of 1965 as ritualized, recognizing that the folk songs he played were not where his heart was. His heart was in the rock ‘n’ roll songs found on Bringing It All Back Home, and the yet to be written “Like A Rolling Stone.”

Bob Dylan’s memoir Chronicles: Volume One offers insight into the construction of his character. Dylan introduces that he was feeling uncomfortable with the labels and his own stardom, “All I’d ever done was sing songs that were dead straight and expressed powerful new

60 Ibid.
61 Ibid., 28.
62 Ibid., 30.
63 Greil Marcus, Like a Rolling Stone (New York: BBS Public Affairs, 2005), 55.
realities. I had very little in common with and knew even less about a generation that I was supposed to be the voice of.”64 This book was released approximately a year before Martin Scorsese’s film No Direction Home was released. Dylan’s memoirs and Scorsese’s film present Dylan as a misunderstood victim who was forced into a role he was uncomfortable filling.

As a whole, the academic and popular works of Dylan provide as well rounded a picture of the man behind these songs as possible. Each work has strengths and weaknesses. Some have been more useful than others. But they have all been important in contextualizing Dylan’s life and these songs.

**Methodology**

The methodology for this study combines historical research, rhetorical studies, and mass communication theory. Many hours have been spent digging through digital and microfilm archives to look at primary sources. Some of the primary sources include the *Jackson Clarion-Ledger* and *Jackson Daily News*, and the Baltimore *Afro-American*. Several secondary texts have also been examined to see how other historians have interpreted and analyzed the events in question. Each scenario has been examined on many levels of news writing, from local newspapers to underground or historically black publications to national papers like the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*.

The analysis is guided by two communication theories, one from the realm of rhetoric and one from the realm of mass communication. First, rhetorical scholar Kenneth Burke’s concept of “terministic screens” informed much of the analysis of the language used by these news organizations. Burke argued that any nomenclature highlights certain aspects of reality and ignores others, or as he put it, “necessarily directs the attention into some channels rather than

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others.”65 Even more clearly he wrote, “Even if any given terminology is a reflection of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a selection of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a deflection of reality.”66 Essentially, our language doesn’t recreate and label reality. Our language filters reality and ultimately distorts reality. This study points out how the language newspapers and Bob Dylan used distorted reality.

The second theory informing this study is framing. According to Robert Entman, “To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communication text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.”67 Maxwell McCombs describes framing as “the selection of—and emphasis upon—particular attributes for the media agenda when talking about an object.”68 Dylan retells these stories through particular frames, and this study hopes to examine those frames and how they define the issues, place blame, and make judgments.

**Dissertation**

This dissertation will contain four major chapters. Each chapter is divided into two main categories: the story and the song. The “story” contains a brief summary of the narrative for each case and a review all of the secondary sources and academic literature that inform each chapter. The “song” refers to the analysis of primary sources, such as newspapers and magazines, and

66 Ibid.
Dylan’s lyrics. Each chapter will contain the entire lyrics of the song being examined, as well as an analysis of the song.

Chapter two deals with Bob Dylan’s “The Death of Emmett Till,” a retrospective piece similar to the annual newspaper coverage of the anniversaries of Pearl Harbor or September 11. In this chapter, Till’s case becomes a guiding narrative for the civil rights movement. Along the way, the details of the case become part of our collective memory, which often is inaccurate. Dylan’s song becomes a crucial part of that cultural memory. By examining the press coverage from northern newspapers, southern newspapers, *Look* magazine, and Dylan’s song, this chapter shows how each perspective framed the case in different ways.

Chapter three deals with “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll,” an example of timely underground journalism. In this chapter, Dylan’s song functions very similar to how underground journalism works, as it ignores the conventions of traditional reporting. Hattie Carroll’s death is documented and saved in an unconventional format with the type of inaccuracies, biases, and hyperboles common in underground journalism. Dylan’s journalism more closely resembles that of the historically black Baltimore *Afro-American* than the *New York Times* or *Baltimore Sun*. Ultimately, the reason anyone remembers Hattie Carroll’s story is because Dylan wrote a beautiful and telling version of her story.

Chapter four serves as a bridge between Dylan’s earlier work in protest music to his return in the middle 1970s. The song “George Jackson,” a blip on Dylan’s “protest music radar,” functions as an obituary for the fallen militant black activist who was killed in prison. In this song, Dylan doesn’t chronicle the details of the case the way he did for Emmett Till and Hattie Carroll, which are more like newspaper reports. Rather, he highlights Jackson’s life and
attributes, like an obituary. This song doesn’t get the full treatment that the other three songs do, as it lacks the courtroom drama the other songs provide.

Chapter five deals with Dylan’s song “Hurricane,” in which Dylan and co-writer Jacques Levy argue for the innocence of convicted boxer Rubin “Hurricane” Carter. The song closely resembles the type of literary or narrative journalism made popular by writers like Tom Wolfe, Hunter S. Thompson, Gay Talese, and Truman Capote. Carter had been imprisoned for a triple murder in 1966 in Paterson, New Jersey, but two of the key witnesses for the prosecution were convicts who later recanted their testimony. Dylan uses several techniques of literary journalism to create a dramatic and haunting depiction of Carter’s case.

Finally, the conclusion examines the way that Dylan’s music works as journalism and all the complicated implications that come with it. Rather than pointing toward the past, the conclusion points to what modern journalists can learn from the way artists like Dylan tell stories.
CHAPTER 2
VERSE ONE: BOB DYLAN’S VERSION OF EMMETT TILL AND THE CREATION OF MEMORY

For the jury found them innocent and the brothers they went free, / While Emmett's body floats the foam of a Jim Crow southern sea.

—Bob Dylan, “The Death of Emmett Till”

Some historians argue that the civil rights movement began with a whistle. The whistle came from the lips of Emmett Till, a black 14-year-old boy from Chicago, visiting Mississippi for the first time. On the evening of August 24, 1955, a group of eight black teenagers stood outside Roy Bryant’s store in Money. Carolyn Bryant, Roy Bryant’s 21-year-old wife, was working at the store that night. Emmett Till went into the store and allegedly asked Mrs. Bryant for a date. A cousin, who knew the rules of Mississippi, took Till out of the store. Once outside, Till allegedly let loose a “wolf whistle.” The teenagers drove away as Mrs. Bryant went to get a gun.

Four days later, Roy Bryant and his half-brother, J.W. Milam, allegedly drove to the house of Moses Wright, Till’s uncle and host in Mississippi. After identifying Till, the brothers took him to Milam’s house and beat him. They brought him to the Tallahatchie River and shot him. The brothers tied a cotton gin fan around him with barbed wire and pushed him into the river. Seventy-two hours and eight miles of river passed before fishermen found the body, which could only be identified by a ring with Till’s father’s initials engraved in it. The jury of their peers ultimately acquitted brothers of murder, and according to historian Clenora Hudson-Weems, the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s was ignited.  

1 The details that follow are taken from William Bradford Huie, “The Shocking Story of Approved Killing in Mississippi,” Look Magazine, 24 January 1956, 46-50. Elements of Huie’s story have been debated, but the facts listed in this section have been agreed upon by other sources.

But depending on who is telling the story, the details change. Historians will probably never know exactly what happened on those fateful, steamy days in the Mississippi Delta in 1955. The story of Emmett Till’s death means much to many people. Rhetorical critic Dave Tell writes, “By all indications, the story of Till’s death has remained a staple of the American imagination.” In other words, this story has become a myth to which different groups attach different significance and part of our collective memory.

Bob Dylan’s 1962 song “The Death of Emmett Till” tells the tragic story of the black teenager from Chicago. Dylan never included the song on one of his records. He performed the song live often in 1962, and it circulated through folk compilation records and bootlegs. Emmett Till’s story appears in books, magazines, newspapers, films, academic journals, plays, and songs. Dylan’s song, like all other retellings, rhetorically places emphasis on some facts and ignores others. Till’s story becomes a myth.

This study explores the origin of that myth by focusing on several distinct voices: the mainstream media, represented by the New York Times, the Washington Post, and the Chicago Tribune; William Bradford Huie’s article published in Look Magazine in January of 1956; the coverage by local news organizations, represented by the Jackson Clarion-Ledger, the Jackson Daily News, and the Delta Democrat-Times; and Dylan’s song.


The Story

The Murder of Emmett Till

Till’s story was certain to have reverberations. In one of the first editorial comments from a northern newspaper, the New York Times September 7, 1955, editorial said, “The prompt action of the grand jury in the Till case indicates that the people of contemporary Mississippi are against this form of murder as against other forms of murder.” While the interpretation seemed plausible, the logic follows that the subsequent acquittal would suggest that the people of the state are in fact not against this form of murder. John N. Popham, a New York Times reporter who was the first newspaper reporter from the North to cover the South, wrote in the article previewing the trial that many in Mississippi knew that if segregation was to survive, equal justice was necessary. In other words, for Mississippians, a lot was riding on a guilty verdict. Popham already recognized the swaying public opinion as a result of “outsiders” such as the NAACP.

The initial reaction to the brutal murder from the press, the law enforcement, and apparently from the people of Mississippi was of outrage. The state of Mississippi vowed to get to the bottom of the case. But shortly after the incident broke in the news, Roy Wilkins of the NAACP made some inflammatory remarks to the press about the entire state resorting to murdering children. The remarks worked against the prosecution.

Before long, public opinion and many editorial opinions shifted. Instead of prosecuting two men, the state ended up defending itself. Mississippi seemed to resent Wilkins’ statements. Even Sheriff Strider, who originally confirmed the identity of the body as Till, weeks later

decided he wasn’t so sure. He thought the body looked like a grown man’s and that it had been in the water much longer than three days. Public opinion shifted with Strider’s opinions.

Hodding Carter Jr., the editor of the Greenville *Delta Democrat-Times*, saw the writing on the wall. The body was Till’s, and the case was not a “northern conspiracy,” he wrote. But as the public opinion turned, the state of Mississippi would be in for it if the verdict came back not guilty. If people thought the rest of the country looked down on them before the trial, wait until an acquittal is read. The editorial in *the Delta Democrat-Times* read:

They are calling this a lynching in some places outside of Mississippi. Well, it wasn’t. But it may well become a lynching post-facto, if the courts in Mississippi are unable to accomplish justice in this matter.

And if this happens, we will deserve the criticism we get. 9

The trial had several dramatic moments, most notably Moses “Preacher” Wright staying, “Thar he,” and pointing to Milam as he identified the two men who had abducted Till. The state produced surprise witnesses placing Till and Milam in the same truck and barn the night he was abducted and killed. Emmett Till’s mother testified in the trial. Carolyn Bryant described the incident in the store, though not in front of the jury because the judge decided her testimony was outside the timeframe of the events in question. Two potential witnesses could not be found. In the closing argument, both sides argued that the jury needed to protect the state of Mississippi with its verdict, either by standing up to outside agitators with a not guilty verdict or by silencing them with a guilty verdict.

After a little more than an hour, the verdict came not guilty. About a month later, a Leflore County grand jury failed to indict the brothers for kidnapping, even though they had confessed to

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a sheriff that they had. Legally speaking, the Emmett Till case was closed. But emotionally and culturally, the Emmett Till narrative was just beginning.

Till’s death was part of the beginning of fledgling civil rights movement, but certainly not the only. The entire Till case happened in the wake of the monumental *Brown v. The Board of Education* Supreme Court decision in May 1954, which overturned the “separate but equal” policy toward segregated schools. As the people in the south resisted the expanding reach of the federal government and the changes to their way of life, racial tensions in the south continued to increase. The Leflore Count grand jury refused to indict Emmett Till’s murderers on November 9. About three weeks later and 300 miles away in Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks stood her ground in the front of a public bus. Her December 1 stand led to Martin Luther King Jr.’s first major victory in the Montgomery bus boycott.

**The Background**

Academics have given much attention to Emmett Till’s story. In 2008, the historical journal *Southern Quarterly* devoted an entire issue to the legacy of Till’s death. In the introduction to that issue, Philip C. Kolin writes that Till represented everything “from historical figure to everyone’s child to sacrificial lamb to mythic hero.”¹⁰ The communication journal *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* dedicated an issue to Emmett Till and Rosa Parks. In the introduction to the issue, Davis W. Houck calls Till a “martyr” and Parks a “heroine.”¹¹

Hugh Stephen Whitaker, a master’s student at Florida State University in 1962, wrote his thesis on the Emmett Till story, which appeared in 2005 in *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*.¹²

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S. Anderson wrote an article claiming to separate “fact and fiction” in the Emmett Till case. Scholars have published numerous books documenting the entire Emmett Till case and aftermath, often claiming to have access to the “true” story. Stephen Whitfield’s 1988 book, *A Death in the Delta*, was the first to compile the historical evidence into a complete narrative. Houck and Matthew A. Grindy’s 2008 book, *Emmett Till and the Mississippi Press*, examines the Mississippi press coverage of the death, trial, and aftermath. In their comparison of three sources of news, Margaret Spratt, et al. concluded that Mississippi newspapers viewed outsiders as the root of Mississippi’s race problem, and the *Chicago Defender*, a historically black paper, viewed outsiders as the solution. John R. Tisdale’s oral history of three reporters who covered the trial found that the differing organizational and audience expectations for each reporter affected their coverage.

Scholars have given much attention to the idea that artifacts from popular culture and press coverage create narrative frameworks for the interpretation of history. Peter Ehrenhaus and A. Susan Owen argue in their analysis of war films, “Popular storytellers have supplanted historians


and journalists as a primary source of public memory."  

Eric W. Rothenbuhler examines the mythology of blues music pioneer Robert Johnson, arguing that in this case, “actual events and documentary evidence are only some of the elements of the story.” In her analysis of the relationship between the terms history and myth, Rebecca Collins found that history “monopolized the notion of objective truth while myth was characterized in different ways in relation to this truth.”

In his study of collective memory and collective action, political scientist Fredrick C. Harris concluded, “Memory processes sustain the memory of the event over time, allowing the event, now a collective memory, to publicly resurface as political actor re-appropriate it to build lines of solidarity and/or forge strategies for collective action.” The lynching of Emmett Till seems to be one of those memories, fostered by the numerous popular representations such as Dylan’s song, as demonstrated in Emmett Till in Literary Imagination, a collection of essays exploring literary representations of the Till case. This study examines the many voices that have contributed to that imagination.

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20 Rebecca Collins, “Concealing the Poverty of Traditional Historiography: myth as mystification in historical discourse” Rethinking History 7.3 (2003): 345-346.


The Song

Bob Dylan’s “The Death of Emmett Till”

“The Death of Emmett Till” was important in Dylan’s progression as a songwriter—it was possibly Dylan’s first “protest song.” According to Clinton Heylin, a Dylan biographer, Dylan wrote the song for a CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) benefit concert. Dylan performed the song for another radio program in May of 1962, which appeared on a folk compilation titled *Broadside Reunion* under the pseudonym Blind Boy Grunt. Dylan’s live performance of the song in Montreal on July 2, 1962, appeared on the *Historical Archives Vols. 1 and 2*. In December of 1962, Dylan recorded a year’s worth of songs, including “The Death of Emmett Till,” for his new music publisher, Witmark Music. It is unclear if anything happened with these recordings. Dylan scholar Todd Harvey called Dylan’s 1962 composition “one of his most important and well-received early compositions,” getting the almost reverential treatment that his “Blowin’ in the Wind” would receive a few months later. Heylin has heard seven copies of “The Death of Emmett Till”—all recorded in 1962.

This was certainly one of Dylan’s earliest songs. He was a young songwriter, hungry for material and trying to hone his craft. By the end of 1962, Dylan would write classics such as “Blowin’ in the Wind” (April 1962), “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall” (September 1962), “Don’t

25 Ibid., 30.
26 Ibid., 31.
27 Ibid., 35.
28 Harvey, 23.
29 Ibid., 23.
Think Twice, It’s Alright” (October 1962), and “Oxford Town” (fall 1962). While “The Death of Emmett Till” came nearly seven years after Bryant and Milam were acquitted of the grisly crime, Dylan’s song “helped to foster support for the movement among folk revivalists,” Harvey writes.  

**National/Northern Press Coverage**

The mainstream press covered the Emmett Till case in the objective, detached way that has become expected of them, as discussed in the above literature review. There was very little editorializing in the news stories. Any opinions always came from their sources. Most papers used Associated Press or United Press International wire services to supplement their reporting. According to the ProQuest Historical newspaper archives, the first mainstream report of the slaying came from the *Washington Post*, which reported on September 1, 1955, that Till had “been shot through the head” and found in the Tallahatchie River with a cotton-gin blower tied around his neck.  

The *Washington Post*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *New York Times*, and the *Christian Science Monitor* reported the slaying, arrests, and indictment in early September 1955 with wire stories, but used their own reporters once the trial began in the latter half of the month.  

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30 Harvey, 22.

31 “Missing Negro Boy Found Shot to Death in River,” *Washington Post and Times Herald*, September 1, 1955. This was during the time when the *Washington Post* merged with the *Washington Times Herald* and was officially called the *Washington Post and Times Herald*. In the text, it will be referred to as its common name, the *Washington Post*.

32 Please note that these four newspapers could hardly stand in as a clear representation of the northern press. Countless papers were printed during the time of Till’s saga, and each one had a unique voice and perspective. However, these newspapers represented as close to a national voice as could be found in print. For that reason, these papers were chosen to represent the northern media. Similarly, the analysis of the southern press must be limited as well. I have chosen the *Jackson Daily News* and *Jackson Clarion-Ledger* because of their wide circulation in the Mississippi Delta and the *Delta Democrat-Times* for its proximity to the trial and representation as a moderate to progressive southern newspaper.
The Southern Press

The analysis of the southern press’s coverage of the trial comes from two influential voices in the northern Mississippi Delta. The first voice is from two papers, the *Jackson Clarion-Ledger* and *Jackson Daily News*. Both of these newspapers were owned by the Hederman family, which supported the segregationist group the White Citizens Council. The second voice is from the Greenville *Delta Democrat-Times*. The editor of the *Delta Democrat-Times* was Hodding Carter Jr., widely considered the most progressive editor in the region. Houck and Grindy’s analysis in their comprehensive study of the Mississippi coverage of the Till trial lends a guiding hand to the analysis.

William Bradford Huie


The editor’s note before the article states:

The editors of *Look* are convinced that they are presenting here, for the first time, the real story of that killing—the story no jury heard and no newspaper reader saw. Disclosed here is the true account of the slaying in Mississippi of a Negro youth named Emmett Till.

Huie and the editorial staff at *Look* showed their confidence in getting the true and real story. Nowhere in the story does Huie state that he interviewed the brothers, except for several

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33 Roberts and Klibanoff, 101.
34 Whitfield, 52.
35 Huie, 46
quotations throughout the story. Directly after the story was published, the brothers vehemently denied the confession. Huie’s version of Till’s death for years had been leading narrative, though Houck and Grindy report that Huie and Look magazine were most likely “bamboozled” by the brothers and conclude that we probably will never know what happened that night. 36

The Making of the Myth

These voices—the northern and southern press, Huie, and Dylan—address three important ideas in this story. Race, the whistle or motive for the murder, and justice emerged as key elements of the myth of the Till’s story. It would be a mistake to assume that these three concepts are separate, distinct ideas. Often, race appears to be the motive. And if the motive is the whistle and “fresh” talking that Till did toward Carolyn Bryant, the offense takes on different meaning in the racially charged South. As Houck and Grindy point out, the ideal of the beautiful white woman takes a special place, especially when confronted by an aggressive “negro” from Chicago. Viewed through the lens of a segregationist, the question of whether justice was served is blurry. These ideas are indeed interrelated.

Race

The entire story was about race. The killers were white. The victim was black. The woman in the middle was white. The recipe was tailor-fit for a dramatic lynching story. But each source describes race a little differently as each source experiences it a little differently. The northern press has one understanding of race, and the southern papers have another. Dylan, only 21 at the time he wrote the song, was influenced by his liberal friends in Greenwich Village. Each of those show up in the way each voice presents the idea.

36 Houck and Grindy, 151.
**Northern/national press.** As expected, the mainstream press addressed the issue of race cautiously. In 1955, using the term “Negro” as an adjective and noun was acceptable. These articles would always refer to a black man as a “Negro man” or just a “Negro.” It was important to identify the race of the source or witness. Virtually every article described the alleged murder of a “Negro boy” by “white men.” Often the conflict was positioned between a negro boy and a white woman, tying in the miscegenation fears of the South. The term lynching appeared early in the coverage, but only in a quotation, not the reporters’ words.

The northern press noted that the grand jury that indicted the brothers was made up of white men. Popham knew the trial would be racially charged considering the Jim Crow rules of the time.\(^\text{37}\) The day before the trial would begin, Popham wrote about the reaction to the case: “But in several senses the real drama will concern the entire state and its role as a militant defender of racial segregation practices.”\(^\text{38}\) It became clear that the more the NAACP and other civil rights activists protested, the more the people of the state supported the brothers and turned against Till. The northern press reported the defense’s theory about the death of Emmett Till. The defense argued that “outsiders” and “rabble-rousers” manufactured the body to urge on civil rights activists.

Popham said more than once that because the jury only had three options in the murder trial—death, life imprisonment, or acquittal—the jury was probably unwilling to punish white men so severely for a crime against a black person.\(^\text{39}\) An editorial in the *Christian Science Monitor* reiterates Popham’s observation, noting that there were “not merely two defendants but also all the deep-rooted racial mores of a South which feels itself misunderstood.”\(^\text{39}\)

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38 Ibid.

reportage of race was muted, the national or northern press seemed to have a strong understanding of the racial implications of the case.

In their final arguments, both sides of the case argued that the jury must defend the way of life in Mississippi. The prosecution said justice must be preserved, even if it is a white against a “Negro.” The defense said the state needed to be protected against “outside agitators.” Holmes writes:

The defense theory, advanced by John Whitten, one of five members of the Sumner bar retained by Bryant and Milam, was that the kidnaping [sic] of Till, if it took place, was no more than an effort to administer a whipping, but that “outsiders” had seized on the circumstances to simulate Till’s death.

Whitten told the jury it was possible “outsiders” had hidden Till, equipped a body with Till’s ring, and dumped the body into the Tallahatchie river in the hope its identification as Till would disrupt racial relations.

Popham added that Whitten said “rabble rousers’ had brought ‘notoriety’ and national newspaper coverage to Sumner. He said he was ‘sure that every last Anglo-Saxon one of you has the courage to free these men in the face of that pressure.’”40 The jury only had three choices: death, life in prison, or acquittal. Popham wrote:

Because of the race relations factors involved in this case it was widely predicted that a verdict carrying either a death or a life imprisonment sentence was most unlikely to be returned by the jury. This was regarded by many as the major factor underlying the jury’s action.

**Southern press.** As could be expected, the *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, the *Jackson Daily News*, and the *Delta Democrat-Times* mentioned race in every article about the case.41 Till was called a Negro child, Negro boy, or Negro man. The brothers and Carolyn Bryant were always

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41 Only one article in the *Delta Democrat-Times* failed to mention race. The article was about Mamie Bradley’s decision to testify at her son’s trial. Neither her race, her son’s race, or the race of the brothers was mentioned. “Slain Youth’s Mother To Testify At Trial,” *Delta Democrat-Times*, September 9, 1955.
described as white. In many cases, the papers called for the protection of the race relations status quo. For example, the *Delta Democrat-Times* ran a United Press story that quoted Robert Paterson, the executive secretary of the pro-segregation White Citizen’s Council, saying, “One of the primary reasons for our organization is to prevent acts of violence.”

From the beginning of the coverage in the southern newspapers, the battle was not the State versus the defense, or even good versus evil. The battle was the South versus the rabble-rousers from the North. The second story on the case in the *Clarion-Ledger*, published on September 1, 1955, quotes Roy Wilkins, misspelled as Ray Winkins: “It would appear from this lynching that the State of Mississippi has decided to maintain white supremacy by murdering children.” This quote would ring through the southern press several times, appearing in the *Clarion-Ledger* four times. In fact, 10 of the first 18 stories about Till’s case in the *Clarion-Ledger* mentioned the NAACP.

Wilkins and the NAACP become the clear-cut enemy of the southern establishment, and a hyperbolic quotation like this only exacerbated the sentiment. A September 2, 1955, editorial in the *Jackson Daily News* accuses the NAACP of trying to “arouse hatred and fear” by classifying the killing as a lynching. The September 3, 1955, issue of the *Clarion-Ledger* questions the NAACP’s classification of this case as a lynching. In an editorial in the September 3, 1955, issue reads: “One minor sideline many may not have considered is that it is by reason of incidents of this kind that such radical groups as the NAACP are able to raise large sums of


43 “Body Of Negro Found In River,” *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, September, 1, 1955. The *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, *Jackson Daily News*, and *Delta Democrat-Times* used several wire stories in its coverage of the Till case, most often from the Associated Press. Unless otherwise indicated, all stories are from wire services.


45 “State Papers Hit Slaying Of Negro,” *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, September 3, 1955. This story is not credited to an author or to a wire service.
money for expansion of its strife-breeding business.” A September 4, 1955, seven-column headline in the *Daily News* reads: “Say Mass Demonstrations Hinder Murder Prosecution.” The tragedy was hardly about the dead teenager, but about the risk to the Southern way of life.

The *Delta Democrat-Times* quoted Mississippi Governor White saying, “They’re in the press all the time—that gang,” in reference to the NAACP. The term “gang” probably didn’t have the inner city connotations in 1955 as it might today. Still, it seems like a fairly derogatory term for a governor to use to describe the organization. The headline of an unattributed story in the *Daily News* reads, “NAACP Power Is Result of Apathy.” The article is simply a place for John Satterfield, the president of the Mississippi Bar Association, to complain that integration laws were a violation of the majority’s civil rights.

In an editorial, the *Delta Democrat-Times* called the NAACP’s tactics “blatant propaganda,” and printed Wilkins “murdering children” quote. In a later editorial, the *Delta Democrat-Times* said two groups are seeking an acquittal: friends of the brothers and the NAACP. The implication is that an acquittal provides more fodder for the budding civil rights movement supported by the NAACP.

Jay Milner, a staff writer for the *Clarion-Ledger*, said the “sensitive” NAACP officials in New York “called it a ‘lynching’” and quoted Sheriff Strider calling the murder “a trick” of the NAACP. The outspoken sheriff said after the trial, “Well I hope the Chicago niggers and the

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NAACP are satisfied.” In another story, Milner interviewed Bryant’s neighbors who heard Bryant talk nicely about his black commander in Korea. The headline said he “didn’t mind” his Negro colleague. This served as proof for his neighbors that he probably didn’t commit that crime. The newspapers in the South often referred to keeping the status quo of race relations.

**Hue.** Huie is bolder than the northern press in his discussion of race. He positions race as a central aspect of the story. Black folks are some of the main patrons of Bryant’s store, but that has changed with government assistance to the black workers in the South. Quite bluntly, the civil rights movement has hurt the Bryants’ business. Huie describes the Bryant/Milam family as resisting the rise of the black people in their area. As blacks tried to become more economically and politically powerful, the whites like the Bryants and Milams needed to work harder to sustain the status quo of white dominance.

Huie quotes Milam’s outspoken position on race:

“I’m no bully; I never hurt a nigger in my life. I like niggers—in their place—I know how to work ‘em. But I just decided it was time a few people got put on notice. As long as I live and can do anything about it, niggers are gonna stay in their place.”

Without a doubt, Milam appears not to be a passive racist, willing to accept the conditions simply because they benefit him. Rather, Milam is an aggressive, hateful racist who is working to maintain the status quo of black oppression and white supremacy.

A key point that Huie makes is about Till’s alleged bragging about having sexual relations with white women. Till’s supposed aggression toward Mrs. Bryant and the culmination of that in the wolf whistle enraged the white brothers. The brothers were consumed with their desire to

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keep black people in their lower position, and a sexual advance was the ultimate form of stepping out of line. Milam said, “When a nigger gets close to mentioning sex with a white woman, he’s tired o’ livin’. I’m likely to kill him.” Till could have said just about anything, and it would have been better than suggesting he’s had sex with white women.53

**Whistle/Motive**

The press quickly gave the story a title: the wolf whistle murder. The alliterative nickname was too good to resist. Yet Dylan resisted it, and the judge presiding over the trial didn’t allow it in court. The whistle had a deeper meaning than these sources let on. In their research, Houck and Grindy were struck with the large number of beautiful white women appearing in Mississippi newspapers. They write, “[W]hether it was a come-hither prone shot, a titillating from-below peek, a claustrophobic décolletage glimpse, or even a spread-eagled cheerleading jump, Mississippi newspapers reveled in exposing beautiful white womanhood.”54 This whistle served as a synecdoche for what Mississippi segregationists saw was wrong with integration. Blacks and whites mingling, interacting, marrying. The fears of miscegenation coalesce in the teenager’s whistle.

**Northern press.** Again, the mainstream press exercised due caution concerning the “wolf whistle” or “fresh remarks.” Any mention of the whistle was always couched in an “allegedly” or a “supposed.” The northern press was careful with positioning a motive for the brothers’ actions. The first *Washington Post* wire story reports that Carolyn Bryant was “allegedly insulted.”55 A *Chicago Tribune* Associated Press story reminiscent of the writing from the southern papers

53 Huie, 50.
54 Houck and Grindy, 27.
reported, “The boy’s body was found in a river a few days after he whistled at pretty Mrs. Roy Bryant.”

An editorial in the *Christian Science Monitor* highlighted the sexual mores in the south: “Non-Southerners must understand that any act of undue familiarity by a Negro toward a white woman has always been deemed very serious.” Paul Holmes of the *Chicago Tribune* noted that by not including Carolyn Bryant’s testimony in the trial, the prosecution failed to present a plausible motive. It is quite likely that the prosecution didn’t want Bryant’s testimony included to prevent a “justifiable homicide” defense. In a later story, Holmes writes that Bryant said that Till “tussled with her while making indecent proposals” and Till allegedly said an “unprintable word.” A United Press article in the *Washington Post* described Carolyn Bryant as “a brunette whose charm allegedly attracted Till.”

Because only Carolyn Bryant knew what went on in the store, the papers made sure to be clear that the account is based only on her recollection. Others reported the whistle, some arguing that Till had a speech impediment that made a whistling sound, others arguing that Till was whistling at an impressive move in the Checkers game outside the store. Either way, the northern press was cautious about reporting the whistle. But they almost never failed to mention either the whistle or the remarks. Even as an “alleged” action, the confrontation between Carolyn Bryant and Emmett Till was significant.

**Southern press.** Initially, the *Jackson Clarion-Ledger* spoke of the “ugly remarks” Till made to Carolyn Bryant as motivation for the brothers’ revenge. On September 1, 1955, the

The wolf whistle wasn’t mentioned until September 2, 1955, in the Clarion-Ledger when Wheeler Parker, Till’s Chicago friend and traveling companion, described “wolf call.” Another story said Till was “acting ‘fresh’ toward a white woman.” It reads, “The boy, 14-year-old Emmett Till, was found in a river near here a few days after he wolf-whistled at pretty Mrs. Roy Bryant in the story at Money, Miss.” Note the factual presentation of the whistle. The whistle was not alleged or reported. It simply happened. Two stories in the September 10, 1955, issue follow this accusation. The first said that “he wolf-whistled at a pretty white woman,” and another said that the brothers were accused of murdering him because “he ‘made some remarks’ to Mrs. Bryant in the Bryant store and then whistled at her as he departed.”

In the story that ran the day the jury was expected to begin deliberations, the Clarion-Ledger ran an Associated Press story by Arthur Everett, which started with a dramatic lede: “A young Mississippi white mother claimed today she was molested by a wolfwhistling [sic] Negro boy. Three days later a visiting Chicago Negro lad was abducted and slain, allegedly as the molester who tried obscenely to date her.” Later in the story, Till is described as the Negro who “invaded” her store. Till was no longer a 14-year-old boy, but a molester and invader. While this testimony didn’t make it before the jury, the Clarion-Ledger found it important enough to print. The picture running next to this story showed a weary Carolyn Bryant laying her head on her


62 “Slain Boy’s Mother Will Get Invitation To Trial Of Deltans,” Jackson Clarion-Ledger, September 8, 1955.


husband’s shoulder. The caption reads, “Mrs. Bryant, visibly showing the strain of her husband’s murder trial, rests her head on his shoulder.” Such sympathetic photos and captions of Mamie Till during the trial of her son’s murderers never appeared in the newspaper.

If Houck and Grindy are right, Carolyn Bryant’s beauty was an undercurrent throughout the case, and the *Clarion-Ledger* and *Daily News* were not shy in reporting her beauty. The *Daily News* and the *Clarion-Ledger* focused on her looks with phrases like “Bryant’s pretty brunette wife,” “highly attractive,” and “black-haired, brown-eyed, shapely and slender 21-year-old wife of one of the defendants,” “who was voted most beautiful girl at both Indianola and Leland High School during her school days.” In a September 20, 1955, story, Milner described the two accused murders’ wives as “well groomed and uncommonly attractive.” These can be compared to the Featherston’s description of Mamie Bradley in the *Daily News*, “Dressed in a black shantung dress, a black velvet hat studded with rhinestones & a considerable amount of costume jewelry, the 33-year-old Mamie Bradley, small, plump and appearing very neat…”

No more clearly did the *Jackson Daily News* demonstrate the real motive for the murder, and the resulting acquittal, than on the front page of the October 15, 1955, issue. The bold, all-caps, six-column headline shouts, “Till’s Dad Raped 2 Women, Murdered A Third In Italy.” The story is really about the “Negro propaganda” against the state of Mississippi, quoting a *Life* magazine story that said Till’s father was killed during World War II in France while fighting for the American value of equality, when the truth was that he was executed for his crimes.

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The front page of the issue is telling. Just to the left of the glaring headline about Till’s father is this smaller headline: “Rape Charges Dropped Against Negro Boys.” A reader could easily think the stories were about the same crime. Directly below the headline about Till’s father is a picture of a beautiful and buxom white woman in a form-fitting sweater, announcing that sweater season has arrived in the south. The trial was about murder and about race, but it was also about protecting southern white sexuality from the black rapists, young and old.

**Huie.** When the editor’s note prior to the story calls it the “true account,” there is no room for mincing words. Huie tells the story from the brothers’ perspectives, and the whistle is central to the brothers’ irrational behavior. Huie is not shy about describing Till’s action in the store. Huie writes, “He squeezed her hand and said: ‘How about a date, baby?’ Till said, ‘You needn’t be afraid o’ me, Baby. I been with white girls before.’” By his account, Till practically assaulted Carolyn Bryant by grabbing her around the waist. Even if this is true, the punishment of death was motivated only by racial hatred. Had a white teenager done the same thing in Bryant’s store, the response would most likely have been completely different. As Huie explains, Bryant had to take action against the black aggressor: “For him to have done nothing would have marked him for a coward and a fool.”⁶⁹

But the whistle really only started the action, but wasn’t necessarily the motivating factor for the killing. According to Huie, the brothers only intended to scare Till. Milam told Huie: “We were never able to scare him. They had just filled him so full of that poison that he was hopeless.”⁷⁰ It came down to a final exchange between Milam and Till:

—“You still as good as I am?” Milam asked.
—“Yeah.”

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⁶⁹ Huie, 47.
⁷⁰ Ibid., 50.
—“You still ‘had’ white women?”
—“Yeah.”

Huie wrote, “That big .45 jumped in Big Milam’s hand. The youth turned to catch that big expanding bullet at his right ear. He dropped.” According to Huie’s version, Till’s arrogance, brashness, lack of respect, inability to be scared, and his distain for the southern way of life is what led to his death.

Justice

The stakes were high. Numerous editorials from the North and the South said the future of Mississippi was on the line. And both the defense and prosecution agreed. Defense attorney Whitten argued that outside pressure is upon the state and that he was “sure every last Anglo-Saxon one of you has the courage to free these men in the face of that pressure.” The prosecution argued that if segregation in Mississippi was going to survive the Supreme Court and other outside attacks, the jury must show that whites and blacks will get equal treatment by a fair court of law. A guilty verdict would increase the outside pressure and spell the end of the Mississippi way of life, as separate but equal would crumble. The idea of justice was treated differently by the different voices.

Northern press. The result was that the two men were found not guilty. As the northern press described it, the jury simply didn’t believe that the body was Till’s. The defense’s strategy of questioning the identity of the body paid off. The foreman of the jury said, “We had a picture of the body with us in the jury room, and it seemed to us the body was so badly decomposed it could not be identified.” Holmes story quoted the jury foreman questioning Mamie Bradley’s sincerity during her testimony: “If she had tried a little harder she might have

got out a tear.” The defense’s explanation was that outsiders had hidden Till and planted the body to disrupt the race relations in the South.

Again, the national press was not going to make strong comments about the verdict, but would quote others. For example, the *Washington Post* quoted the NAACP’s reaction to the verdict, calling it as “shameful as it is surprising.”73 The *New York Times* quoted a minister who said the verdict was a reflection of “Mississippi’s corporate neurosis about race.”74 The *Times* quoted another minister who called the verdict “a dagger struck [sic] in the back of America.”75

**Southern press.** The *Jackson Clarion-Ledger* began questioning the validity of the murder charges early in their coverage. A major piece of evidence identifying the body as Till was a ring inscribed with “May 25th 1943, L.T.,” the initials of Till’s father, Louis Till. The *Clarion-Ledger* recklessly tried to undermine that evidence by writing, “However, if the ring were given the boy in 1943, he would have been two years old at the time,” as if the date on the ring necessarily is the date Emmett Till was given it.76 To boost the image of the accused, the first pictures of the brothers appeared in the *Daily News* on September 6, 1955—separate military photos of each brother. They couldn’t look more All-American.

On September 6, 1955, Milner’s story revealed that Dr. L.B. Otkens, a pathologist who examined the body, and Sheriff Strider, who initially identified the body, both questioned the identification of the body as Till’s. Otkens said the body looked to have deteriorated more than the three days that Till was missing.77 The brothers apparently confessed to taking Till, as

reported in the September 9, 1955, issue of the Clarion-Ledger. But an Associated Press story by Sam Johnson leaves plenty of room for readers to doubt the guilt of the brothers. Johnson’s story finishes: “Local citizens are still asking the question: Was it Till’s body that was pulled from the muddy river?”

The headline to the Daily News front page story covering Mose Wright’s testimony reads, “Dim Light Casts Some Doubt On Identity Of Till’s Abductors.” If not read carefully, the headlines almost seems to call Wright the “dim light.” And instead of focusing on Wright’s identification of two white men, which was historic, the Daily News focuses on the lighting that night, a moot point considering that the two men admitted taking Till.

A story by Phil Stroupe in the September 7, 1955, issue of the Daily News quotes a Sumner resident, “Justice should be done, but we resent the outside interference from Northern Negroes who don’t know the facts.” But in an interesting pair of stories, Milner quotes a portion of Chatham’s closing argument, “I am not concerned with the pressure of organizations outside or inside the state. I am concerned with what is morally right or wrong. I say if your verdict is influenced by anything except the evidence you will endanger every custom and tradition we hold dear.” The editorial the very next day reads, “Mississippi’s courts do not like covert attempts at intimidation. [Black congressman from Michigan Charles] Diggs and Mamie Bradley, mother of [sic] the dead Negro, went from Sumner to Mound Bayou, where they were guests of Dr. T.R.M. Howard, arrogant leader of the NAACP in Mississippi.” Indeed,

78 “Deltans’ Trial Date To Be Set,” Jackson Clarion-Ledger, September 9, 1955.
Chatham’s hope that the case would be judged on the evidence didn’t come true. The jury was apparently affected by the northern “agitators.”

After the not guilty verdict, Milner spends a few inches applauding the fairness of the Mississippi criminal justice system. He calls Judge Swango “unimpeachably fair” and said prosecutors Smith and Chatham “were extending a maximum effort.” Milner quotes an unnamed reporter from Pittsburgh, “A jury in Nome, Alaska, couldn’t convict these men on the evidence.”

In an opposite way, the more progressive *Delta Democrat-Times* began its coverage by subtly questioning the brothers’ story. In the first United Press story in the *Delta Democrat-Times*, the lede read, “Two white men charged with kidnapping a 15-year-old [sic] Chicago Negro because they claimed he insulted the wife of one of the men claimed today they released the missing boy unharmed.”82 The use of the term “claimed” twice implies that the writer doubted the brothers’ story.

In an editorial, the *Delta Democrat-Times* demolished the theory that the NAACP had planted the body:

Had such a murder been planned to replace another body for Till’s, the ring, engraved 1943 LT (for the boy’s father, Louis Till) someone would have had to have been killed before the boy was abducted, the ring stolen from young Till and placed on the dead person’s finger. Without the prior knowledge that Roy Bryant and his half-brother would kidnap young Till, as they admittedly did, such a conspiracy defies even the most fantastic reality.83

On September 20, 1955, Harry Marsh, a reporter for the *Delta Democrat-Times*, listed a series of questions that were apparently nagging him and other reporters about the investigation:

Why didn’t officers search Bryant’s store?
Why didn’t they question Milam’s family?
Why didn’t they question Mrs. Bryant?

Why didn’t they locate the car Milam and Bryant did the kidnapping with? Why didn’t they find out what kind of bullet the lad was shot with?\textsuperscript{84}

Answers to these questions, especially the last one, would have surely strengthened the case against the brothers, and something that most investigators should have considered.

In a noticeably downbeat editorial, the \textit{Delta Democrat-Times} showed disappointment with the lack of effort from the law enforcement, taking a shot at, but not mentioning by name, Sheriff Strider and the “diverting fantasies” he dreamed up. The editorial ends by hoping that the brothers will get their justice in the kidnapping trial.\textsuperscript{85} Following the failure of the grand jury to indict the brothers on kidnapping charges, the \textit{Delta Democrat-Times} started an editorial, “A Leflore County grand jury has told the world that white men in Mississippi may remove Negroes from their homes against their will to punish them or worse, without fear of punishment for themselves.”\textsuperscript{86}

\textbf{Huie.} Huie handles the issue of justice lightly. In the most damning sentence of the story, Huie describes the mental clarity of the brothers that night: “Both men were and remained—cold sober.” The brother’s action wasn’t explained away by drunkenness. These guys were thinking as clearly as they could. For Huie, these guys were as guilty as can be.

Huie ignores any direct references to the concept of justice until the last paragraph of his story, which was quoted above. Huie wanted to let the men tell their story, and he took a shot at the white people in Mississippi in his final sentence:

\begin{quote}


\end{quote}
The majority—by no means all, but the majority—of the white people in Mississippi 1) either approve Big Milam’s action or else 2) they don’t disapprove enough to risk giving their “enemies” the satisfaction of a conviction. 87

Though he waited until the final sentence to do it, Huie condemns the state of Mississippi for approving this crime.

**Bob Dylan’s Version**

Dylan’s song had a different purpose than the journalism discussed above. But to an extent, it serves a similar function. Dylan’s song presented the facts of the case, though distorted through his own “terministic screens,” 88 just like the *New York Times* and the *Jackson Daily News* did. Below is a verse-by-verse lyrical analysis of Dylan’s song, focusing on the three concepts of race, motive, and justice as discussed above.

**“The Death of Emmett Till”**

‘Twas down in Mississippi not so long ago,  
When a young boy from Chicago town stepped through a Southern door.  
This boy’s dreadful tragedy I can still remember well,  
The color of his skin was black and his name was Emmett Till.

Some men they dragged him to a barn and there they beat him up.  
They said they had a reason, but I can't remember what.  
They tortured him and did some evil things too evil to repeat.  
There was screaming sounds inside the barn, there was laughing sounds out on the street.

Then they rolled his body down a gulf amidst a bloody red rain  
And they threw him in the waters wide to cease his screaming pain.  
The reason that they killed him there, and I'm sure it ain't no lie,  
Was just for the fun of killin' him and to watch him slowly die.

And then to stop the United States of yelling for a trial,  
Two brothers they confessed that they had killed poor Emmett Till.  
But on the jury there were men who helped the brothers commit this awful crime,  
And so this trial was a mockery, but nobody seemed to mind.

87 Huie, 50.

I saw the morning papers but I could not bear to see  
The smiling brothers walkin' down the courthouse stairs.  
For the jury found them innocent and the brothers they went free,  
While Emmett's body floats the foam of a Jim Crow southern sea.

If you can't speak out against this kind of thing, a crime that's so unjust,  
Your eyes are filled with dead men's dirt, your mind is filled with dust.  
Your arms and legs they must be in shackles and chains, and your blood it must refuse to flow,  
For you let this human race fall down so God-awful low!

This song is just a reminder to remind your fellow man  
That this kind of thing still lives today in that ghost-robed Ku Klux Klan.  
But if all of us folks that thinks alike, if we gave all we could give,  
We could make this great land of ours a greater place to live.

In the first verse, Dylan sings that Till’s death happened “not so long ago.” He wrote the song six years after the killing. In 1962, Till was still a motivating narrative for those toiling for civil rights. The southern door Dylan refers to could have quite literally been then door to the Bryant shop where he encountered Carolyn Bryant. But in this case, it almost feels like Dylan was talking about simply Till’s trip south. Was the Southern door the train Till rode to the Delta? This coincides with Dylan’s depiction of the South being a place where black people are killed.

Dylan says he remembers it well, but Till was born on July 25, 1941, only two months before Dylan. When Till was killed, Dylan was probably enjoying his summer break before starting the ninth or tenth grade. The trial was big national news, but one wonders how much Dylan knew about it in Hibbing, Minnesota. Does he remember it well? Or is this already the cultural/collective memory that his song contributes to?

By mentioning Till’s skin color, Dylan provides the motive and one of the key differences between Dylan’s presentation and some of the other presentations in the press. Dylan implies that the reason Till was killed is because he was black. While the outcome would have probably...
been different had Till been white, Dylan’s explanation simplifies it too much. Many black people lived in the South, so being black couldn’t have been the only reason Till was killed. The killing was based on a whistle/assault/near rape/disrespect, with race permeating all those concepts. To pinpoint race as the sole motive simplifies the racial relations as described by Houck and Grindy and Whitfield.

Some men they dragged him to a barn and there they beat him up.
They said they had a reason, but I can't remember what.
They tortured him and did some evil things too evil to repeat.
There was screaming sounds inside the barn, there was laughing sounds out on the street.

Dylan eschews the motive again, probably because he didn’t quite understand. He says he can’t remember because that’s easier than trying to place this murder into the context of white sexuality and the fear of miscegenation that dominated the cultural landscape of the south. As Houck and Grindy point out, Mississippi newspapers were fixated on the idea of white beauty. Pages were filled with pictures of beautiful white women. The fact that Till approached/whistled at/hit on/touched/assaulted/attempted to rape a beautiful white Mississippi woman would have been difficult for Dylan to fit even into one of his usually long-winded songs.

The torture that was too evil to repeat might have been a reference to the untrue rumors that Till was castrated. He certainly was beaten and tortured, but why Dylan can’t repeat that is unclear. The screaming in the barn and laughing on the street is probably a reference to the witnesses, some of whom didn’t make it to the trial, who heard sounds and saw Till and Milam. It is unclear who was laughing on the street.

Then they rolled his body down a gulf amidst a bloody red rain
And they threw him in the waters wide to cease his screaming pain.
The reason that they killed him there, and I'm sure it ain't no lie,
Was just for the fun of killin' him and to watch him slowly die.
Dylan begins to slip-up on some of his facts here. There appears to be no evidence that it was raining that night. Dylan implies that Till drowned in the river. This is untrue as Till had been shot and killed before the cotton gin fan was tied to him. Certainly, the distinction between the figurative language of a songwriter and the literal language of the press comes into play. The meaning of Dylan’s lyrics is open to interpretation.

A verse before, Dylan can’t remember the motive. But in this verse, he remembers: it was to watch him die. Dylan ignores any concept of the wolf whistle or the complex sexual culture that Houck and Grindy and Whitfield refer to. Rather than portraying the nuanced and accurate depiction of the southern race relations, Dylan simply paints these men as evil sociopaths. While that is probably a true statement, the undercurrent of the entire episode was the aggressive sexuality of Till’s alleged confrontation with Carolyn Bryant.

And then to stop the United States of yelling for a trial,
Two brothers they confessed that they had killed poor Emmett Till.
But on the jury there were men who helped the brothers commit this awful crime,
And so this trial was a mockery, but nobody seemed to mind.

It’s unclear what Dylan means by the first line of this verse. According to all of the historical data, the authorities in Mississippi intended (or at least said they intended) to prosecute the perpetrators of this crime. It is doubtful that the pressure from the United States government led to the trial or to a confession. Many reporters presented it as the opposite, that national attention and pressure from the NAACP and other “rabble-rousers” led to the acquittal.

The confessions Dylan refers to could be two different “confessions,” and in either case, he gets the story wrong. First, Bryant and Milam confessed to kidnapping Till the night he was killed. They claimed that they went to get him to see if he was the one that “did all the talking.” When Carolyn Bryant said he wasn’t the one, they said they let him free. Houck and Grindy point out the inconsistencies in this claim. If that were the case, where was Till? Why did they
stop looking for the one that “did all the talking”? This confession created a complicated situation for the defense. If they were to argue that they released the boy, Carolyn had better not identify Till as the one who approached her. If they were to use justifiable homicide, that Till deserved to die for assaulting a woman, then their claims become lies. Regardless of their confession to kidnapping, a Leflore County grand jury failed to indict them on kidnapping charges.

The second “confession” was when the brothers spoke to Huie. In his article, Huie explains what the brothers did, and many perceived this as a confession. Almost like O.J. Simpson’s *If I Did It* type of story, the brothers never claimed to have spoken to Huie, although many believed that Huie’s version was relatively accurate and based on his interviews with the brothers and Carolyn. In any case, the confession came after men were acquitted and the kidnapping charges were dropped.

Again, Dylan takes liberties with the facts when he talks about the trial. The jurors didn’t literally help in the crime, but they figuratively condoned the killing and were accomplices to the brothers getting away with the crime. Many journalists and historians thought that the trial was not necessarily a mockery, but that investigation, prosecution, and execution of the case was. And people certainly minded. The uproar from the verdict lasted decades and many argue that it sparked the civil rights movement. To say nobody seemed to mind is certainly wrong.

I saw the morning papers but I could not bear to see
The smiling brothers walkin' down the courthouse stairs.
For the jury found them innocent and the brothers they went free,
While Emmett's body floats the foam of a Jim Crow southern sea.

Again, Dylan was fairly young when this took place. He may be referring to seeing the papers in 1955 or later on in his life. Regardless, seeing the smiling brothers kiss their wives is a terrifically stomach-turning image. In this verse, Dylan broadens his condemnation. In an earlier
verse, Dylan sings about Till’s walking through a southern door. This entire episode is a “southern” episode. But by invoking the label of Jim Crow, it becomes clear that this crime was approved and legal within the de facto, if not de jure, laws of the south. Bryant and Milam are bad dudes, and Dylan doesn’t let them off easy, just as he didn’t for Hattie Carroll’s killer, William Zantzinger, a year later. But the problem runs deeper than a couple bad dudes. Dylan is claiming that the entire way of life in the South, the segregation and discrimination that make up the Jim Crow way of life, are responsible for Till’s death.

If you can't speak out against this kind of thing, a crime that's so unjust,
Your eyes are filled with dead men's dirt, your mind is filled with dust.
Your arms and legs they must be in shackles and chains, and your blood it must refuse to flow,
For you let this human race fall down so God-awful low!

This song is just a reminder to remind your fellow man
That this kind of thing still lives today in that ghost-robed Ku Klux Klan.
But if all of us folks that thinks alike, if we gave all we could give,
We could make this great land of ours a greater place to live.

Ending a novel must be a terribly difficult thing to do. The reader needs an appropriate level of closure, but also needs to know that the characters live on. Dylan, a rookie songwriter at the time, seemed to struggle to finish this song. He rather weakly calls the listener to action in the last two verses. First of all, we need to speak up. If we can’t, we must be dead. Second, we need to give all that we can give. That will fix our country and put an end to the Klan. A good writer should let the reader figure some of the story out for themselves, not be so obvious. Dylan doesn’t do that for us. The song ends with a thud as he calls us to action, compared to the dramatic conclusion of his depiction of Hattie Carroll’s death a year and a half later.

Music as History

All of the above storytellers emphasized certain facts to frame the story in a particular way. The mainstream press presented every fact, quotation, assertion, or claim as they “should.”

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Everything was properly attributed and cautiously presented. The result is a factual presentation of the case, but a lifeless one. The press could not say what it needed to: Milam and Bryant were bigots, the trial was a farce, and the state of Mississippi was comprised of and ruled by racists.

The Southern press reshaped the drama away from what the brothers did to Till, but what Till did to Carolyn Bryant. Ultimately, the conflict was between the Mississippi or Southern way of life versus northern agitation, led by progressive newspaper editors and especially the NAACP. By not serving justice, the state invited more criticism, activism, and “agitation” from within and without the state. A fair conclusion is that the verdict helped the civil rights movement in Mississippi.

Huie was looking for drama because drama sells copies. He threw the caution found in the mainstream coverage to the wind. By setting up the racial conflict and presenting the brothers’ side of the story as fact, Huie created the most compelling version of the story. Two brothers were irrationally defending the honor of a woman and, more importantly, the way of life in the South.

Those details are not the point of Dylan’s song. He did not write the song to record the story accurately. Journalists and historians had done that already. He wanted to create change. He wanted to get people to think about concepts of justice, race, segregation, and discrimination. The only problem is that the song paled when compared to other songs he had written at that time, especially “Blowin’ in the Wind.” A better song might have had the impact Dylan was looking for. The reticent Dylan rarely spoke of the song. In 1964, he said of the song:

I used to write songs, like I’d say, “Yeah, what’s bad, pick out something bad, like segregation, OK, here we go,” and I’d pick one of the thousand million little points I can pick and explode it, some of them which I didn’t know about. I wrote a song
about Emmett Till, which in all honesty was a bullshit song … I realize now that my reasons and motives behind it were phony. I didn’t have to write it.90

Dylan apparently regretted the song, though probably more because it wasn’t a particularly good song, rather than because he didn’t feel the importance of the Till narrative.

Music can document history, but music can also blur history. In this case, Dylan found a story that moved him and wanted it to move others. “The Death of Emmett Till” still tells the story of a young black Chicagoan killed in Mississippi. Dylan’s song serves as an entry point into historical information about the issues faced in America during the Jim Crow era.

Dylan’s song had little impact at the time because it slowly leaked to the public and was six years after the event. But now, a Google search of “Emmett Till” shows that one of the top sites is a link to a Youtube.com video of images of Till’s case set to Bob Dylan’s song. No doubt, for many people, learning about Emmett Till’s death will begin with Dylan. Here we have a song written by a young, eager, inexperienced songwriter who would soon change the face of American popular music. That song is history, but was not read by peer reviewers for accuracy before it was published. That song is journalism, but there was no editor scrutinizing his reporting or an ombudsman to hear complaints. But that song is also one of the key ways people make sense of the Emmett Till story.

CHAPTER 3
VERSE TWO: HOW BOB DYLAN’S “THE LONESOME DEATH OF HATTIE CARROLL” FUNCTIONS AS ALTERNATIVE JOURNALISM

Oh, but you who philosophize disgrace and criticize all fears, / Bury the rag deep in your face / For now’s the time for your tears.

—Bob Dylan, “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll”

On February 8, 1963, a drunken William Zantzinger got himself in trouble. Attending the “Spinsters’ Ball” with his wife in Baltimore, Maryland, the 24-year-old tobacco farmer was wearing a top hat, a tuxedo with tails, and carrying a toy cane. He used the cane to hit some of the wait staff. When he hit a barmaid named Hattie Carroll for not getting his drink soon enough, she collapsed. Before the evening was over, Zantzinger struck several other staff members with his cane and was arrested for fighting at the charity event.

Carroll was dead the next morning, and Zantzinger was charged with murder. The subsequent trial resulted in Zantzinger’s conviction of manslaughter, which carried a six-month sentence. This tragedy was reported by many different sources, including the mainstream press, as represented by the Washington Post, the New York Times, and the Baltimore Sun, the black press, as represented by the Baltimore Afro-American, and in the lyrics of Bob Dylan’s “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll.” This chapter compares the coverage of Carroll’s death by the mainstream media, by the local press, by the black press, and by Bob Dylan in song. Compared to the mainstream press, Dylan’s song functions as a form of alternative or underground journalism, as it rejects what James Lewes calls the mainstream press’s “smokescreen of objectivity”1 and tries to express “the truth.”

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The Story

Carroll’s “Lonesome Death”

The Washington Post first reported Carroll’s death on February 10, 1963, with an Associated Press story. From February 10, 1963, when the crime happened, until March 17, 1964, when Zantzinger was released, the Washington Post, the Baltimore Sun, and The Afro-American told and retold the story of Hattie Carroll’s tragic encounter with William Zantzinger. According to the Post, Zantzinger had been drunk on the evening of February 8, 1963. He went around hitting the wait staff with his toy cane. He hit Carroll on the shoulder after calling her a racial slur and complaining that his drink was coming too slowly. She collapsed to the floor. He was arrested for assault that evening and released on $3,600 bail.

The next morning, Carroll died of a brain hemorrhage. A warrant was issued for Zantzinger’s arrest on homicide charges. He surrendered on February 10, 1963, and was released the next day on $25,000 bail. On March 19, 1963, he was indicted on murder charges. The grand jury accused Zantzinger of “feloniously, wilfully [sic] and of deliberately meditated malice aforethought” killing Hattie Carroll.

At the request of the defense, the case was tried before a panel of three circuit judges rather than a jury. At the trial, witnesses for the defense corroborated to retell the events of that evening. The state medical examiner concluded that there was “a definite relationship between

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2 At the time of these events, the Washington Post had recently purchased the Washington Times-Herald. These events fell in the brief period where the newspaper went by the name the Washington Post and Times-Herald. To avoid confusion, I will refer to the newspaper by its current, more common name, the Washington Post. However, in the notes and bibliography, I will use the name that appears on the original documents.


the assault and the onset of the symptoms” leading to Carroll’s death. Zantzinger claimed that he was so drunk he couldn’t remember the events of that evening and had no recollection of hitting Carroll. On June 21, 1963, the judges dismissed the premeditation charge and acquitted Zantzinger of the first-degree murder charge. On June 24, the judges acquitted him on the second-degree murder charge, leaving only manslaughter and assault charges.

On June 27, 1963, the panel of judges convicted Zantzinger of manslaughter and three counts of assault. The conclusion was that the caning was not enough to cause death, but the combination of the verbal assault and physical blow caused the hemorrhage that led to Carroll’s death. On August 28, 1963, Zantzinger received a six-month sentence and a $625 fine for the manslaughter and assault charges. Zantzinger’s sentence would begin on September 15, to allow him time to harvest his tobacco crops.

As discussed in the above literature review, the media are often the public’s only way of knowing the world around them. To understand what happens in Washington, D.C., is really to understand what the press says about what happens in Washington, D.C. The argument follows that these news organizations should be as objective, unbiased, fair, and honest as possible to serve their readers and viewers better. The result is an objective, straight, and often lifeless

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8 Ibid., “Judges Weigh…”.
9 Ibid., “Zantzinger Guilty…”.
presentation of the facts, as this chapter will demonstrate using Hattie Carroll’s death as an example.

Bob Dylan presented another side of the story in song—a side that the readers of newspapers would never have heard. It is out of the range of this study to decide which version is true. It would be impossible to make that assumption more than forty-five years after the murder. This chapter discusses how the press and Bob Dylan differed in their coverage of the death of Hattie Carroll.

Bob Dylan’s “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll” described how William Zantzinger (misspelled by Dylan as Zanzinger, probably as one more insult to Zantzinger) killed barmaid Hattie Carroll by hitting her with a cane. Dylan portrayed four parts of the story: Zantzinger’s arrest, his release on bail, the senseless murder of Carroll, and his ridiculously light six-month sentence, in that order. After the first three verses, Dylan sings, “But you who philosophize disgrace and criticize all fears / Take the rag away from your face / Now ain’t the time for your tears.”13 Dylan reminds his listeners to hold back their sorrow, for the saddest part of the story is yet to come.

But after the final verse that describes the six-month sentence, Dylan sings, “Oh, but you who philosophize disgrace and criticize all fears / Bury the rag deep in your face / For now’s the time for your tears.” Here Dylan is saying that the saddest part of the story was not the senseless loss of life, but the system and society that fails to value the lives of certain members of that society. In this song, Dylan took a specific example of injustice and made a much larger claim—something this study shows the mainstream media seemed reluctant to do. In “The Lonesome

Death of Hattie Carroll,” Dylan frames Carroll’s death and Zantzinger’s trial to highlight social implications of Carroll’s slaying and the injustice of Zantzinger’s potentially fixed trial.

The events surrounding Carroll’s death in the larger political and cultural environment were important, specifically in the civil rights arena. Shortly after Carroll was killed, Martin Luther King Jr. was arrested in Birmingham, Alabama, and wrote his now-famous letter from jail. In May 1963, Eugene “Bull” Connor reacted violently toward student protesters in Birmingham, using police dogs and fire hoses. Medgar Evers was killed while Zantzinger was awaiting trial. And the day Zantzinger was acquitted, Bob Dylan joined several other marchers at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, where King delivered his “I have a dream” speech. Before Zantzinger was released from jail, John F. Kennedy was assassinated, and the United States was slowly being pulled into a full-fledged conflict in Vietnam, with about 16,000 troops committed by 1963.14 The context must have had an impact on the interpretation of any death associated with racial conflict.

The Background

The review of the literature on underground journalism and alternative media reveals three characteristics of underground journalism. First, underground journalism is always in opposition to the mainstream media. Second, underground journalism rejects the concept of objectivity, both on a practical and philosophical level. Third, underground journalists use unconventional methods of presenting and distributing their message.

Elizabeth Nelson defined “counter-culture” as “the rejection of the dominant or ‘straight’ society and its culture.”15 Journalism scholar Stephen Baker referred to the way the alternative


press attempted to “counter” the official releases in the mainstream press during the Northern Ireland peace process. 16 Lewes noted that the underground press “emerged to fill the news vacuum left by the mainstream media’s collective failure to pay attention to and/or address the needs of the growing counterculture.” 17 Robert J. Glessing recognized that the underground press consists of “dissenters” whose goal is “without fail damming the establishment.” 18 The “overground” press did not speak to the problems of the “widening new subculture” that needed “its own communication medium.” 19

Julian Williams documented the short history of the Mississippi Free Press, a desegregationist newspaper. Williams found that because the mainstream press “distorted or ignored” important racial issues, “blacks turned to newspapers in their own community.” 20 The Mississippi Free Press dealt with many hardships to get their contrary message out. Williams wrote, “The segregationist power structure was determined to silence what was considered to be a radical voice for change.” 21 The Mississippi Free Press went out of business only twelve years after its founding. A result of the hard work of the Mississippi Free Press and other civil rights publications was that the mainstream media became more sympathetic to the movement. Because they had more resources, the mainstream media covered the movement better than the

17 Lewes, 389.
19 Ibid., 12.
21 Ibid.
The identity of the underground press is dependent on its opposition to the mainstream. Alternative journalism rejects the ideal of objectivity. The underground press ignored “journalism’s professional practices” because of their partisan political agendas. The mainstream media have committed themselves to the concept of objectivity, and the underground press recognizes that objectivity is an impossible achievement. Rather, they wear their biases on their sleeves. Bob Ostertag called objectivity “the ideological rationale for the whole enterprise” of journalism. Prior to the consolidation of media ownership, the idea of objectivity was not something journalists attempted to achieve. Ostertag observed, “The notion that journalists should—or even could—write without a viewpoint or opinion emerged as a necessary ideological underpinning of media oligopoly, the selling point for the idea that media control by the few is not inherently detrimental to democratic institutions or culture.” Because the goal of social movement journalism was “to promote ideas, not profits,” the ideal of objectivity was unnecessary.

The underground press also must present its ideas in unconventional methods. Baker found that the alternative media in Northern Ireland had to distribute their publications in unconventional ways like door-to-door or handing them out in pubs. Glessing stated, “By traditional journalistic standards, much of the writing in the underground press is lurid,

22 Ibid., 112.
23 Baker, 378.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Baker, 379.
subjective and sometimes undecipherable.” These alternative newspapers were interested in anything that went against the establishment—including methods and style of journalism, as well as their ideas.

The above review of the literature supports the argument that music can also play a journalistic role in our cultural understanding. Journalism has not always taken the form it has today. Throughout history, people have often conducted a form of journalism, of reporting and retelling events, through unconventional means. Renowned historian Robert Darnton argued that “every society develops its own ways of hunting and gathering information” and understanding these means of communication “can reveal a great deal about its understanding of its own experience.”

To demonstrate this, Darnton examined the communication system of eighteenth-century France in which the government suppressed a free press. Darnton argued that scandalous novellas and songs were the main way to disseminate information the government might not want publicized. Songs were extremely effective because “in a society that remained largely illiterate, they provided a powerful means of transmitting messages.” Bob Dylan’s “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll” was a song that powerfully transmitted a message—a message clearly opposed to the one presented in the mainstream press.

28 Glessing, 6.
30 Ibid., 19.
The Song

The Coverage of Hattie Carroll’s Death by the Mainstream Media

This chapter is concerned with two dominant versions of Hattie Carroll’s death: the one that appeared in the mainstream press and the one Bob Dylan presented. To compare these two versions, a textual and thematic analysis of the mainstream media’s coverage of Carroll’s death and Zantzinger’s arrest, trial, sentencing, and release as presented in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, was conducted. Second, a lyrical analysis of Dylan’s “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll” highlights Dylan’s framing of the event. Entman stated that “frames” function in four ways: defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral judgments, and suggesting remedies. By highlighting different elements of the story, Dylan frames Carroll’s death as one symptom of a much larger—the social inequality built into the American justice system. Dylan highlights the problems, diagnoses the causes, and makes a moral judgment, but offers no solutions—fulfilling three of the four functions of a frame.

To understand the mainstream press’s coverage of Hattie Carroll’s death and compare it with Dylan’s telling of the story, it is necessary to examine some of the specific language the newspaper used. There are five important areas of interest when comparing the mainstream press’s coverage with Dylan’s presentation: descriptions of the slaying, descriptions of the suspect and his family, the legal issue of causality, race and class, and finally descriptions of Zantzinger’s sentencing.

The first issue is the way the press described the act that caused Hattie Carroll’s death. A United Press International article in the *Post* referred to it as a “fatal caning.” An Associated

31 Entman, 52.

32 “Caning Death…”.
Press article in the *Washington Post* called it a “caning death.” Another said that Carroll “was beaten with a cane.” Another referred to Zantzinger as “causing the death of Hattie Carroll.” And another wrote that Zantzinger “struck a barmaid who died.” It appears that the *Washington Post* never referred to the event as a “murder” and never called the cane a “weapon.” According to the *Associated Press Stylebook*, journalists are to refrain from using the word “murder” or “murderer” until the suspect has been convicted or authorities say premeditation was obvious. As soon as the charges were reduced to manslaughter, the term of murder was eliminated from the discussion.

The mainstream media also commented on Zantzinger’s status in society. He was called “a young tobacco farmer and socialite” by an AP article in the *Post*. An AP article and a UPI article in the *Post* referred to him as “a Southern Maryland gentleman farmer.” Another AP article in the *Post* called him “a Charles County gentleman farmer.” This is extremely proper language for a man accused of murder. The mainstream press emphasized Zantzinger’s family relationships. The wire stories in the *Washington Post* on February 10, 11, and 12, and March 20, 1963, make reference to Zantzinger’s father, Richard C. Zantzinger, who was a former member

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38 “Socialite Tied…”.

39 “Zantzinger Surrenders…”; “Caning Death…”.

40 “Zantzinger’s Wife…”.

77
of the Maryland Planning Commission and a former Maryland State legislator. John Goshko reported the appearance of the elder Zantzinger at his son’s trial.41

According to press reports, Zantzinger apparently showed little remorse for his actions. Andrew Glass quoted Zantzinger in an article in the Washington Post: “I didn’t do anything to her … judging by what those (defense called) doctors testified she probably would have been dead the next morning anyway.”42 Glass wrote, “Neither was he overly concerned by the prospect of going to jail Sunday, ‘I’ll just miss a lot of snow,’ he said with a grin, ‘and I’ll be back in time for the spring harvest.’”43

Another important issue discussed by the mainstream press was the complicated issue of proving causality between Zantzinger’s actions and Carroll’s death. This became an important issue for the trial. Diggins noted that the autopsy reported that Carroll “had a heart twice the normal size and had suffered a ‘huge hemorrhage’ within the brain.”44 Dr. Charles Petty, the assistant medical examiner, said during the preliminary hearing, “There is a direct cause and effect relationship” linking the verbal and physical assault to Carroll’s death.45 Goshko quoted Petty during the trial saying that there was a “definite relationship between the assault and the onset of the symptoms.”46

43 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
46 Goshko, “Zantzinger Witness…”.
The judges dismissed the first-degree murder charges, agreeing that “there was no element of premeditation in Zantzinger’s alleged action.”47 However, Carroll’s medical condition called into question how much Zantzinger’s actions resulted in Carroll’s death. According to Goshko, the judges said, “We find that Hattie Carroll’s death was not due solely to disease, … but that it was caused or hastened by the defendant’s verbal insults coupled with an actual assault, and that he is guilty of manslaughter.”48 The judges observed that it would be “unreasonable and possibly subversive of justice” if there was no criminal responsibility attached to the chain of events that started with Zantzinger’s verbal and physical assaults and led to the death of Hattie Carroll.49

The press also discussed the issue of race. Zantzinger was a rich white man. Carroll was a poor black woman. Diggins was the first to directly refer to race, more than a month after the incident, when he quoted testimony during a preliminary hearing that described the victim as a “Negro female.”50 Goshko quoted testimony from the trial in which Zantzinger reportedly referred to Carroll as a “nigger.”51 Goshko also reported the prosecuting attorney referring to Zantzinger as a man who was “unwilling to accept the verdict of Appomattox.”52 Glass quoted Zantzinger’s wife, Jane, who said of Zantzinger’s treatment of his black employees, “Nobody treats his niggers as well as Billy [Zantzinger] does around here.”53 In reference to black people,
Zantzinger said, “I don’t feel one way or another about ‘em. But, hell, you wouldn’t [want] to go to school with Negroes anymore than you would with French people.”

Glass recognized the controversial nature of the sentencing in his Washington Post article. He noticed that on a night when the “big news was the civil rights March on Washington” the panel of judges “decided that the first white man ever accused in this state of murdering a Negro woman had in fact committed manslaughter.” This search revealed other news organization that drew a connection between what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said in Washington, D.C., and what happened to Zantzinger in a courtroom.

Glass’s article was also one of the only articles to comment on the light sentence. He said simply, “The judgment of William Devereux Zantzinger, a 24-year-old Southern Maryland farmer, was not severe.” According to his “sidewalk interviews” the public felt that Zantzinger “got off very lightly.” Glass quoted one of Zantzinger’s neighbors, “Country folk, I can tell you, would have gotten a much bigger sentence. He got off real lightly. I don’t know if a Charles County Judge would let him off that easy.” Outside of Glass’s article, the Washington Post never commented on the light sentence. No article makes mention of his familial ties to power in Maryland after he received his sentence, and no article speculates on a connection between his family’s political ties and his light sentence.

The mainstream press, as represented by the Washington Post, the New York Times, and the wire services, delivered the “objective” coverage that communication scholar Kevin Stoker

54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
writes has become expected of mainstream newspapers since the Penny Press in the 1830s.\textsuperscript{59} There was very little editorializing. The issues of racism, “classism,” political favoritism, or any other potentially controversial issues were rarely raised. However, Bob Dylan did just that in his version of the events.

**The Local Reporting from the Baltimore Sun**

The coverage in the *Baltimore Sun* represents a mainstream media organization with localized coverage. Unlike the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*, the *Baltimore Sun* doesn’t have the national audience. The first mention of Carroll’s death came in the February 10, 1963, issue of the *Sun*. The story covered “the death of a 51-year-old barmaid who died seven hours after she was struck by a cane at a Baltimore society ball.”\textsuperscript{60} Further on, the story retells the encounter between Zantzinger and Ethel Hill: “The police said, she was struck across the buttocks with a cane of the carnival-prize kind. She attempted to leave the area, but was followed and whacked across the arm, thighs and buttocks several times.”\textsuperscript{61}

The article recounts Zantzinger’s beating of Carroll by accurately stating that he struck her across the shoulders. This article mentions his father, Richard, who was a former member of the Maryland legislature. Being a local paper, this story mentions the background of both Zantzinger and Carroll, including church affiliations and education.

The next day’s *Sun* ran a story about Zantzinger’s submission to the authorities. This story describes Zantzinger’s demeanor and dress: “Zantzinger, dressed in a sweater, tweed

\begin{footnotes}
\item[60] “Caning Suspect, Wife Sought State-Wide in Death of Barmaid,” *Baltimore Sun*, February 10, 1963, p. 40+. Many of the reports in the *Baltimore Sun* have no bylines and no indication of a wire service. When an author or wire service is listed, it will be noted in the text.
\item[61] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
topcoat and wearing a striped button-down shirt without tie, had nothing to say. He was calm, almost expressionless. He wore a day’s growth of beard.”

This story discusses race plainly: “Both the women are Negroes.”

George J. Hiltner’s story on February 12, 1963, reports Zantzinger’s release on $25,000 bail. This story was one of the first to question the causal relationship between the caning and the death. Hiltner reported, “In asking for the release on bail for Zantzinger, Claude A. Hanley, his attorney, argued that Mrs. Carroll’s death was not the result of an assault, but that she ‘did in fact die as a result of a stroke induced by hypertension, a malady from which she was a chronic sufferer.’” The story on February 13, 1963, in the Sun was about Zantzinger’s wife, Jane, and the assault charges brought against her from that night. The story retells the events of that night but offers no significant new details. Zantzinger is mentioned again on February 14, 1963, when George Gesell, a bellhop at the Emerson Hotel, filed assault charges against Zantzinger, claiming that he too was struck with the cane.

A story in the Baltimore Sun described the arrest of a man who was trying to get money from Zantzinger in exchange for getting him “off scot-free.” The story reports that Zantzinger cooperated with police to help apprehend the man by covertly accepting the man’s offer.

62 “Zantzinger Gives up in Death of Barmaid Caned at Society Ball,” Baltimore Sun, February 11, 1963, p. 34+.
63 Ibid.
64 George J. Hiltner, “Zantzinger Case to Wait for Hearing,” Baltimore Sun, February 12, 1963, p. 34+.
65 Ibid.
68 “Zantzinger Extortion Bid Laid to Man,” Baltimore Sun, February 28, 1963, p. 52+. This story is credited to “a Sun Staff Correspondent” and includes J.T.D., Jr. at the bottom of the story.
story ends stating that police are investigating the man’s claims. The arrest does not appear in the
Sun again, but Zantzinger comes off as a man willing to cooperate with the police.

The next time Zantzinger appears in the Sun is in a story announcing the date of his grand
jury hearing in the March 8, 1963, issue, followed by the report from the hearing on March 16,
1963. The story appeared beneath an understated headline, “Zantzinger is Held for Jury Action,”
but contained many of the lurid details from the hearing. Zantzinger reportedly called Carroll a
“black bitch” and hit her hard, said Shirley Burrell, a waitress at the hotel, “so hard I couldn’t
understand how she could stand up.”69 This story reported the testimony from Dr. Charles S.
Petty, who said Zantzinger’s blow from the cane caused Carroll’s death, but reported that he
found no bruises on Carroll’s body during the autopsy.

As a local paper, the Baltimore Sun provided significantly more detailed coverage of the
trial than the national papers. On June 20, 1963, Robert A. Erlandson’s story filled several
columns of description of the trial.70 Erlandson provided details about Zantzinger’s shenanigans
prior to striking Carroll. He allegedly struck Hill on the buttocks four or five times as she was
walking away from him. “Each time he hit, he hit me harder and harder,” she testified. Erlandson
reported the events of the following day’s testimony, much of which revolved around the
question of causality: did Zantzinger’s blow cause Hattie Carroll’s death?71

Another story by Erlandson reported the events of the third day of the trial, featuring
testimony by Zantzinger and his wife.72 Zantzinger said that he was only playing with the cane,
but he and his wife both said they don’t remember any of the details of the night because they

had been drinking so heavily. After the weekend break, Erlandson reported that the judges acquitted Zantzinger of murder, but needed another day to consider the manslaughter and assault charges. This story is one of the first to hit on the potentially explosive nature of the case, quoting a judge who said, “There is no question that this case has notes of possible outside elements dealing with the public.” Among other events, Mississippi civil rights leader Medgar Evers had been murdered less than two weeks prior to the trial. The reporter made no comments to elaborate on the judge’s quotation, as most readers were well aware of the racially charged environment. The Baltimore Sun announced Zantzinger’s conviction of manslaughter and assault on the last page of the June 28, 1963, issue. The story, which had no byline, was a short, lackluster report of the facts and the judge’s comments.

Zantzinger and Carroll seemed to be largely forgotten for nearly two months. On August 29, 1963, the front page Baltimore Sun was covered with stories about the civil rights march that had just taken place in Washington, D.C., featuring the dynamic “I Have a Dream” speech by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. There seems to be a slight slant in the headlines of these stories: “200,000 Attend Peaceful D.C. March,” “Orderly Crowd Hears Appeals for Freedom, Racial ‘Togetherness,’” and “D.C. Rally Described As Flawless.” The most important part of the story, as implied by these stories, is the lack of violence, not the importance of the message or the urgency of the movement.

75 For a closer examination of the coverage, see Ian Frazier, “Legacy of a Lonesome Death,” Mother Jones 29.6 (2004): 42-47.
Ironically, on the last page of the issue, an Associate Press story reporting Zantzinger’s sentencing appears. The story makes no comment on the severity of the sentence, only restating the arguments of the defense that Carroll was dangerously ill anyway and that some witnesses questioned whether Zantzinger even had the cane when Carroll collapsed. The slanted coverage of the March on Washington and the lack of coverage of Zantzinger’s trial are telling.

**Bob Dylan’s Version of Hattie Carroll’s Death**

Bob Dylan took a different view of the events that evening in February 1963. The facts remained the same. William Zantzinger struck Hattie Carroll with a cane. She died. Zantzinger was arrested on charges of first-degree murder. He was rich with well-connected parents. After a trial, the judges handed Zantzinger a six-month sentence for his role in Carroll’s death. Dylan and the press agreed upon these basic facts.

Dylan experts disagree on the origins of the song. Oliver Trager’s encyclopedic volume on Dylan retells the “legend” that Dylan learned about the story by reading a newspaper article on his way home from the March on Washington and wrote it in New York City. Mike Marqusee writes that Dylan received the story from *Broadside* magazine co-editor Gordon Friesen, who regularly provided Dylan with stories for topical songs. Biographers Howard Sounes and Clinton Heylin state in separate biographies that Dylan wrote the song at Joan Baez’s home in Carmel, California, in September 1963. Where Dylan might have learned the story is in question.

76 “Zantzinger is Given 6 Months in Jail, Fined $500 in Manslaughter,” *Baltimore Sun*, August 29, 1963.


“The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll”

William Zanzinger killed poor Hattie Carroll
With a cane that he twirled around his diamond ring finger
At a Baltimore hotel society gath’rin’.
And the cops were called in and his weapon took from him
As they rode him in custody down to the station
And booked William Zanzinger for first-degree murder.
But you who philosophize disgrace and criticize all fears,
Take the rag away from your face.
Now ain’t the time for your tears.

William Zanzinger, who at twenty-four years
Owns a tobacco farm of six hundred acres
With rich wealthy parents who provide and protect him
And high office relations in the politics of Maryland,
Reacted to his deed with a shrug of his shoulders
And swear words and sneering, and his tongue it was snarling,
In a matter of minutes on bail was out walking.
But you who philosophize disgrace and criticize all fears,
Take the rag away from your face.
Now ain’t the time for your tears.

Hattie Carroll was a maid of the kitchen.
She was fifty-one years old and gave birth to ten children
Who carried the dishes and took out the garbage
And never sat once at the head of the table
And didn't even talk to the people at the table
Who just cleaned up all the food from the table
And emptied the ashtrays on a whole other level,
Got killed by a blow, lay slain by a cane
That sailed through the air and came down through the room,
Doomed and determined to destroy all the gentle.
And she never done nothing to William Zanzinger.
But you who philosophize disgrace and criticize all fears,
Take the rag away from your face.
Now ain’t the time for your tears.

In the courtroom of honor, the judge pounded his gavel
To show that all’s equal and that the courts are on the level
And that the strings in the books ain’t pulled and persuaded
And that even the nobles get properly handled
Once that the cops have chased after and caught ‘em
And that the ladder of law has no top and no bottom,
Stared at the person who killed for no reason
Who just happened to be feelin’ that way without warnin’.
And he spoke through his cloak, most deep and distinguished,
And handed out strongly, for penalty and repentance,
William Zanzinger with a six-month sentence.
Oh, but you who philosophize disgrace and criticize all fears,
Bury the rag deep in your face
For now’s the time for your tears.

From the beginning of the song, Dylan presents the story with a different shade of meaning than the mainstream press. He frames the story to promote a certain interpretation of the events. Dylan vividly describes the blow from the cane: Carroll was “killed by a blow, lay slain by a cane.” It was, of course, Zantzinger’s cane that “sailed through the air and came down through the room.” This move was “doomed and determined to destroy all the gentle.” One gets the picture of a crazed murderer flying across the room and crashing the cane into Carroll’s skull.

This is consistent with the earliest reports of the event when the facts were still being sorted out. One article said that Carroll was “stunned by a rain of blows about the face and shoulders.”80 Another wrote that Carroll had been “beaten with a cane.”81 But further from the event, the press changed the way they described it. Soon they started saying she was “struck” by a cane; others said, “caned.” Thus, as the story unfolded, the press seemed to soften its representation of the events of that evening. Yet Dylan persisted in presenting a vicious, murderous blow. After the first verse, Dylan sings, “But you who philosophize disgrace and criticize all fears / Take the rag away from your face. / Now ain’t the time for your tears.”

Dylan provides a clear picture of Zantzinger’s family. In the second verse, Dylan highlights that fact that this 24-year-old owns a six-hundred-acre tobacco farm. He is the child of “rich wealthy parents who provide and protect him.” Dylan needed to make it clear how wealthy Zantzinger was. By showing the riches of this young socialite and comparing that to Carroll’s

80 “Zantzinger Surrenders…”.
81 “Zantzinger’s Wife…”.

87
poverty in the next verse, Dylan highlights the contrast between the “haves” and “have-nots,” the privileged and the underprivileged. Zantzinger’s family is connected to the political powers in the state of Maryland. Dylan sings about their “high office relations in the politics of Maryland.” Dylan is setting up the scenario he describes in the final verse in which Zantzinger receives what Dylan considers an unjust trial.

Dylan also presents Zantzinger’s personality. He reacted to the situation “with the shrug of his shoulders,” “swear words,” and “sneering.” Zantzinger’s lack of remorse makes the tragic events seem even worse and lends credence to the portrayal of Zantzinger as a racist who has little value for the lives of black people. According to Dylan, it was only “a matter of minutes” before he was released on bail. Dylan’s description of Zantzinger’s destruction of “all the gentle” is directly opposed to the description of Zantzinger in the mainstream press as a “southern Maryland gentleman farmer.” Dylan is saying that there is nothing gentle about him. In fact, he destroys the gentle. After the second verse, Dylan sings, “But you who philosophize disgrace and criticize all fears / Take the rag away from your face. / Now ain’t the time for your tears.”

Dylan clearly makes the claim that Zantzinger’s blow caused Carroll’s death. The first line of the song says, “William Zanzinger killed poor Hattie Carroll.” Dylan did not say, “William Zanzinger caused the death of Hattie Carroll,” “William Zanzinger fatally caned Hattie Carroll,” or “William Zanzinger struck Hattie Carroll who died” as the mainstream press did. Dylan made it clear: Zantzinger killed Carroll. Later in the first verse, Dylan sings, “His weapon took from him.” It was not a toy or novelty cane; it was a weapon. According to Dylan, this was an act of hate-filled violence.

While Dylan never explicitly mentions the racial divide between the victim and the accused, he draws attention to the socioeconomic divide between the two. He refers to Carroll as
“poor Hattie Carroll” in his opening line. The second line contrasts her socioeconomic position with Zantzinger’s when he refers to Zantzinger’s “diamond ring finger.” Zantzinger’s wealth was an important aspect of Dylan’s version of the story. The third verse profiles the victim. Hattie Carroll worked in the kitchen and was the mother of ten children.82 Dylan describes her job: she took out dishes and garbage. She never sat at the head of the table, never talked to her customers, and simply cleaned up the food and emptied the ashtrays. Carroll was a faithful worker, willing to do her job and earn her money to feed her children. Dylan skillfully contrasts Carroll’s role as someone who humbly serves with Zantzinger’s position as someone who arrogantly expects service. Dylan never mentioned race, but the audience understands.

Before the third verse is over, Dylan makes clear the relationship between Carroll and Zantzinger in what is the most damning line of the song: “And she never done nothing to William Zanzinger.” Dylan allows the strumming rhythm of the song to slow, letting this important fact sink in. This was a senseless act of violence; no provocation, no motive, and no remorse. The press did not cover this aspect of the story heavily. The press acknowledged that Carroll’s only offense would have been serving a rich white man his drink too slowly. The press didn’t emphasize the randomness of the crime. Yet Dylan emphasizes this point lyrically and musically. After the third verse, Dylan sings, “But you who philosophize disgrace and criticize all fears / Take the rag away from your face. / Now ain’t the time for your tears.”

82 It is noteworthy that the newspapers reported that Carroll was the mother of 11 children, while Dylan only said 10. This is an interesting mistake made by Dylan. Certainly, it is sadder to have one more motherless child and would have only supported Dylan’s argument. It is possible that Dylan chose 10 rather than 11 for aesthetic purposes and poetic meter. However, Dylan’s song does not follow any regular rhythmic or rhyming pattern that would justify the shorter word. An article in the folk music magazine Broadside, which is considered by some to be Dylan’s source and will be discussed in more detail below, called Carroll a mother of 10 in the headline. If this was the source, that would explain the discrepancy. While the poetic meter theory still holds, one wonders if Dylan had squeezed the three-syllable “eleven” into the song instead of the one-syllable “ten,” that would have felt like the proper poetic meter.
The final verse of Dylan’s song describes Zantzinger’s trial. Dylan’s voice drips with sarcasm as he refers to “a courtroom of honor.” The judge pounds his gavel “to show that all’s equal and that the courts are on the level.” Dylan refers back to his profile of Zantzinger’s well-connected family saying that “the strings in the book ain’t pulled and persuaded” by those with money and power. In these courts, Dylan proclaims that “even the nobles get properly handled.” Dylan sings, “And that the ladder of the law has no top and no bottom.” It was this supposedly honest court that looked upon Zantzinger, “the person who killed for no reason,” and “handed out strongly, for penalty and repentance, / William Zanzinger with a six-month sentence.”

The climax of the narrative arrives with a punch. This entire story, the death of an innocent mother at the hands of a rich tobacco farmer in a foul mood, ended with a six-month sentence for manslaughter, not even one month for each motherless child left behind. Only Glass’s article referred to this sentence as light. Yet it was the focus of Dylan’s reporting. Dylan makes the thesis of this song somewhat explicit: money and power are enough to tip the scales of justice, especially when the crime is against a poor person. And Dylan sings, “Oh, but you who philosophize disgrace and criticize all fears / Bury the rag deep in your face / For now’s the time for your tears.”

The facts were more or less the same. The story was sad whether you heard it from the Washington Post or from Bob Dylan’s album. But it’s a different kind of sad. The mainstream press points out an ugly situation. It’s sad that the mother of eleven children died. It’s sad that a promising young man like Zantzinger allowed one night of drunkenness to derail his life. Zantzinger’s senseless act destroyed one life, and negatively impacted the lives of so many others. For this, we should cry.
Dylan does not deny the tragic elements of this story. Yet he recognizes that the motherless children aren’t the saddest part of the story. The death of an innocent barmaid isn’t the saddest part. The trouble Zantzinger and his family are going through isn’t the saddest part. The saddest part came when Zantzinger was tried in what Dylan described as a less-than-honest court. The strings were pulled. All was not equal. The courts were not on the level. The nobles clearly do get treated differently. By Dylan’s account, Zantzinger received a joke of a sentence, and he emphasizes that as the saddest part of the story. Dylan makes it clear that certain lives in this society are valued differently than others, not based on one’s actions or character, but on one’s skin color, bank account, and family connections. For this, we should cry.

The Baltimore Afro-American

Dylan’s music more closely resembles the coverage from The Afro-American, a weekly black newspaper from Baltimore. The Afro-American ran several stories on the saga involving Hattie Carroll and William Zantzinger between February 16, 1963, and March 28, 1964. The first story about Hattie Carroll’s death on February 16, 1963, has a subheadline reads, “Mother of 10 beaten in ballroom.” The lede to the story was a quotation: “It all happened so fast. He was like a wild animal. After he had knocked her unconscious he became even more belligerent. And now she is dead. And all because she didn’t serve him fast enough.”83 Aside from the bold lede, the initial story in The Afro-American was fairly straightforward and comparable to the coverage in the mainstream media. In describing the event, the story reads, “[H]e reportedly walked to the bar in the ballroom and began to beat Mrs. Carroll, who dropped to the floor unconscious.”

83 “Caned Barmaid Dies, Jail Blond,” The Afro-American, February 16, 1963. Many of the stories about Carroll’s death and Zantzinger’s trial have no bylines for the authors. When the author is listed, the name will be included in the text and in the footnote.
*The Afro-American* offers a little more color to the story than the mainstream press did. The charity event was described as “swank.” Zantzinger’s initial appearance before the court is described: “As he faced Judge Albert H. Blum in his wrinkled clothes, with a wilted carnation in his lapel, the thick cane used in the beating was brought into the courtroom. It was in three pieces.”

Like Dylan’s reference to Zantzinger’s “diamond ring finger,” *The Afro-America* seemed to highlight Carroll’s lowly status and Zantzinger’s privileged one.

The next week, *The Afro-American* ran three front-page stories about Carroll’s death, one about the likelihood of Zantzinger requesting to move the trial, one about the bitter reaction over the death, and one about the crowds at Carroll’s funeral. The headlines were straightforward: “Farmer may ask change of venue,” “Reaction bitter and quick over slaying,” and “Police hold back crowd at church.” These stories discuss some of the reaction resulting from Carroll’s death. For example, Ralph Matthews Jr. wrote that Carroll became “the conscience of a city of a million souls.” So many people wanted to attend the funeral that they were turned away. Matthews reports, “No white faces were to be seen except in cars wizzling [sic] east on Mulberry St. past the church.” The pastor of Carroll’s church said at her funeral, “Downtown yesterday, I paused and wondered to myself if I am in Baltimore or in Alabama or Mississippi?”

The story about the reaction discussed the several phone calls that *The Afro-American* and NAACP offices received. Many people took issue with state attorney William J. O’Donnell’s handling of the case. He suggested that the charges would not be murder, and he did not oppose Zantzinger’s release on bail. The article quoted a statement by the Congress for Racial Equality, stating how they hoped that O’Donnell’s willingness to release Zantzinger on bail was not an

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84 Ibid., 2.
indication of racial preference that might affect a trial. CORE is the organization in which Dylan’s one-time girlfriend Suze Rotolo was involved, possibly connecting him to the story.

The next time Carroll and Zantzinger appear in The Afro-American is March 16, 1963, announcing the beginning of Zantzinger’s trial. The coverage is markedly changed. A large headline appears: “Cane-Killer’s Trial Set.”87 The rules governing journalistic practices suggest that newspapers should be careful to allow the courts to convict criminals and newspapers simply report what they know. But the editors at The Afro-American eschewed those rules with this headline. Instead of writing, “Alleged Cane-Killer” or using qualifiers like accused, charged, reported, and so on, the editors make it clear. Zantzinger killed Carroll with his cane. He’s a cane-killer. The headline isn’t much different from Bob Dylan’s “lede” in “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll.” He sings, “William Zanzinger killed poor Hattie Carroll.” This type of language would never appear in the New York Times. The reporting under that startling headline was straightforward.

The reporting continued in the same fashion. The following week’s front page headline read, “‘You black b…….’ Shouts Cane-Killer.”88 The story begins with another quotation lede: “Why are you so slow, you black b….h?” During the grand jury hearing, Grace Shelton testified that Zantzinger said that before hitting Carroll with his cane. Even the slug indicating the continuation of the story on the second page reiterated the headline “—‘You black B---’.” In this hearing, Charles E. Petty, Jr., the assistant medical examiner said Carroll’s “emotional reaction to the blow caused her death.” Collins quotes the courtroom dialogue, “All I know is he hit her. He hit her. He struck right down and hit her,” said Shirley Burrell, a co-worker of Carroll’s.

“Actually, he just tapped her with the cane?” asks defense attorney Frederick J. Green Jr. “No, he did not. He struck right down and hit her.” “A hard blow,” the attorney asks. “Yes, sir. It was a hard blow. So hard I couldn’t understand how she could stand up.”89

_The Afro-American_ reported on Zantzinger’s murder trial in the June 29, 1963, issue. The headline read, “Cane-Killer Forgets,” and the subheadline read, “He can’t remember fatal blow.”90 The headline almost seems mocking in its tone, saying, “Can you believe that? He doesn’t remember!” The proverbial “shrug of the shoulder” that Dylan describes represents the inability of the killer to even remember the killing.

Another story in the _Afro-American_ by James Williams reports the events during the trial, which included Zantzinger and his wife testifying, an outburst from one of Carroll’s sons, and the defense argument that Carroll might have died that morning with or without Zantzinger’s blow. According to the story, the defense tried to paint Zantzinger as a “dirt-farmer who went to Baltimore just to ‘cut-up’ a bit, and drank so much that he had no recollection of striking Mrs. Carroll.” Williams reported that many guests of the charity event appeared as witnesses at the trial. He writes, “Many of them wore rather shamed faced expressions, as if they were embarrassed [to] be involved in a trial of this nature.”91 Again, Petty argued that his autopsy and research showed that the beginning of Carroll’s stroke coincided with Zantzinger’s blow, therefore it was accurate to say that Zantzinger caused the stroke. Williams summarizes the testimony of the three eye witnesses and co-workers of Hattie Carroll who claimed that Zantzinger demanded his drink, shouted racial epithets, and struck Carroll with his cane.

Williams ends his article with this paragraph:

89 Ibid.


91 Ibid.
If they [the Zantzingers] were disturbed, it did not show on their faces. Take them from this place and put them in a more accustomed setting and they would be the embodiment of the “ideal” American couple as projected by the advertising merchants — young, well dressed and handsome.92

Williams referred to the question of whether or not Carroll would have died the next day regardless of Zantzinger’s blow in the beginning of the article, but never elaborates on that testimony. Certainly, for the panel of judges deciding Zantzinger’s fate, that must have been important testimony.

One week later, James Williams reports that Zantzinger was found guilty of manslaughter and three counts of assault by the judges.93 Williams reported that the sentencing will be done after an investigation by the Department of Parole and Probation, but will most likely be less than 10 years in prison. Williams summed up the trial: “As the state charged, and then proved, the blow that Zantzinger struck and the vile racial epithets he used to insult her, were enough to cause a brain hemorrhage that resulted in a stroke that killed her.”94

Williams’s article has a victorious feel. He recognized the importance of this case. It was rich versus poor, white versus black, haves versus have-nots. He said that Petty’s testimony carried “the ring of authority,” which pretty much closed the book on the entire case. For the first time in The Afro-American coverage, Williams’ story pointed out the elevated stakes. He writes, “It was not only Zantzinger that was to be placed on trial, it was Maryland justice as well.” He writes that Carroll “was no longer an unknown—she was a crusade.” Williams includes the judges' decision: “We find that Hattie Carroll’s death was not due solely to disease, but that it was caused or hastened by the defendant’s verbal insults, coupled with an actual assault and that

92 Ibid.
93 James D. Williams, “Cane-killer found guilty by judges,” The Afro-American, July 6, 1963.
94 Ibid.
he is guilty of manslaughter.” 95 Dylan, too, recognized that Zantzinger wasn’t on trial, but the entire American criminal justice system was on trial.

That victorious tone disappears with the next article about the case under the headline “Cane-killer gets off with six months.” 96 The article is very even-handed, noting that some observers said the sentence was an “unexpectedly ‘light’ penalty.” Johnson writes that the judges said the event was similar to vehicular manslaughter and that if Carroll had been a healthy person, “we would have never heard anything about it.” The defense filed a motion to appeal the conviction, but the judge rejected the motion.

Williams’s article about the conviction was the only story that really addressed the racial and class issues in much depth. The headlines were sensational in their reference to Zantzinger as a “Cane-killer,” which brings to mind the type of nicknames serial killers earn: BTK, Son of Sam, and so on. No doubt, this story paled when compared with the headlines that appeared around it. Medgar Evers was killed weeks before Zantzinger’s trial. The sentence, which really was the climax of the entire saga, came out the same day as the March on Washington for Freedom and Justice, which included a performance by Bob Dylan and Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous “I have a dream” speech. John F. Kennedy was killed while Zantzinger was in jail.

In most cases, the reporting between the mainstream press and The Afro-American was similar. The Afro-American included a little more editorializing in their reporting, but never seriously distorted the facts. The bold headlines represented a significant shift from the Washington Post and New York Times type of reporting towards the type of journalism Dylan

95 Ibid.

was doing. The headlines seemed to say, “The ‘Cane-Killer’ must surely be guilty of murder,” just as Dylan suggested.

**Music as Underground Journalism**

“The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll” functions in a similar way to underground journalism. The review of literature showed three common elements of underground journalism: opposition to the mainstream media, the rejection of the ideal of objectivity, and the use of unconventional means of producing and distributing their message.

Before performing “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll” at the Royal Albert Hall in London on May 10, 1965, Dylan said, “This is a true story. It comes from the newspapers. Nothing in this story’s been changed except the words.” With that statement, Dylan explicitly proclaims that he intended to counter the coverage found in the mainstream media. He recognized that to get at the “truth,” he needed to change the words. As the above analysis has shown, Dylan highlighted different aspects of the case to provide an alternative interpretation of the event. Dylan frames the event in a different way so that the elements that become salient are race, class, injustice, and a crooked justice system.

Dylan’s quote above also shows his disregard for objectivity. He is presenting the truth as he sees it, not worrying about objectivity, detachment, and the other ideals of the mainstream media. Dylan had a point of view to get across, and by framing the events the way he did, he was able to make the political and social statement that he felt had been missed by the coverage of the mainstream press. By ignoring the larger social issues of the story, the mainstream media missed what, according to Dylan, was the most important part of the story.

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Dylan also got his message heard through unconventional methods. By using music rather than print to tell a news story, Dylan takes a nontraditional route to news distribution. The review of the literature shows that music has distributed information and recorded history for centuries. Yet in 1963, the “news” was considered the business of newspapers and television networks, not messy-headed folk singers with scratchy, nasally voices. Dylan’s unique musical techniques and sounds only add to the unconventionality of his message.

Even Dylan’s language was purposefully unconventional. Dylan sings, “And she never done nothing to William Zanzinger.” Having grown up in a middle class home in Minnesota, receiving a high school education, and enrolling at the University of Minnesota in St. Paul, Dylan certainly knew that the line should have been, “And she never did anything to William Zantzinger.” However, by using grammatically incorrect language, Dylan separates himself even more from the mainstream media, highlighting the difference between his version of the story and the story presented by the mainstream media.98

The point that Dylan’s music works as a form of journalism is supported by a UPI article in the May 28, 1964, edition of the Chicago Defender, a historically black newspaper. The story reports that three students from Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, started a fundraiser for Hattie Carroll’s children. After hearing the song, the three young men “were particularly touched by the withdrawal from college by one of Mrs. Carroll’s sons because of the financial problems brought about by his mother’s death.”99 While Dylan’s song wasn’t the only way to learn about Carroll’s death, it proved to be an effective way for people outside of Baltimore to learn about, and eventually act on.

98 Dylan was a serious follower of Woody Guthrie, often imitating him early on in his career. Guthrie, often called the Dust Bowl Rambler, would have used language like this, so another explanation is that Dylan was still mimicking his idol.

Ian Frazier dug a little deeper into the death of Hattie Carroll in 2004. He located
Zantzinger in Maryland to discover that he had found more trouble, nearly thirty years later. He
had been arrested on real estate fraud charges. Frazier went to Hattie Carroll’s church in
Baltimore to visit with the preachers there. Their objection dealt not only with Zantzinger’s
action, but with the inaction of those around him. One of Zantzinger’s childhood friends said,
“And what I really can’t understand is, when Billy started getting crazy at the party, why
somebody didn’t just kick his ass for him and throw him out on his ear.”

Frazier recognized that by barely covering Zantzinger’s sentencing and only focusing on
the lack of violence of the March on Washington, the New York Times, the Washington Post, and
the Baltimore Sun missed the true message of the march. Frazier wrote, “If it weren’t for TV and
videotape, we would not know how powerful the March on Washington or Dr. King’s speech,
really was. And if it weren’t for Dylan, nothing more would have been said about Hattie
Carroll.” The mainstream media as represented by the Times, the Post, and the Sun missed the
point, and it took an artist like Dylan to make it.

Dylan got it wrong. Zantzinger apparently wasn’t a crazed, racist lunatic. The beating
apparently wasn’t so violent. The light sentence apparently wasn’t so ridiculous. Dylan
exaggerated the events of the night, quite likely for political or artistic purposes. He wanted to
sell records, and this dramatic story certainly helped. In his analysis of Dylan’s recording
sessions, rock biographer Clinton Heylin calls “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll” a “gross
misrepresentation of the facts” and in his biography of Dylan says the song “verges on the

101 Ibid.
libelous.” 103 He writes, “Dylan’s concern, though, was not the facts themselves but how they might fit his preconceived notions of injustice and corruption.” 104

After Zantzinger’s death in 2009, the New Yorker published a brief by David Simon highlighting Dylan’s artistic liberties and exaggerations. Simon said he found reference to a letter in the Carroll homicide file written by a “folksinger in New York who seeks information about the aforementioned case, which was investigated by your agency.” 105 The letter was gone, but Simon suggests that it was written by a remorseful Dylan. Dylan exaggerated, but it’s possible the exaggeration didn’t start with him.

Broadside magazine was a folk-enthusiast magazine that promoted folk events and published folk songs. The late March 1963 issue of the magazine included a song called “Ballad of Hattie Carroll” by Don West and an article titled “Rich Brute Slays Negro Mother of 10” by Roy H. Wood. 106 The song goes, “A story of a brutal murder / Done by a rich & powerful man / Who beat to death a maid of color / With stylish cane held in his hand.” Later, “The big man pounded on the table / She hardly heard what he did say / When Hattie went to get his order / He took his cane & flailed away.”

The accompanying news story wasn’t much more accurate. Woods wrote of a “brutal beating by a wealthy socialite.” The death scene is described, “[H]e strode to the bar and rained blows on the head and back of Mrs. Carroll who was working there. The cane was broken in three pieces.” At the end of the article, Woods predicts the light sentence Zantzinger will get. He writes:

103 Heylin, Bob Dylan: Behind the Shades, 124.
104 Ibid., 125.
105 Simon.
106 Broadside 23, Late March 1963: 5.
The judge who released Zantzinger on bond has already permitted his attorney to claim that Mrs. Carroll died indirectly as a result of the attack rather than directly.

There is speculation here that attempts will be made to get Zantzinger off with a slap on the wrist.

Recently, a “cat burglar” caught in the wealthiest section here, Guilford, received a 90-year sentence. He never once committed violence.\(^{107}\)

It is hard to know if Dylan read this story, though his connection to the folk community and the publishers of the magazine are well documented.\(^{108}\) This raises the question that Dylan based his writing on the story and intended to improve upon the poorly written song.

This chapter is less focused on proving whether or not Dylan got the facts right. As demonstrated by the first report that showed up in the *Washington Post*, even conventional, well-funded, and objective news organizations can make mistakes, rely on unreliable sources, and just flat-out get things wrong. But what this chapter will show is that Dylan’s music works in many ways, not simply to document a public event, but to document a particular interpretation of that event. Dylan found meaning in Carroll’s lonesome death, and through his music, many of his fans did too.

This study has shown the power of songs in communicating important ideas. By framing the story to make the issues of class, race, and injustice salient, Dylan performs a form of alternative journalism, opposing the “objective” and “factual” account of the mainstream media for an account that might get closer to the “truth.” In order to understand the full potential for music as a tool of communication and promoting social change, it is necessary to examine

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107 Roy H. Wood, “Rich Brute Slays Negro Mother of 10,” *Broadside* 23, Late March 1963: 5. The microfilm copy was difficult to read, and the word Guilford and the 90-year sentence may be misread. The point remains the same.

topical songs, such as “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll” as subversive and alternative journalism.

While the newspapers clippings recounting Hattie Carroll’s tragic death are now buried in archives, viewable through microfiche by interested historians, Dylan’s coverage lives on in the grooves of vinyl records, remastered CD’s, covered versions of the classic song, documentary films, and even footage of him performing the song on Web sites like YouTube.com. Dylan may or may not have gotten the story right. He did, however, demonstrate, yet again, that journalism is not always something that takes place in the confines of a newsroom and that objectivity is not always the top priority of a journalist.
CHAPTER 4
THE BRIDGE: “GEORGE JACKSON”—BOB DYLAN’S OBITUARY FOR A REVOLUTIONARY

Lord, Lord, / They cut George Jackson down. / Lord, Lord, / They laid him in the ground.

—Bob Dylan, “George Jackson”

The first part of Bob Dylan’s career seemed to indicate how the rest of his career should go. He was supposed to do what Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, and Cisco Houston did, and what Joan Baez, Dave Van Ronk, and Phil Ochs would do, and spend the rest of his career pointing out the ills in society and suggesting ways to improve it. Dylan had other plans. 1964’s The Times They Are A-changin’ contained some of Dylan’s strongest “protest songs” such as “Only a Pawn in Their Game,” “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll,” and “With God on Our Side.” Later that year, the follow-up record, Another Side of Bob Dylan signaled a striking change in his career.

This album began what appeared to be a shift in Dylan’s work from the politically and socially conscious thought of his earlier recordings. Another Side begins with “All I Really Want to Do,” in which Dylan sings, “I don't want to fake you out, / Take or shake or forsake you out, / I ain't lookin' for you to feel like me, / See like me or be like me. / All I really want to do / Is, baby, be friends with you.” Dylan pretty clearly isn’t trying to be persuasive; he’s trying to be friendly. The record finishes with “It Ain’t Me, Babe,” in which Dylan tells his lover he’s not the one she’s looking for. It wouldn’t be a stretch to say that he was singing to the entire folk community: find another prophet.

From then, he began to shift away from topically minded folk music toward rock ‘n’ roll. Bringing It All Back Home, released in 1965, represented his return to his first musical love. Highway 61 Revisited, released later that year, and 1966’s Blonde on Blonde are rock ‘n’ roll
masterpieces by someone trying to completely reinvent the genre. Following a brief hiatus after
his motorcycle crash, Dylan turned back to the folksy sound with *John Wesley Harding* in 1967
and the country-influenced *Nashville Skyline* in 1969. The next year brought critically and
commercially disappointing *Self Portrait* and its more successful follow-up, *New Morning.*
Dylan’s bright career, it seemed, had burned out. Many of the old folk guard were pointing to his
apolitical music as a turn away from his strengths.

On August 21, 1971, black revolutionary George Jackson was gunned down in his prison
cell. Shortly after hearing the news, Dylan penned “George Jackson,” a song that he wrote after
reading a newspaper account of his death on November 3, 1971. ¹ He recorded two versions of
the song on November 4, a solo-acoustic version and a big band version. About a week later, on
November 12, Columbia released a single with each version on a side, preventing radio stations
from playing a less political song. The quick turnaround was remarkable for the slow-moving
recording industry.

**The Story**

**Jackson’s Life and Death**

George Jackson’s life and death is tragic. Convicted for only three crimes in his life—all
robbery—Jackson spent more than one third of his life locked up in prisons and jails.² The last
time Jackson was convicted of a crime was at the tender age of 19. He was given one year to life
for stealing $70. He, along with the other two “Soledad Brothers,” was accused of killing a
prison guard in the Soledad Prison in 1970. Jackson’s 17-year-old brother Jonathan died while
reportedly trying to free San Quentin prisoners from a courtroom in 1970. Two hostages and the

¹ Heylin, 330.
presiding judge were also killed, and UCLA philosophy professor Angela Davis was implicated in the crime.

Jackson’s death came August 21, 1971, during an attempted escape, the details of which are still disputed. Somehow Jackson appeared with a gun, freed several convicts from their prison cells, and killed three prison guards and two other prisoners. The Los Angeles Times reported that Jackson had been planning an escape for several weeks and that his attorney smuggled the gun into the prison. The original autopsy suggested that Jackson was killed from above, supporting the official story that he was trying to escape. A later autopsy reversed the path of the bullet, ruling out the official account. Many scholars, including French theorist Michel Foucault, thought Jackson was assassinated and his entire incarceration was not for the crimes he committed, but for the political views he held.

Jackson may have been a political prisoner and a victim of a large-scale plan to assassinate those who held radical beliefs. He may have been a homicidal threat to the prison who died in a violent escape attempt, but many seemed to doubt that simple explanation. On August 23, 1971, New York Times reporter Earl Caldwell offered a eulogy for Jackson, writing that those who recognized the injustice of the court system argued: “‘Something is wrong,’ they would say, ‘when a man pleads guilty to stealing $70 and spends 10 years in jail and still has no hope of getting out.’”

By the end of the 1960s, racial tensions across the nation were peaking. In 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, sparking riots across the nation. In 1969, Fred Hampton, the leader of the Black Panther Party, was killed during a police raid on his home. The event is widely considered an assassination. In 1970, Angela Davis was placed on the FBI most wanted

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list. By the time George Jackson was killed in prison, the United States had been bogged down in the increasingly unpopular war in Vietnam and mass protests were becoming common. Less than three weeks after Jackson’s death in California, 12,000 inmates took over the Attica Correctional Facility in New York. Four days later, state troops and guards violently take back the prison, leaving 29 inmates and 10 hostages dead.

It would be foolish to assume that this chapter could answer so many of the unanswered questions surrounding this case. That is hardly the intent. Instead, this paper examines the news coverage surrounding Jackson’s death by the nation’s newspaper of record, the *New York Times*; the historically black newspaper the *Chicago Defender*; a west-coast voice, the *Los Angeles Times*; and Dylan’s musical obituary released shortly after his death.

**The Background**

George Jackson’s story highlighted many important issues, from race relations, to prison culture, to freedom of political expression. The story pointed to the radicalization of prison culture and the way prisoners were treated in penitentiaries. It pointed to the fact that the nonviolent, civil-disobedient activists of the 1950s and 1960s were giving way to the militant revolutionaries like Jackson, Angela Davis, and the Black Panther Party, who recognized that they couldn’t fix the system by working from within the system. Jackson’s case captured the interest of postmodern thinkers like Michel Foucault and Jean Genet.

In the preface to a pamphlet titled “The Assassination of George Jackson,” the Prison Information Group, led by Foucault, wrote, “The death of George Jackson is not a prison accident. It is a political assassination.”

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assassination was, and still is, a form of political action.” The pamphlet, which was published only two days before Dylan’s song came out, had two parts—one featuring interviews with Jackson to demonstrate his political philosophy and one featuring an analysis of American press coverage of his death to reveal the assassination conspiracy.

In the section about the press coverage, Foucault and his colleagues write, “A man whose account of his neighbor’s death is half as incongruous as the story told by the director of San Quentin about Jackson’s death would be immediately accused of the crime, but this will not happen to the director of San Quentin.” 5 The analysis lists five goals that the “counteroffensive tactics” in the press tried to achieve, all in effort to keep black people in their place to prevent the seemingly inevitable revolution.6

Historian Lee Bernstein calls Jackson “a key participant in debates over incarceration, colonialism, and racism” who hasn’t been properly recognized for his role in “an organized system of covert education that presaged theories of internal colonialism, his popularization of arguments about the political qualities of incarceration, and insistence that prisoners can contribute to movements for social change as symbols, intellectuals, and leaders.”7

In his well-known collection of letters, Soledad Brother, Jackson writes, “Blackmen [sic] born in the U.S. and fortunate enough to live past the age of eighteen are conditioned to accept the inevitability of prison.”8 He posthumously authored Blood in My Eyes, a collection of essays clarifying his views on communism, fascism, and revolution. Jackson’s rhetoric worried the

5 Ibid., 140.
6 Ibid., 142.
establishment. For example, he wrote, “Total revolution must be aimed at the purposeful and absolute destruction of the state and all present institutions, the destruction carried out by the so-called psychopath, the outsider, whose only remedy is destruction of the system.” 9 Many concluded that Jackson’s views kept him in prison.

Jo Durden-Smith’s *Who Killed George Jackson?* reconstructs as many of the pieces of the puzzle as he could, though the result is inconclusive and his narrative confusing. Durden-Smith titles the three sections of the book, “History as Fiction,” “History as Fact,” and “History as Feeling.” The first section retells the story based on as many sources as he could find, to retell the narrative like a novelist would, hence history as fiction. The second section deals with all the contradictory evidence that complicates the narrative, hence history as fact. Finally, the author recognized the personal role emotions play in our understanding and interpretation of events, hence, history as feeling.10

The Song

**A National Perspective: The New York Times**

The original report of Jackson’s death in the *New York Times* came on the front page of the August 22, 1971, issue. The story by Wallace Turner referred to Jackson’s murder charges and the death of his brother. At the time the story was written, it wasn’t clear who had killed whom, if Jackson was the killer or the victim. The story included a quote from the associate warden James W. L. Parks referring to the gunshots that came after the prison was secured: “If one of these men made a false move, he would have been dead and I wouldn’t apologize. When you walk in and see your fellow officers in a pool of blood, it doesn’t help your frame of mind.”11

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A story by Steven R. Weisman toward the back of the August 22, 1971, issue retold Jackson’s story, beginning with the prison incident that led to the so-called Soledad murders, Jackson’s eminent murder trial, and the escape attempt. The story mentioned Jackson’s armed robbery conviction, but neither story in that issue offered details about the extent of his crime. This story served to contextualize Jackson’s story in the black power political movement, which had a strong base in American prisons.

The next day’s issue had a front page story from Reuters about the search for the origins of Jackson’s weapon and a story by Turner providing more details about the prison deaths. That issue also included Caldwell’s story that most closely resembled Bob Dylan’s song. Caldwell’s story discusses the “two standards” that blacks see in the judicial system. He writes, “They mention, too, that often the juries that convict Negro defendants are white, that the judges are white, that the prosecutors are white and that the arresting officers are most often white.” Caldwell writes that Jackson was a symbol of the way blacks are treated in prison, but he was also a criminal prisoner, held for what he stood for, not what he did.

In an August 24, 1971, column, Tom Wicker described the injustice many blacks saw. He wrote that many are “aware that all is not as promised in the promised land.” His description of Jackson’s confrontation with the courts, who “knew nothing better to do with him than to send him to its harsh prisons, where he spent a third of his life,” resembles Dylan’s line, “Authorities they hate him / Because he was just too real.” For both Dylan and Wicker, George Jackson was the victim, not the perpetrator, though Wicker recognizes the unlikelihood that the prison incident itself was set up to kill him.

13 Caldwell.
In an August 25, 1971, editorial, the New York Times offered a slightly more critical take on Jackson’s life and death. The editorial states, “The dead prisoner’s family is entitled, in its grief, to believe whatever gives it comfort. For the rest of us it is no contribution to the national good—in this case or in the courthouse slayings for which Angela Davis awaits trial—to explain away acts of savagery as the inevitable reaction to social inequities.”\(^{15}\) The editorial finishes with, “The true social revolutionary’s hope in this country is still in the life of the law, not the death of its guardians.” One can almost hear George Jackson’s likely response: Living a “life of the law” would never bring about the social revolution that “true social revolutionaries” are demanding.

In an August 27, 1971, editorial, former assistant attorney general Roger Wilkins elaborates on the inevitable violence in American prisons: “Death of prisoner and keeper alike are the natural consequences of state-sponsored savagery. If some men kill to prevent the theft of the goods of their store or their family jewels might others not also kill to prevent the theft of their lives and their spirits?”\(^{16}\)

**A Black Perspective: The Chicago Defender**

The death of a radical black activist at the hands of the guards who were supposed to be protecting him would naturally be an important issue for a historically black newspaper like the Chicago Defender. The Defender indeed covered the story, but with the journalistic integrity that the ideals of journalism demand. The stories contained little editorializing or moralizing. According to a search conducted in the Black Studies Center digital archives, the first editorial on Jackson's death didn’t appear until September 29, 1971, more than a month after the slaying.

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The first story in the *Chicago Defender* starts with a pretty soft lede for such a dramatic story: “George Jackson, born on Chicago’s southside, would have been 30 years old one month from today. Instead, he died in a hail of bullets during Saturday’s aborted escape from the state’s maximum security prison here.” The article continues by retelling Jackson’s biography, his confrontations with the law, and his role as a “hero to many radicals.” The details of the attempted prison break don’t appear until the fifteenth paragraph of the story.

The August 24, 1971, issue included a story from the United Press Service quoting Jackson’s mother and father stating that their son was murdered in an assassination plot. Jackson’s father, Lester Jackson, said, “I have no more sons. They have killed the last one now.” The issue also had extensive stories looking at the unanswered questions in the case and describing the search for the lawyer who had supposedly visited Jackson right before the attempted jailbreak.

The next day, more details emerged, such as Jackson’s supposed attempt to hide the gun in his hair and a lengthy story on Stephen Mitchell Bingham, the lawyer suspected as the supplier of the gun. An August 28, 1971, story described the “melee” that erupted at a hearing for the two remaining “Soledad brothers,” who were accused of murdering a prison guard.

A handful of stories referred to George Jackson in the *Chicago Defender* between August 29, 1971, and September 21, 1971, but those stories focused on issues like a journal about injustice, Angela Davis’ trial, and educating blacks. On September 22, 1971, a United Press

International story about a new autopsy report that contradicted the original explanation.\(^{22}\)

Essentially, the path of the bullet was reversed. The entrance wound, originally reported as the top of Jackson’s head, was actually the exit wound. The conclusion showed that Jackson could not have been shot from the 20-foot tower as originally reported. An accompanying story ran a loud headline that included an exclamation point, rarely seen in news writing: “George Jackson shot in back!”\(^{23}\) The story shows that the report gives strength to the family’s theory that Jackson was set up and assassinated.

An editorial on Jackson’s death finally appeared in the September 29, 1971, issue of the *Chicago Defender*. It reads:

> It has become quite possible for blacks of all political persuasion to take up the cause of a George Jackson, to see in him the rape of black manhood, to view him not as a criminal, as officialdom would have them do, but as a victim of a system that twisted and tortured him and in the end destroyed him.

> Jackson sinned against society and society rightly punished him. But in the punishment there was an element of vindictiveness that many blacks believed stemmed not so much from the nature of the crime for which he was convicted as it did from his radicalism.\(^{24}\)

> In sum, the coverage of Jackson’s death in the month following his death was unbiased and tame. The headlines were conservative, save for the exclamation point; the stories were unbiased; and the reporting focused on the facts. An explanation for the relatively straight reporting is that many of the stories were United Press International stories. The reporters were not necessarily *Defender* reporters. Another explanation could be that the paper wanted to distance itself from the radical politics of George Jackson, potentially destroying any credibility the *Defender* held. An unabashed accusation of the government of assassinating Jackson might

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have been seen as unabashed support of Jackson’s politics. While those speculations might not be the only explanations, the Chicago Defender’s coverage seemed to be the least similar to Dylan’s version.

**The West Coast Perspective: The Los Angeles Times**

The Los Angeles Times ran two stories about George Jackson the day after he was killed. The first story, by Doug Shuit and Daryl Lembke, reported the killing and all the details made available at the time, many from Associate Warden Park. Park clearly places the blame for the death when he said, “This talk of revolution by dilettantes outside the prison does a lot of harm. They aren’t here getting killed. It’s also a result of all this talk of killing the pigs.”

The second story, by Stanley Williford, provided a little more background on Jackson’s life and politics. Williford reported that Jackson spent more than a third of his life behind bars, mostly for the $70 robbery. He reported that Jackson’s prison life was “dedicated to revolution” and that he studied Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Huey Newton, Nikolai Lenin and other radical thinkers. Williford summarized Jackson’s symbolism concisely: “When Jackson died Saturday at San Quentin State Prison, he was a hero to many radicals but the epitome of the troublesome convict to prison authorities all over the state.”

The stories on August 23 and 24, 1971, provided more details into the case, but nothing significantly more than the New York Times or the Chicago Defender. The article by Phillip Hager and Daryl Lembke on August 23 described the search for the lawyer who was suspected

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of providing Jackson with the gun. The story by Philip Hager on August 24 provided a clear timeline of the incident, as described by Associate Warden Park.

The August 25, 1971, issue of the *Los Angeles Times* included an interesting story from the Associated Press about a widow of one of the fallen San Quentin Prison guards. She said, “Every article we’ve picked up glorifies Jackson as a political prisoner. But nobody seems to care about the officers.” Jackson’s life was celebrated by many, but his death caused great tragedy for the victims’ families. This was lost in much of the press coverage.

The reporting in the *Los Angeles Times*, like the *Chicago Defender*, wasn’t significantly different from what appeared in the *New York Times*. In this case, changes in location, perspective, and audience didn’t seem to have the significant effects like those demonstrated by the reporting coming out of the Emmett Till case, where the southern reporting was drastically different from the northern perspective. A possible explanation is that as the civil rights movement gained momentum, the language of the press reflected that, becoming more homogenous. Another explanation is that Jackson’s controversial political views made the press a little more cautious in its coverage.

**Bob Dylan’s Obituary for a Revolutionary: “George Jackson”**

I woke up this mornin’,
There were tears in my bed.
They killed a man I really loved
Shot him through the head.
Lord, Lord,
They cut George Jackson down.

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Lord, Lord,
They laid him in the ground.

Sent him off to prison
For a seventy-dollar robbery.
Closed the door behind him
And they threw away the key.
Lord, Lord,
They cut George Jackson down.
Lord, Lord,
They laid him in the ground.

He wouldn't take shit from no one
He wouldn't bow down or kneel.
Authorities, they hated him
Because he was just too real.
Lord, Lord,
They cut George Jackson down.
Lord, Lord,
They laid him in the ground.

Prison guards, they cursed him
As they watched him from above
But they were frightened of his power
They were scared of his love.
Lord, Lord,
So they cut George Jackson down.
Lord, Lord,
They laid him in the ground.

Sometimes I think this whole world
Is one big prison yard.
Some of us are prisoners
The rest of us are guards.
Lord, Lord,
They cut George Jackson down.
Lord, Lord,
They laid him in the ground.

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Dylan biographer Clinton Heylin noted the speculation many had about Dylan’s sincerity, saying he wrote the song just to get people from the “left” off of his back. And the poor sales of

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the record suggest “that Dylan was not the only one for whom such political statements were passé.” In the first verse of the song, Dylan describes tears in his bed at the news of the death of a man “I really loved.” There is no evidence that Dylan even met the man, much less truly “loved” him. It begins with the seemingly insincere statement. Regardless, Dylan clearly concludes that Jackson was murdered. The chorus after every four-line verse is the same: “Lord, Lord, / They cut George Jackson down. / Lord, Lord, / They laid him in the ground.” It’s not clear who the “they” are in Dylan’s version, but in many conspiracy theory stories, the “they” is often unknown.

The second verse of Dylan’s song is a pretty accurate description of Jackson’s criminal history. He was sent to prison for a $70 robbery. They “closed the door behind him / and they threw away the key.” All of the evidence points to Jackson’s being a political prisoner. The crime wasn’t egregious or violent. His behavior in prison was fine. Dylan, like many other writers and journalists, concluded that Jackson was in jail because of his radical political views.

Dylan’s lyrics begin to take on the voice of the radical politics that Jackson was promoting. He sings that Jackson “wouldn’t take shit from no one / He wouldn’t bow down or kneel.” This represents a lyrical shift for Dylan. He had always been a powerful lyricist, writing songs that moved people in many ways. From “Blowin’ in the Wind” to “Like a Rolling Stone,” Dylan knew how to manipulate the English language to its greatest impact. But this song represents one of the first times Dylan uses a word like “shit.” As the civil rights movement became more aggressive and more angry, as demonstrated by militants like Jackson, the Black Panther Party, and Stokely Carmichael, Dylan’s music became a little more aggressive and angry, culminating in “Hurricane,” as discussed below. Compared to the sympathetic descriptions of Hattie Carroll

and the naive and youthfully hopeful tone of Emmett Till, these lyrics have a strikingly different tone. The verse finishes with the perplexing couplet, “Authorities, they hated him / Because he was just too real.” While authorities probably did hate him, it is unclear what it means to be “too real” or why that would be a cause for hatred.

The next verse continues this theme. Dylan describes the prison guards who hate him and how they watch him from above. He sings, “But they were frightened of his power / They were scared of his love.” These lines, including the last two from the previous verse, must surely represent the response to Jackson’s radical politics. *Soledad Brother*, his collection of prison letters, became an important political text. His power and love that so scared the authorities didn’t come from weapons, but from words.

Dylan finishes the relatively forgettable song with an extremely memorable verse. He sings, “Sometimes I think this whole world / Is one big prison yard. / Some of us are prisoners / The rest of us are guards.”32 Dylan’s line brings to mind the separation Marxists refer to between those with power and those without, those who control the means of production and those who don’t. Jackson literally spent more than a third of his life as a prisoner, but Dylan argues that he was always a prisoner. The color of his skin and the amount of money in his bank account ensured his prisoner status. Those fortunate enough to take the role of guards, Dylan seems to say, are simply lucky.

**Music as Obituary**

Stories about death take a particular importance in our society. Communication scholar Janice Hume argues in her analysis of American obituaries, “[O]bituaries share ‘death stories’ of

32 Dylan recorded two versions of the song and two variations on the lyrics. The acoustic version, which is archived on [http://www.bobdylan.com](http://www.bobdylan.com), is quoted here. The large band version is “Some of us are prisoners / Some of us are guards.” The first version includes all, while the second version leaves room for people who are neither prisoners or guards.
people who have never met, making individual and generational memories an element of public consciousness through the mass media.”33 But Hume argues that they even do more than that.

Hume’s study revealed four common elements of American newspaper obituaries: “name and occupation of the deceased, cause of death, personal attributes of the deceased, and funeral arrangements.”34 Not all of these elements were there for every obituary, as sometimes the cause of death was unimportant or the funeral arrangements were to remain private. Hume found that as American culture changed, for example during the women’s suffrage movement, the obituaries reflected these changes. Hence, she writes, “Obituaries may help distribute a type of ideology to their mass audiences.”35

Dylan’s obituary for George Jackson came quickly after he died. Jackson died on August 21, 1971, and according to Heylin, Dylan wrote the song on November 3, 1971, after reading of Jackson’s death in a newspaper and was in the studio the next day to record.36 Dylan’s song was only 127 words long, counting the chorus only once, considerably shorter than most newspaper obituaries (and certainly shorter than most of the typically verbose singer’s music.) But Dylan fulfills three of the four common elements Hume listed, not including the funeral arrangement for obvious reasons.

Dylan clearly provides the name and describes his occupation. The name “George Jackson” appears after all five verses. And while he doesn’t provide detail into Jackson’s “occupation,” there is little to say considering he had been behind bars since he was 19 years old.

33 Janice Hume, Obituaries in American Culture (Jackson, MS: University Press of Jackson, 2000), 16.
34 Ibid., 23.
35 Ibid., 22.
36 Heylin, 330. The timing of this seems suspect, as one wonders why it took Dylan more than two months to read about Jackson’s death. The news coverage of the botched escape attempt was somewhat heavy.
Rather, Dylan depicts a man who would be a life-time prisoner when he sings, “Closed the door behind him / And they threw away the key.” While not an occupation, Jackson’s life work was clear. Dylan also described Jackson’s cause of death in the first verse of the song, “They killed a man I really love / Shot him through the head.” The cause of death? Murder.

Dylan’s description of Jackson’s attributes is not quite like the “loving mother” or “avid golfer” that many obituaries contain. But a picture of who this man was emerges. Dylan says that Jackson wouldn’t take any shit or bow down or kneel to anyone. He was hated “because he was just too real.” Dylan said the prison guards were scared of his “power” and “love.” The image of Jackson that appears is a man, not the violent militant revolutionary, but a persuasive, thoughtful, loving, and powerful man.

Dylan’s version most closely resembled the early reports in the *New York Times*, questioning the truth of the “official reports” and suggesting that Jackson was a political prisoner and a victim of an assassination plot. Caldwell’s story, which appeared two days after Jackson was killed, said that blacks “assert that prisons are filled with blacks and that guards and administrators and parole authorities are white.”37 This line echoes Dylan’s closing line, “Some of us are prisoners / The rest of us are guards.”

A *New York Times* editorial on August 24, 1971, reads, “A talented writer, a sensitive man, a potential leader and political thinker of great persuasiveness, George Jackson was destroyed long before he was killed at San Quentin.”38 Both Caldwell’s piece and this editorial spoke kindly of a man who would have been tried for murdering a prison guard had he not been killed and whose supposed prison-escape attempt resulted in the death of two other inmates and three

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more guards. Unlike with the coverage of Emmett Till and Hattie Carroll, Dylan probably approved of the sympathetic coverage of Jackson’s death by the *New York Times*.

The editorial in the *Times* reads, “He was, that is, not merely a victim of racism, although he was certainly that. He was a victim, too, of the poverty and hunger and disadvantages that are not the lot of blacks alone in this richest country on earth.” The *New York Times* editors and Bob Dylan recognized that Jackson’s death should not be considered just another tragic prison death, but that his life needs to be examined to understand the politics of poverty, race, and disadvantage.

Dylan didn’t give the details in “George Jackson” that he did in “The Death of Emmett Till,” “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll,” or “Hurricane,” as the analysis below will show. This song lacked the courtroom drama or political finger pointing the earlier songs did. Like an obituary, Dylan didn’t want to recap the details of the death, but celebrate the life. Jackson’s life is part of the struggle that began in earnest with *Brown versus the Board of Education*, the lynching of Emmett Till, and Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott. The struggle for equal treatment—politically, legally, economically—continued. While Dylan moved away from this movement musically, he continued to support causes that he thought was important, as demonstrated in the next chapter’s discussion of the supposed wrongfully convicted boxer, Rubin “Hurricane” Carter.
CHAPTER 5
VERSE THREE: BOB DYLAN’S “NEW JOURNALISM” COVERAGE OF RUBIN “HURRICANE” CARTER’S BATTLE FOR JUSTICE

Here comes the story of the Hurricane, / The man the authorities came to blame / For somethin' that he never done.

—Bob Dylan and Jacques Levy, “Hurricane”

Bob Dylan made a career out of protesting—at least that is what most people think. The truth is after 1965, the “Prince of Protest” did not compose many protest songs. Carl Benson writes in the introduction to his edited volume of commentary on Dylan’s music, “Dylan was the greatest of all the social-protest songwriters but knew when it was time to give up the style.”

Beginning with 1964’s Another Side of Bob Dylan, Dylan focused less on the political world around him and more on himself. He started experimenting with rock ‘n’ roll in 1965’s Bringing It All Back Home. Finally, in “Like a Rolling Stone,” he asks the question many Baby Boomers were beginning to struggle with, “How does it feel to be on your own, like a rolling stone?”

Dylan’s career took many turns before co-writing “Hurricane” with Jacques Levy. After the subdued John Wesley Harding (1967), the country-influenced Nashville Skyline (1969), the commercial and critical flop Self Portrait (1970) and what some consider the beginning of his comeback New Morning (1970), Dylan’s political consciousness reappeared with the 1971 single “George Jackson.” Dylan finally returned to form with 1975’s Blood on the Tracks. This album was in some ways a musical return to the folk influences of his early career. But like his rock era of the mid 1960s, he turned his lyrical lens inward, rather than outward. Blood on the Tracks is possibly Dylan’s most intensely personal album. In 1976, Dylan released Desire, which

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contained the hard-biting “Hurricane,” a song about a professional boxer named Rubin “Hurricane” Carter who Dylan believes was wrongly accused of murder.

This song is a return of sorts to Dylan’s earlier work. Dylan started his career by focusing on issues of civil rights, injustice, and pulling for the “underdog.” Dylan biographer William McKeen writes of the songs on *Desire*, “These new pieces told stories and bore a distant resemblance to this old finger-pointing songs.”¹ This chapter argues that Dylan’s music works as a form of literary journalism. Not unlike “The Death of Emmett Till” or “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll,” Dylan points out the flaws in the criminal justice system with his song “Hurricane.” Instead of white men getting light sentences or acquitted for killing a black person as the earlier songs documented, “Hurricane” chronicles the story of a black man wrongfully convicted of killing white victims. This chapter will retell the saga of Rubin Carter, compare the coverage of the events by the mainstream media, as represented by the *New York Times* and other national newspapers, and show how Dylan’s music works as a type of Tom Wolfe’s idea of “new journalism.”

**The Story**

**The Background**

Before exploring Carter’s case and Dylan’s song, it is important to consult the literature on several areas. First, the story of Rubin “Hurricane” Carter has been told several times. Carter’s autobiography documents a particular perspective on the story. Carter ends his book with a plea to his audience: he needs the audience’s help to right the wrongs that had been done to him.³ In 1999, the case experienced a rebirth in popularity. Norman Jewison’s biographical film titled *The

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Hurricane, starring Denzel Washington in an Oscar-nominated role, appeared in theaters. In 2000, political scientist Paul Wise published Rubin “Hurricane” Carter and the American Justice System, and journalist James S. Hirsh published Hurricane: The Miraculous Journey of Rubin Carter. The result was a clear perspective of Carter’s innocence. Any casual observer of the film would firmly believe that Rubin Carter was framed. Bob Dylan’s “Hurricane” helped shape that perception. Dylan makes clear that Carter was framed by a racist criminal justice system.

Literary journalism is an old type of journalism, but has been called “new” journalism in the 1970s and “new new” journalism as recently as 2005. 4 John C. Harstock defined narrative literary journalism as “true-life stories that read like a novel or short story.” 5 Harstock traces literary journalism back to the eighteenth century with James Boswell’s biography of Samuel Johnson. Thomas Connery wrote that literary journalism is distinguished from newspaper writing “by virtue of what was conveyed, not just by how it was conveyed.” 6 The goal is to “make a statement, or provide an interpretation, about the people and culture depicted.” Norman Sims writes, “Standard reporting hides the voice of the writer, but literary journalism gives that voice an opportunity to enter the story, sometimes with dramatic irony.” 7 This is hardly what the writers at the New York Times and other traditional news organizations are taught to do.


A key confrontation, which will be discussed in more detail in the conclusion to this dissertation, occurred between two of literary journalism’s most decorated practitioners, John Hersey and Tom Wolfe. Hersey’s “Hiroshima,” which first appeared in the *New Yorker*, but was also published as a book, is considered by some to be the greatest piece of American journalism.8 “Hiroshima” is a striking recreation of the aftermath of the atomic bomb dropped on the city during World War II.9 Wolfe attempted to redefine the world of journalism with his *New Journalism*, a collection of manifesto of the idea of literary journalism and an edited collection of some of the best examples of the craft.10

In his essay, Wolfe argues that writers like Wolfe, Truman Capote, Gay Talese, and Jimmy Breslin started incorporating the techniques of fiction into their nonfiction. The goal, Wolfe said in the first few chapters of *The New Journalism*, was to elevate journalism to the level of the novel by using the techniques of fiction writing. Hersey acknowledged the value of narrative storytelling, but was concerned that these writers slipped beyond the unavoidable subtraction bias, which occurs when writers must choose which facts to include or exclude in a story, to the addition bias, where writers are adding to the facts to make for more compelling storytelling.11

Dylan’s song marks a particular moment in time, while the mainstream media coverage this chapter discusses appeared over a 10-year period. In the years between 1966 and 1975, American culture had changed. For this study, it is important to be aware that the societal changes might impact the way the press covered the story. In the political realm, civil rights, the

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Vietnam War, the assignations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy, the 1968 Democratic conventions, race-riots, and Watergate were just a few of the events that changed the cultural landscape. The 1967 summer of love, the Woodstock and Altamont music festivals, the self-destruction of Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin, the break up of the Beatles, and the advent of disco music changed popular music. Clearly, the world was different in 1966, when the murders occurred and in 1975, when Dylan wrote the song.

Celeste Condit Railsback’s analysis of the American abortion controversy serves as an example of rhetorical analysis of a movement over time. Railsback’s work shows how the language of the debate changed. Certain labels came and went, depending on the context of the argument. For example, borrowing the language of civil rights movement, terms like “rights,” “equality,” and “discrimination” crept into the vocabulary of prochoice advocates. The debate changes over time, and Railsback was able to document and analyze that debate. This chapter will examine the language the newspapers used over the ten-year span to describe Carter’s saga. This chapter argues that Dylan’s version of Rubin Carter’s story works as a form of literary journalism.

The Saga of the Hurricane

Rubin Carter spent 22 years in jail for murders that he says he didn’t commit. While there are other documents that might shed more light on the actual events, this chapter intends to compare the mainstream coverage to Dylan’s coverage, not historically reconstruct the events; therefore, those documents that appeared after Dylan’s song was released were not included in this section.

The murders took place at the Lafayette Grill in Paterson, New Jersey, in the early morning hours of June 17, 1967. James Oliver, age 52, and Fred “Cedar Grove Bob” Nauyoks, age 60, were killed at the scene, and Hazel Tanis, age 52, died in a hospital a month later. William Marin, who somehow survived a shot in the head, was the sole survivor. The New York Times reported that about $200 was missing from the tavern’s cash register. Police pulled over Carter and his companion, 21-year-old John Artis, twice that night not far from the Lafayette Grill. The first time they had another companion and were ruled out as suspects because witnesses described two, not three, suspects. The second time, Carter and Artis dropped off their other companion, and they were considered suspects. The witnesses’ descriptions were of two black men who were close to the same size and shape, but Carter was short and stocky and Artis was tall and thin. Regardless, both men were taken to the bed of the injured William Marin, who flatly denied that Carter and Artis were the murderers. Carter and Artis were released after sixteen hours of being in police custody.

Nearly four months after the murders, Carter and Artis were arrested on murder charges after police met with a “mystery witness.” That mystery witness ended up being Alfred Bello, a career criminal who happened to be in the neighborhood of the Lafayette Grill performing his own crime, breaking into a building. Bello’s testimony, along with the testimony of his partner in crime, Arthur Bradley, led to Carter and Artis’s indictment for murder on December 1, 1966. Bello, a key witness for the prosecution, said he heard the gun shots and came over to see what


14 Hirsch, 38.

was happening. During the trial, Bello admitted stepping over the dead bodies to steal the cash from the Lafayette Grill register before calling for help. He said, “I am basically a thief. But I’m not an assassin.” Bello identified Carter as the gunman, but admitted in cross-examination that he did not see the defendants’ faces.

The jurors believed Bello, and Carter and Artis were convicted on May 26, 1967, on all three murder charges and given life sentences. Artis’s sentence would be served concurrently, and two of Carter’s three would be served consecutively, as Carter appeared to be the leader. The prosecution never established a motive for the murders, which is not required for conviction in New Jersey. Nearly two months later, the New Jersey Supreme Court, stating that the trials were indeed fair, upheld the convictions. The American justice system completed the required process, and Carter and Artis faced several years in prison without parole.

The story seemed to end there until August 1972 when the Chicago Daily Defender published a United Press International story by John Needham claiming Carter’s innocence. Carter was working on an autobiography that would lay out his case for innocence. Two years later in September of 1974, Selwyn Raab, of the New York Times, wrote about two key witnesses in the murder case who recanted their testimony. One of the witnesses was Bello, who called the conviction a “grave mistake.” The other was Arthur D. Bradley, who said, “There’s no doubt Carter was framed.” Neither witness could be charged with committing perjury because the statute of limitations had expired.

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Carter and the New Jersey Public Defender pushed for a new trial in light of the recantations, but the Passaic County prosecutor resisted a new trial. Right around the time Raab’s story broke, Carter published *The Sixteenth Round*, the book he had been working on while in prison about the injustice he had faced. In spite of the prosecution’s opposition, a hearing was held to determine if Carter and Artis deserved a new trial. Fred W. Hogan, a senior investigator for the New Jersey Public Defender, said he had heard that Bello and Bradley had informally recanted their testimony.\(^\text{19}\)

On October 1, 1974, the New Jersey Public Defender’s Office filed a request for a new trial for Carter and Artis. One report in the *New York Times* stated that most of the evidence against Carter and Artis was circumstantial, with the recanting Bradley and Bello as the sole witnesses.\(^\text{20}\) The argument was that the two witnesses, who were also convicted criminals, were persuaded to testify against Carter and Artis in return for lighter sentences. For example, Raab reported that Bradley received a three-to-five-year sentence instead of the possible maximum term of 80 years.\(^\text{21}\)

During the hearing requesting a retrial, Bello and Bradley recanted their earlier testimony. Bradley said in a soft voice, “I didn’t see Mr. Carter or Mr. Artis that night.” When asked if his previous testimony was true, he said simply, “No, I lied.”\(^\text{22}\) The prosecution argued that there

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were no promises made to the witnesses. They theorized that the witnesses were changing their story to get back at the authorities for not reducing their sentences.\textsuperscript{23}

On December 11, 1974, Superior Court Judge Samuel A. Larner turned down the appeal for a new trial. Larner wrote in his decision: “The criminal minds of Bello and Bradley are so devious and amoral that it is impossible for a court to analyze their motivations and mental gyrations in order to arrive at a reason for their conduct.”\textsuperscript{24} Larner apparently did saw the injustice in using those “devious and amoral” minds to convict a defendant in the first place. The recanting witnesses insisted on their truthfulness. After hearing the results, Bradley said, “You tell the truth and they don’t believe you; you tell a lie in court and they do believe you.”\textsuperscript{25}

Nearly nine months after the decision, a group began campaigning for another look at Carter’s and Artis’s convictions. The group, called the New Jersey Defense Committee for Rubin Carter and John Artis, collected more than 15,000 signatures in support of the convicts. In September of 1975, lawyers for Carter and Artis again asked for a new trial, this time charging that the prosecution “engaged in massive suppression of evidence,” according to a report in the \textit{New York Times}.\textsuperscript{26} Along with national attention, the case was beginning to gather celebrity support. Fellow boxer Muhammad Ali, along with Academy Award-winning actress Ellen Burstyn and journalist Jimmy Breslin, attended a rally in support of Carter’s release.\textsuperscript{27} Bob Dylan’s song came out in November 1975 as a single, appeared on the album \textit{Desire} in January

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.


1976, and showed up in Dylan’s set list throughout the Rolling Thunder Revue tour, which culminated with a benefit concert in New York City called “Night of the Hurricane.”

Carter and Artis were granted a new trial in 1976. In the second trial, Bello again identified Carter and Artis as the men he saw at the bar that night. Bradley did not testify. Selwyn Raab, the *New York Times* reporter who had written more than 50 stories about the case, testified at the trial.28 The second trial was even more racially charged because the defense tried to establish a “racial revenge” motive. The theory was that the murder at the Lafayette Grill was revenge for the murder of a black bar owner earlier that night.29 The jury at the second trial found Carter and Artis guilty, based on the same shaky testimony as the first trial.

In August of 1982, the New Jersey Supreme court rejected an appeal for a third trial. In November of 1985, Federal District Court Judge Lee Sarokin overturned the convictions at the second trial. In the early part of 1988, the Passaic County prosecutor decided not to seek a third trial and the indictments were dropped.30 After a 22-year battle, Carter was finally free.

**The Song**

**Analysis of the Mainstream Press’s Coverage of Rubin Carter**

Dylan’s song highlights four important aspects of the case. They do not appear in neat sections, but are integrated and addressed throughout. Dylan describes the murder and arrest, the trial, race, and criminal justice in America. This section contains an analysis of how the press handles each of these four issues.

28 Wise, 139.

29 Wise, 129.

30 Wise, 208.
The first story appeared the day after the slaying and mentioned that Carter and Artis “are being questioned,” but that the authorities do not consider them as suspects. The next story appeared four months later, when Carter and Artis were arrested. This story states that the murders happened during a holdup, and that $200 was missing from the cash register. Apparently, a witness had come forward placing Carter and Artis at the scene of the crime. This story also commented that Carter has spent nearly one-third of his life in jail. The historically black newspaper the Chicago Defender ran a story with the headline, “Ex-Boxer Has Clouded Record.” The Washington Post ran a UPI story that stated simply, “Carter, 29, and John Artis, 21, allegedly burst into the Lafayette Bar and Grill June 17 and started shooting in an apparent attempt to stage a robbery and leave no witness.”

The description of the trial mostly came after the fact. The coverage of the trial was minimal. The New York Times reported briefly on the trial, only stating Bello’s testimony as the evidence against Carter and Artis. With no details from the courtroom, the New York Times reported that Carter and Artis were convicted. Much of the reporting on the trial came after Bello and Bradley recanted. After their recantations, the press applied more scrutiny to the trial.

The first story to mention the concept of race was nearly a year after the trial. On May 12,

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33 “Ex-Boxer Has Clouded Record,” Chicago Defender, October 29, 1966. Interestingly, the press reported the victims’ names incorrectly. The New York Times reported James Oliver as George Oliver in the first story about the killings, and then got both Oliver’s and Fred Nauyoks’s names wrong, calling both of them George in the article reporting Carter’s arrest. These misspellings recurred in all newspapers, probably a result of the wire service. The names did not appear correctly in print until Raab’s initial article in September 1974. One can imagine how the real George Oliver must have felt seeing his name in the paper.
1967, an article in the *Chicago Tribune* simple stated, “Carter, a Negro…” Aside from a picture, until that point, no one would have known that the accused were black men and the victims were white. This relatively innocuous reference was the only mention of race until the *Chicago Defender* ran Needham’s story on August, 12, 1972, which states, “The jurors were all white, as were the two key prosecution witnesses, both of whom were convicted thieves.”

Two years later on September 27, 1974, Selwyn Raab also mentions that the entire jury and both key witnesses were white, but also discusses the racial tension in Paterson, New Jersey, at the time. Raab describes the city as “a racially troubled, decaying industrial city….During the mid-nineteen sixties, the city was the scene of several racial disorders touched off by charges of discrimination and police brutality.” That same day, the *Chicago Tribune* reported in an Associated Press story that “former black boxing star Rubin (Hurricane) Carter” murdered “three white men.”

Interestingly, race enters the discussion in 1974, but was left out of the discussion in 1966. This goes against common wisdom, which would suggest that as the civil rights movement took root across the country, race would have become a less important aspect of the story in 1974 than in 1966. Yet, in 1966, no story mentioned race, and in 1974 nearly every story mentioned race. There are number of possible explanations for this paradox. First, it is possible that the times were so racially heated in 1966, especially in cities like Paterson, that the press felt that dealing with the race issue might be fanning the flames. Second, and more likely, is that as soon as Carter’s guilt came into question, the press was looking for an explanation to Carter’s framing.

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37 Needham.

38 Raab, “Murder Case Witnesses Recant 7 Years After 2 Got Life Terms.”

Once the soundness of the justice system was in question, race seemed to be the most plausible explanation. Carter himself suggested that he was framed because he participated in the civil rights movement. This theme recurred in the subsequent coverage of the case. While terms like “Negro,” which only appeared once in reference to Carter, disappeared from the newspapers, race did not.

John Needham’s *Chicago Defender* story was the first to suggest that Carter was not guilty. Five years after the trial and six years after the murder, Needham reported that it was not only Carter maintaining his innocence. Needham wrote, “First, one guard, then a second, escorting a visitor to the back of the prison, said without hesitation, ‘He was framed.’” Needham reported that the State Supreme Court ruled that any errors in the trial were “harmless.” Carter responded, “Of course, I fail to see how they can be harmless errors if I’m sitting up in jail.”

Raab’s story in the *New York Times*, which appeared two years after Needham’s, reported that Bello and Bradley recanted. The same day, the *Chicago Tribune* printed a story that quoted Bradley, “There’s no doubt Carter was framed.” When the witnesses recanted, they claimed that it was to reduce their own sentences. Raab quoted Bello who said Lieutenant DeSimone told him, “You’ll get 100 years in jail if you try and rearrange what happened that night.” One article in the *New York Times* reported that both witnesses had “made informal statements recanting their testimony.”

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41 Needham.
42 “Report Carter ‘framed.’”
43 Raab, “New Carter Trial Sought, But Prosecutor Objects.”
The press did not explicitly discuss the state of justice in America. However, in his *New York Times* review of Carter’s autobiography on October 15, 1974, Christopher Lehmann-Haupt seemed to side with Carter. He wrote:

> It needn’t concern us how Rubin Carter compares with writers like Eldridge Cleaver and George Jackson. Images don’t count. You can appear to be a bad guy and write a mediocre book and still be dead right about the evils of the system. And that makes ‘The Sixteenth Round’ seem very eloquent after all.”

Compared to the way the mainstream press stayed objective and cautious with how it reported the Emmett Till or Hattie Carroll cases, the coverage of Carter’s case seemed slanted. The press was clearly rooting for the Hurricane.

**Bob Dylan’s “Hurricane”**

Pistol shots ring out in the barroom night  
Enter Patty Valentine from the upper hall.  
She sees the bartender in a pool of blood,  
Cries out, "My God, they killed them all!"  
Here comes the story of the Hurricane,  
The man the authorities came to blame  
For somethin' that he never done.  
Put in a prison cell, but one time he could-a been  
The champion of the world.

Three bodies lyin' there does Patty see  
And another man named Bello, movin' around mysteriously.  
"I didn't do it," he says, and he throws up his hands  
"I was only robbin' the register, I hope you understand.  
I saw them leavin'," he says, and he stops  
"One of us had better call up the cops."  
And so Patty calls the cops  
And they arrive on the scene with their red lights flashin'  
In the hot New Jersey night.

Meanwhile, far away in another part of town  
Rubin Carter and a couple of friends are drivin' around.  
Number one contender for the middleweight crown  
Had no idea what kinda shit was about to go down  
When a cop pulled him over to the side of the road

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Just like the time before and the time before that.
In Paterson that's just the way things go.
If you're black you might as well not show up on the street
'Less you wanna draw the heat.

Alfred Bello had a partner and he had a rap for the cops.
Him and Arthur Dexter Bradley were just out prowlin' around
He said, "I saw two men runnin' out, they looked like middleweights
They jumped into a white car with out-of-state plates."
And Miss Patty Valentine just nodded her head.
Cop said, "Wait a minute, boys, this one's not dead"
So they took him to the infirmary
And though this man could hardly see
They told him that he could identify the guilty men.

Four in the mornin' and they haul Rubin in,
Take him to the hospital and they bring him upstairs.
The wounded man looks up through his one dyin' eye
Says, "Wha'd you bring him in here for? He ain't the guy!"
Yes, here's the story of the Hurricane,
The man the authorities came to blame
For somethin' that he never done.
Put in a prison cell, but one time he could-a been
The champion of the world.

Four months later, the ghettos are in flame,
Rubin's in South America, fightin' for his name
While Arthur Dexter Bradley's still in the robbery game
And the cops are puttin' the screws to him, lookin' for somebody to blame.
"Remember that murder that happened in a bar?"
"Remember you said you saw the getaway car?"
"You think you'd like to play ball with the law?"
"Think it might-a been that fighter that you saw runnin' that night?"
"Don't forget that you are white."

Arthur Dexter Bradley said, "I'm really not sure."
Cops said, "A poor boy like you could use a break
We got you for the motel job and we're talkin' to your friend Bello
Now you don't wanna have to go back to jail, be a nice fellow.
You'll be doin' society a favor.
That sonofabitch is brave and gettin' braver.
We want to put his ass in stir
We want to pin this triple murder on him
He ain't no Gentleman Jim."
Rubin could take a man out with just one punch
But he never did like to talk about it all that much.
It's my work, he'd say, and I do it for pay
And when it's over I'd just as soon go on my way
Up to some paradise
Where the trout streams flow and the air is nice
And ride a horse along a trail.
But then they took him to the jailhouse
Where they try to turn a man into a mouse.

All of Rubin's cards were marked in advance
The trial was a pig-circus, he never had a chance.
The judge made Rubin's witnesses drunkards from the slums
To the white folks who watched he was a revolutionary bum
And to the black folks he was just a crazy nigger.
No one doubted that he pulled the trigger.
And though they could not produce the gun,
The D.A. said he was the one who did the deed
And the all-white jury agreed.

Rubin Carter was falsely tried.
The crime was murder "one," guess who testified?
Bello and Bradley and they both baldly lied
And the newspapers, they all went along for the ride.
How can the life of such a man
Be in the palm of some fool's hand?
To see him obviously framed
Couldn't help but make me feel ashamed to live in a land
Where justice is a game.

Now all the criminals in their coats and their ties
Are free to drink martinis and watch the sun rise
While Rubin sits like Buddha in a ten-foot cell
An innocent man in a living hell.
That's the story of the Hurricane,
But it won't be over till they clear his name
And give him back the time he's done.
Put in a prison cell, but one time he could-a been
The champion of the world. 46

First, Dylan describes the murders. The song begins with the pistol shots in the bar. Neighbor Patty Valentine, an eyewitness whose testimony about the murderers' getaway car helped convict Carter and Artis, is the first character to appear in Dylan’s narrative. She shouts out: “My God, they killed them all!” The second verse introduces Alfred Bello who was “movin’ around mysteriously,” though he claims he was only taking money and didn’t kill the victims. The witnesses call the police, who arrive shortly after.

The third verse takes us “far away in another part of town” where Carter’s car is. Carter is pulled over by the police, but according to Dylan, that is not a rare thing in Paterson. He sings, “If you’re black you might as well not show up on the street / ‘Less you wanna draw the heat.”

The fourth verse introduces another witness, Arthur Dexter Bradley, who helped confirm that the perpetrators were two men who looked like middleweights and drove a white car with out-of-state plates. Valentine agreed. The police found another man who was not quite dead and was taken to the hospital. In the fifth verse, the police bring Rubin to the hospital. The wounded man says, “Wha’d you bring him in here for? He ain’t the guy!”

In the sixth verse, Dylan flashes forward four months to Carter’s arrest. Arthur Dexter Bradley, still in trouble for his own crimes, is pressured by the police to finger Carter as the murderer. According to Dylan, the police say:

Remember that murder that happened in a bar?
Remember you said you saw the getaway car?
You think you’d like to play ball with the law?
Think it might-a been that fighter that you saw runnin’ that night?
Don’t forget that you are white.

Clearly, the racist cops Dylan portrays expect Bradley to be just as racist.

In the seventh verse, Bradley speaks back to the police saying, “I’m not really sure.” The police mention that they could arrest him for a robbery and have already talked to his friend
Bello. They say, “Now you don’t want have to go back to jail, be a nice fellow.” The police then mention that Carter is getting too brave and needs to be put in jail.

During the eighth verse, Dylan tells us shows how innocent Carter really is. Even though fighting was Rubin’s day job, he’d rather go on his way “up to some paradise / where the trout streams flow and the air is nice and ride a horse a long a trail.” Sounds wonderful, but instead, Carter is thrown in the jailhouse, “where they try to turn a man into a mouse.” In this verse, Dylan describes Carter as completely innocent, much like Carter’s autobiography puts him in the role of the ultimate victim. Every time Carter was in trouble during his youth, he was either framed or misunderstood. But Carter learned to fight in jail as a youth, locked up for stabbing a man. Carter wrote in his autobiography that the man was a child molester and he stabbed him in self defense. Dylan apparently bought into Carter’s story of being a life-long victim.

In the ninth verse, Dylan describes the trial as a “pig-circus,” echoing the rhetoric of radical activists like George Jackson and the Black Panthers. Although the prosecution never found the murder weapon, Dylan sings that the District Attorney said Carter was guilty, and the all white jury agreed. In a confusing segment of the song, Dylan sings:

The judge made Rubin’s witnesses drunkards from the slums
To the white folks who watched he was a revolutionary bum
To the black folks he was just a crazy nigger
No one doubted that he pulled the trigger.

Here Dylan correctly assumes that black people and white people would interpret the trial and the defendants in different ways. However, Dylan implies that black people saw Carter as a lunatic who misrepresented the race. It is unclear where Dylan got this interpretation.

In the tenth verse, Dylan admits that the trial was a farce. He sings, “The crime was murder ‘one,’ guess who testified? Bello and Bradley and they both baldly lied.” Dylan accuses the newspapers of going “along for the ride.” As discussed in the chapter on Hattie Carroll, a key
component of the underground press is an opposition to the mainstream media. In this verse, Dylan clearly places his narrative in opposition to how the press covered the case.

Finally, Dylan addresses the issue of justice in our country. He asks a profound question: “How can the life of such a man / Be in the palm of some fool’s hand?” This question is the basis of Carter’s appeal. Regardless of the circumstantial evidence and the proposed alibis, Carter’s fate was sealed by two criminals. They may have told the truth when they identified Carter. They may have told the truth when they said that they lied to the jury. The bottom line is that these men really should not be trusted, especially should not be trusted with the fate of another man. Dylan finishes the verse, “To see him obviously framed / Couldn't help but make me feel ashamed to live in a land / Where justice is a game?”

At the end of Dylan’s first so-called protest song, “The Death of Emmett Till,” Dylan makes a plea to his listeners to help make this “great land of ours” better. A little more than a decade later, Dylan concedes that that might never happen. Carter was framed because he was black, he argues. Dylan is not proud and no longer hopeful. This land is not great and probably won’t get better. Instead, Dylan is just ashamed.

The final verse provides a quick picture of criminals in coats and ties free to drink martinis, while Carter “sits like Buddha in a ten-foot cell / An innocent man in a living hell.” But Dylan promises that he won’t quit until Carter’s name is cleared and his time is given back. The irony is that after Carter’s case was reopened, Dylan stopped playing the song and outwardly supporting the cause, even after Carter was convicted a second time.

Dylan’s conclusion is unmistakable. He provided a dramatic retelling of the events and a slightly slanted summary the case. Indeed, Carter and Artis were convicted largely on the testimony of two convicted criminals, both of whom at one time recanted their testimony. One
doesn’t need to be a bleeding-heart liberal to recognize the flaws in the case, especially as presented by Dylan.

**Music as Literary Journalism**

After reading *The Sixteenth Round* and meeting Carter in prison in June of 1975, Dylan dedicated himself to the case of Rubin “Hurricane” Carter. When Carter and Artis were released on bail before their retrial in March of 1976, Dylan stopped playing the song.\(^{47}\) The retrial came only seven weeks after Dylan and his colleagues played “Night of the Hurricane II,” a follow up to the New York benefit concert in the Houston Astrodome.

It is impossible to know if Dylan’s song and all the public support helped Carter’s case. The publicity must have put added pressure on the courts to retry the accused and on the prosecution to prove Carter’s guilt. The recantations of the key witnesses, Dylan’s song, celebrity endorsements, and Carter’s autobiography combined to create a perception in favor of Carter’s case. Carter apparently appreciated Dylan’s work. He said, “Bob Dylan…spent hundreds and thousands of hours and millions of dollars to get one man back what he never should have lost in the first place.”\(^{48}\) Dylan’s song may have worked as a form of advocacy, but it is not clear what impact it had on the case.

What is clear is that Dylan’s song served as a form of journalism. Sounes writes, “[The song] was also an excellent piece of journalism, condensing a complex case—involving several characters and conflicting testimony—into eight minutes.”\(^{49}\) Sounes, clearly enough of a Dylan fan to write a comprehensive biography, seems slightly uncritical of Dylan’s reporting, only valuing the brevity of journalism. Journalists should aspire to higher goals, such as accuracy,

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\(^{48}\) Quoted in McKeen, 63.

\(^{49}\) Sounes, 288.
objectivity, and supporting claims with evidence and sources. Conciseness is just one of the qualities that make a good journalist. Dylan was shaky on certain details. His sources are not identified. He is obviously advocating for a particular view of the facts. Dylan appears to ignore many of the ideals of journalism, but that’s because he wasn’t trying to do journalism.

If his song is journalism, it more closely represents the journalism found in the “New Journalism” of writers like Tom Wolfe and Hunter S. Thompson. In his collection of literary journalism *The New Journalism*, Tom Wolfe argues that new or narrative journalism uses four important devices that separate it from traditional journalism: scene-by-scene constructions, the use of dialogue, third-person point of view, and status details. To some extent, Bob Dylan’s “Hurricane” makes use of all four of those devices.

The first line of the song describes the murder scene. By the third verse, Dylan jumps to the next scene, where Carter and his friends were driving “far away in another part of town.” In the fifth verse, Dylan takes the listener to the hospital room where Marins looked at Carter and Artis and flatly said that these two aren’t the murderers. The sixth and seventh verses take place when Carter is fighting his professional fight in South America, a 10-round loss. The police are getting Bello and Bradley to place Carter and Artis falsely at the scene of the crime. The police make threats and promises. Before the song is over, Dylan takes the listener to the courthouse and the prison.

Dylan uses quotations in six of the 11 verses in the song. In most cases, the quotations don’t appear as “dialogue,” where people are talking back and forth, but in each case, the speaker and the listener are clear. According to http://www.bobdylan.com, Dylan’s official Web site, the lines that represent quotations are in direct quotes. While that wouldn’t be heard in the purely

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musical version, quotation marks are usually reserved for direct, word-for-word quotations in journalism. The line between fact and fiction in Dylan’s song gets blurry.

The third device is also one of the more controversial ones. Wolfe describes third-person point of view as “the technique of presenting every scene to the reader through the eyes of a particular character.” 51 Critics of Wolfe and his colleagues argue that a journalist can never know what a person is thinking, and therefore, should never present their work as “third-person” narration. Wolfe argues in New Journalism, that the trick to this devices is to interview the subject to find out what he or she was thinking. In other words, if you can’t tell it in third-person point of view, you didn’t ask the right questions. Dylan made little use of third-person point of view, but he certainly shows to be inside Carter’s brain in the verse where Dylan describes Carter’s personality and supposed aversion to fighting. Dylan didn’t meet Carter until about a month after the song had been released. Most likely, Dylan’s “access” to Carter’s brain came from his autobiography.

The final device is status details, the recording of as many details about the characters as possible to reveal people’s status life, which is, as Wolfe describes it, “the entire pattern of behavior and possessions through which people express their position in the world or what they think it is or what they hope it to be.” 52 Dylan is short on these, as could be expected from the limited space of a song. He does, however, describe the behavior of key witnesses Bello, Bradley, and Valentine with subtle detail. Bello was “moving mysteriously,” Bradley was “on the prowl,” and Valentine simply nodded when asked if she confirmed the testimony. Each of those details revealed something about the “status life.” Bradley and Bello were obviously up to

51 Ibid., 32.

52 Ibid.
no good. And Valentine quietly, almost passively, allowed Carter’s wrongful arrest and conviction.

Another aspect of Dylan’s reporting was his use of vulgar language. While “George Jackson” also used some of this language, Dylan rarely ever used that language in his lyrics. Certainly, never one to shy away from telling it like it is, Dylan rarely recorded epithets in his songs. However, this song contains “shit,” “sonofabitch,” and “ass.” Using terms like that adds to the urgent feeling of the song. It is almost as if Dylan is saying, “Take this seriously. I don’t usually talk this way.” The language adds to the cinematic, literary, or almost fictive feel of the song.

In 1999 and 2000, the story of the Hurricane experienced somewhat of a rebirth. Two full-length treatments of his case appeared in books, and Denzel Washington played Carter in an Oscar-nominated role in Norman Jewison’s “The Hurricane.” Prior to that, Dylan’s version was probably the most widely recognized narrative of the case. As in the cases of Emmett Till and Hattie Carroll, Dylan’s popular version had the staying power and artistic form to create a compelling, memorable, and lasting interpretation of the facts.

Did Rubin Carter and John Artis kill those people in the Lafayette Bar and Grill that night? It seems doubtful. Dylan certainly thinks they were innocent. However, online the debate rages on. Web sites titled, “The Truth about Rubin Carter,” or “Rubin Carter: The Other Side of the Story,” are dedicated to proving Carter’s guilt. Many hold to the fact that Carter was convicted twice, but never acquitted. A online discussion of song lyrics includes some interesting comments by listeners. For example, one poster wrote:

Bottom line: A good song that ultimately raised money to free a triple murderer. Carter is a free man today because of misguided do gooding and the popularity of Bob Dylan at the time. I love Dylans music but the line in the song about justice being a game really was true in this case...just not the way most people thought at
the time. Do your own homework friends...dont let others do it for you..even if they are great singer songwriters.⁵³

This particular post was missing more than a few apostrophes. One could argue that Dylan’s song helped Carter get a retrial in 1976, but it is a stretch to suggest that Dylan’s song contributed to Carter’s release. But what this post points out is that many people get their information from songwriters. But the post accurately points out that Dylan is a songwriter, not a trained journalist. In fact, his first version of “Hurricane” confused Bello and Bradley and accused one of them of stealing money from the bodies instead of the register.⁵⁴

Regardless of Carter’s guilt or innocence, Dylan’s song functions as a form of literary journalism, historical documentation, and ultimately, cultural memory. The truth of the case may never be known, but Dylan’s song documents one side of the complicated argument. And that perspective is preserved in the grooves of long-playing records, the one’s and zero’s of CDs, and more recently, iPods, the miniature music libraries that so many carry everywhere they go. The version recorded in newspapers and saved in microfilm in university libraries is not the version that lasts. Dylan’s version remains.

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⁵⁴ Hirsch, 122-123.
This is a true story. It comes from the newspapers. Nothing in this story’s been changed except the words.

—Bob Dylan, before performing “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll” ¹

These four songs compose an important statement, not just from Dylan or about Dylan, but about the way we tell and remember stories. Each of these songs argues for the civil rights movement, in one way or another. Each of these songs points to moments in history where the American justice system didn’t live up to its own constitutional promises. According to Dylan, all men (and women) were not treated equally. Justice was not blind, but rather was highly tuned in to color. These narratives pointed to institutional prejudice and racism.

But these songs were not addressed to blacks. Henry Hampton’s *Eyes on the Prize*, an awarding-winning documentary of the civil rights movement, barely mentioned musicians like Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and Pete Seeger. Dylan’s “Blowin’ in the Wind” appeared briefly in the soundtrack. Two comprehensive histories of the civil rights movement in Mississippi, John Dittmer’s *Local People* and Charles Payne’s *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, barely mention these musical northern activists. To the black people in Mississippi and Alabama, who were fighting police dogs and fire houses to get basic constitutionally guaranteed voting rights, Dylan’s music didn’t mean that much.

But in his biography of Dylan, *Down the Highway*, Howard Sounes writes, “Bob Dylan is an artist of almost unrivaled importance in modern, popular music.”² Dylan didn’t reach the black people in the South because he wasn’t trying to reach them. His audience was white liberals in the Northeast, initially, and then broader to spread to like-minded people across the

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country. In “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll,” he explicitly addresses an audience, “You who philosophize disgrace and criticize all fears.” These are liberals who are willing to crying, shout, and make the right noise, but for the wrong reason. Dylan was trying to reach those who agreed with him, but needed a little more motivation.

Did it work? Anecdotally, it did. In a personal interview, a long-time Bob Dylan fan, who was promised anonymity, said that Dylan’s music opened his eyes to the world around him, including social justice, the Vietnam War, and civil rights. This fan, who is only a few years younger than Dylan, said, “And Dylan just kind of brought or articulated all that in a way that I never heard before.” The political music Dylan wrote changed this man’s worldview.

Another piece of evidence is the Chicago Defender’s United Press International story about the three Northwestern University students, one from Illinois, one from Ohio, and one from Minnesota, who started a fundraiser for Hattie Carroll’s children after hearing Dylan’s song.3 Those motherless children needed help. And it wasn’t a story in the New York Times or Baltimore Sun that moved those young men to action. Those newspaper clippings were long gone. It was a messy-headed, nasally voiced singer and songwriter in New York City who gave that story the salience needed to move people to action. In this case, Dylan’s music works like journalism. The rest of this chapter looks at how Dylan wrote his news “ledes,” the way he used frames, the issue of truth in his journalism, and some implications for the future of journalism.

A Look at Dylan’s News Ledes

One of the most important parts of a news story is the lede. In a hard news story, the summary lede is supposed to provide all the important details for a particular story. In his

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reporting textbook, Tim Harrower calls it the five W’s: who, what, when, where, and why. In a soft or feature news story, the lede is designed to draw people into the story and get them to read the next paragraph.

Each of Dylan’s songs uses a different technique to start the story. And each lede shows Dylan’s growing sophistication in his songwriting, as each is more complex, dramatic, and artful than the next. In “The Death of Emmett Till,” Dylan begins with a classic “where” lede, a lede with the “where” as the most important part of the sentence. Dylan sings, “Twas down in Mississippi not so long ago / When a young boy from Chicago town stepped through a southern door.” Dylan doesn’t even mention that Till was killed until the end of the third verse. It’s hard to imagine a news story about a murder that took three paragraphs to get to the “news” that someone had been killed. But Dylan didn’t need to put the “news” in the lede because Till’s death wasn’t news. He had been dead for seven years. Dylan, it appears, had another goal.

This line can be contrasted with “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll,” where Dylan used a nearly classic “summary lede” that gets the five W’s right where they need to be: “William Zanzinger killed poor Hattie Carroll / With a cane that he twirled around his diamond ring finger / At a Baltimore hotel society gath’rin’.” Dylan gets the who, what, and where concisely in his first three lines. He ignores the journalistic practice of upholding America’s principle of innocent until proven guilty and convicts Zantzinger before a trial, but Dylan’s resembles what a newspaper might print. Again, Dylan’s goal wasn’t to respect Zantzinger’s constitutional rights, but to point out the systematic injustice.

In “George Jackson,” Dylan uses more of a soft or feature news lede by backing into the story. The song begins in Dylan’s bed, of all places, where he was crying about the tragic death.

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He sings, “I woke up this mornin’, / There were tears in my bed. / They killed a man I really loved / Shot him through the head.” This lede is closer to what Harrower calls a “blind lede,” where the an important piece of information is held from the reader. Dylan doesn’t tell who died until the chorus informs us that “they” killed George Jackson. Who “they” are never becomes clear. In this case, Dylan’s song was more a tribute or, as argued above, an obituary than a news story. The news was not the death. The news was highlighting the importance of the man’s life.

Finally, in “Hurricane,” Dylan provides his most dramatic introduction. The imagery is almost cinematic. Dylan begins, “Pistol shots ring out in the barroom night / Enter Patty Valentine from the upper hall. / She sees the bartender in a pool of blood, / Cries out, ‘My God, they killed them all!’” Harrower might categorize this as an anecdotal or startling statement lede. The rest of the songs, as discussed above, followed the cinematic style of literary journalism. In each song, the lede served a different purpose, coinciding with the goal of the song. Dylan’s songwriting borrows from the techniques of hard news, feature writing, and literary journalism.

**The Framing of Dylan’s News**

Robert Entman writes that the way the media frame an event, issue, or story makes some elements of that story salient, defined as “noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to the audience.” Frames determine “what people notice and how they understand and remember a problem.” Entman argues that journalists who allow their reporting to “frame” the story prevent “most audience members from making a balanced assessment of a situation.” Here, Entman

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6 Ibid., 54.

7 Ibid., 56.
argues that a better educated journalist would be able to avoid biased reporting and be better able to “construct news that makes equally salient…two or more interpretations of problems.”

Years earlier, Kenneth Burke pointed out that Entman’s suggestion is unattainable. He argued that language works to filter reality and ultimately distort reality. Any use of language results in a frame or a particular way to interpret the information. Unsophisticated reporters aren’t really the problem. The equivocal nature of language is the problem, and that’s probably not going away.

Bob Dylan is not immune. Each of his songs suggests a particular way to interpret the event. Dylan comes down hard on the American criminal justice system. In “The Death of Emmett Till,” he called the verdict by the jury in the Mississippi Delta a crime and unjust, a not-so-subtle jab at the failure of the courts to deliver justice. His hopeful conclusion is similar to the conclusion Mamie Bradley, Till’s mother, made in a newspaper story that appeared in eight installments in the Chicago Defender between February 27 and March 8, 1956, in the Chicago Defender. She said she hopes the outcome of the case is to improve racial relations, not worsen them.

The frame comes earlier in “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll.” Dylan suggests a particular interpretation in the first line of the song. Zantzinger killed her, plain and simple. But in this song, Dylan is careful not to frame Zantzinger as society’s real problem. He’s too small and insignificant. Instead, Dylan frames the story in terms of what the American justice system

8 Ibid., 57.


values. It’s white versus black, rich versus poor. The complicating details of the trial aren’t part of the picture in Dylan’s song.

While “George Jackson” lacks the details and drama the other songs do, Dylan still frames the narrative as white against black. Dylan starts consecutive verses with “Authorities, they hated him,” and “Prison guards, they cursed him.” The frame is clearest by the end. Those with power (read: white, rich men) are the prison guards. And those without power (read: poor, black men) will always be the prisoners.

In “Hurricane,” Dylan’s frame is even more explicit, but it took three verses for Dylan to sing, “If you’re black you might as well not show up on the street.” Carter was arrested, tried, convicted, and sentenced for one thing, the color of his skin. Dylan fits each of these four stories neatly into one frame: The American criminal justice system is stacked against black people in favor of white people. Entman might argue that a better journalist, more aware of how he was being manipulated, would have avoided these slanted frames. Burke, on the other hand, might argue that there is nothing Dylan could have done to avoid the bias and distortion that comes from using language to describe reality.

**Bob Dylan, Journalism, the Truth**

Kathy Roberts Forde’s *Literary Journalism on Trial* examined the telling case between psychologist Jeffrey Masson and *New Yorker* writer Janet Malcolm. At the center of the dispute were several potentially defamatory quotations that appeared in Malcolm’s profile of the Freudian psychoanalyst. Masson argued that he never spoke those quotations, and Malcolm, in turn, argued that he did. Several of the quotations that Masson originally claimed were false appeared on tape. Some, however, did not appear on either a taped interview or in Malcolm’s

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notes. Those were the ones that ended up in front of the Supreme Court to determine if Malcolm libeled Masson. The charge was not that Malcolm made false assertions about Masson, but that she fabricated defamatory quotes. There can only be libel if the story contains false information. At the core, the case was about whether or not Masson said what Malcolm said he did.

James W. Carey argued that oftentimes people are working under the wrong understanding of communication in the first place. In his *Communication as Culture*, he argues that communication is often thought of as the transmission model, where a sender sends a message to a receiver.\(^\text{12}\) Rather than looking at communication that way, Carey argues that we need to view the ritual model of communication. Carey wrote, “Communication is a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed.”\(^\text{13}\) What Dylan sang about William Zantzinger wasn’t really reality. But as Carey’s observation shows, it became reality. Zantzinger was a jerk, but he probably wasn’t a murderer. The reality for those who only knew him through the song is that he was.

All of this returns to the fact that reality is, to a certain extent, unknowable, and certainly unprintable in a daily newspaper. For example, when a reporter writes about an event, he or she doesn’t simply witness the event, ask a few questions, and completely understand that event. There are an infinite numbers of ways to view the event and interpret the meaning. And the medium of language is inadequate to capture the full meaning. And the limited size of a news hole wouldn’t allow room for the entire story, if it could be captured in words.

To borrow an example from University of Florida history professor Robert Hatch, when a car accident happens, every witness will interpret the event in a unique way. The drivers

\(^\text{12}\) James W. Carey, *Communication as Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 15

\(^\text{13}\) Ibid., 23.
involved with have an important way to tell the story, as would the medical examiner trying to evaluate the injuries, the police investigators trying to determine criminal charges, the insurance company trying to determine liability, a physicist trying to understand the mechanical forces, and the shopkeeper whose business was disrupted by the stalled traffic. So what happened and what it means, the “truth” of matter, is tied up entirely in perspective.

Conversely, in the hypothetical accident, some things did happen and some things did not. Regardless of perspective, the gender of the drivers will not change. Either an animal was involved or not. Facts are facts. But reality is messy and, to a certain extent, unknowable.

So in the 1960s, a group of young newspaper writers began trying to write news in a way that they thought got closer to that unknowable, unprintable reality. The New Journalists, not necessarily led by, but spoken for by Tom Wolfe, started telling stories in their reports. Writers like Wolfe, Truman Capote, Gay Talese, and Jimmy Breslin started incorporating the techniques of fiction into their nonfiction. The goal, Wolfe said in the first few chapters of *The New Journalism*, was to elevate journalism to the level of the novel.14

Among others, John Hersey, considered by many to be the father of literary journalism with his astounding recreation of the atomic attack on Hiroshima, took issue with some of Wolfe’s techniques.15 First, the idea that a journalist can get into someone else’s head to provide third-person point of view seemed dangerous to Hersey. Wolfe said the best way to find out how a person was thinking at a particular time is to ask them. That doesn’t always happen, Hersey says. As an example, he pointed to Woodward’s book on the Supreme Court, *The Brethren*. When one member of the Supreme Court declined to participate in the book, the authors were

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still able to provide insight into the justice’s motivation. How could this be done, Hersey asks, outside of fabrication?

Hersey doesn’t end his accusation of fabrication there. Hersey takes even more issue with the reconstruction of dialogue. It is difficult indeed to read Capote’s *In Cold Blood* without wondering how he knew all that he wrote about. He reconstructed conversations that occurred between people who died before he could ever ask them what they said. Again, Hersey wonders if these quotations were simply fabricated. Hersey points to several examples in Norman Mailer’s *The Executioner’s Song* where the voice that appears as a quotation in Mailer’s text didn’t seem to match the voice found in recorded interviews. Hersey has a deep respect for quotation marks. The reader should be confident that anything the journalist puts between quotation marks was spoken, but Hersey seems unsure that that is what the new journalists did. That is one of the questions the court system wrestled with during the dispute between Masson and Malcolm. Hersey makes a distinction between the distortion that happens when writers subtract from the facts and the distortion that happens when writers add to the facts.

No doubt Dylan’s song distorted the “Truth” by what Hersey would call “subtraction.” He left out important details, especially the testimony that stated that Carroll’s health condition may have led to her death the next morning anyway, with or without Zantzinger’s cane. Dylan most likely committed the distortion of “addition.” He presents a crazed, murderous Zantzinger rather than a drunk, rude one. And if Zantzinger decided to sue for libel, he might have won.

Should Dylan be held to the standard of the *New York Times*? Or *The New Yorker*? Or *Esquire*? Certainly not. He was an artist, not a journalist. But it would probably be accurate to say that Dylan was just as powerful as those news organizations. Dylan’s versions of Emmett Till’s lynching, Hattie Carroll’s death, George Jackson’s supposed assassination, or Rubin
Carter’s trial resonate longer and deeper than the traditional reporting. That is the power of song, of art. It would be a shame for singers, filmmakers, novelists, and artists to not say what needed to be said for fear political, legal, or economic retribution.

Larry David Smith argues that Dylan was not trying to do journalism. He writes, “‘Hurricane’ says very little about boxer Rubin Carter, in favor of scenic embellishments that unveil the ludicrous qualities of the prosecution and the hideous consequences of the racism.” 16

Dylan was making an argument. Smith wrote an interesting paragraph at the close of his essay on Dylan’s music:

For Dylan, who cares if he misrepresents his arrival in New York or the facts surrounding Hattie Carroll’s death or the details pertaining to Reuben [sic] Carter’s case or Joey Gallo’s biography or his marriage (as if that were anybody’s business!) or any aspect of American History? Dylan is not a dialectical narrator attempting to separate fact from fiction for an audience, as in the cases of journalists or expert commentators (supposedly, even teachers). He is not a rhetorical narrator working to persuade some audience of the merits of some specific case (like a lawyer, preacher, or salesperson). He is a poetic narrator, free to express himself as he wishes. If anyone looks to Dylan to separate fact from fiction or to persuade them [sic] toward a particular end, that individual is using the work in a fashion inconsistent with its creation. 17

Misspellings and grammatical errors aside, there is some truth to Smith’s claims. Dylan had little intention of doing “journalism.” He was a songwriter looking for material to write about. He was an activist, at times, looking for stories to demonstrate the need to act and the obligation to create changes. He was an artist, looking for ways to express himself. He was not a historian, journalist, or teacher.

While Smith’s claim is fair to Dylan, it is unfair to the people who appear in Dylan’s songs. Patty Valentine was potentially slandered in “Hurricane.” In “The Lonesome Death of

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16 Larry David Smith, Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, and American Song (Westport Connecticut: Praeger, 2002), 73.

17 Smith, 119-120.
Hattie Carroll,” William Zantzinger is fully demonized by Dylan, when the case was much more complex than Dylan let on. Poetry or not, Dylan must have a responsibility to be honest. The intentions of the author become moot once the audience acts on the potentially false information. Dylan certainly should not be the final word on any topic, though he can serve as the first word. One hopes that Dylan sheds light on topics like racism, injustice, or war, but that listeners seek further information upon which to base their decisions, assumptions, and actions. Certainly, poets should not be immune to libel. When writing about real people, poetic license is less liberating.

The saga between Masson and Malcolm, as discussed in Forde’s analysis, pointed to some flaws in the American legal system and some of the conundrums created by postmodernist observations. But most importantly, it pointed to the need to continue to write good journalism based on good reporting, honest storytelling, and fair representation. Any time the press is accused of inaccuracy, fabrication, or plagiarism, the press loses. Any time the press is silenced, democracy loses. The more voices, the better. And the artistic voice, whether it appears as a feature in the New York Times, the New Yorker, or as ones and zeros inside an iPod, should be loud and clear in that chorus.

Bob Dylan’s music may not have been the best examples of good journalism. This dissertation pointed out many of the “flaws” in Dylan’s reporting: he exaggerated, ignored important facts, got facts wrong, wrote from a biased perspective, and eschewed the principles of good journalism. The important thing is not what he said, but what we remember. If Dylan’s version of a story becomes the “official” one, the one people remember, what can we learn?

**Keeping the “Old” in New Media**

The journalism industry is in the middle of a transformation. The Internet is changing how people get their news, who creates it, and how media organizations can stay financially viable.
The end result of this shake-up is still unclear. The term new media is not a static term. At one point, the printing press was considered “new” media. What was studied as new media five years ago is not new anymore. What will be studied as new media in five years hasn’t been invented yet. But the old part of new media will last: good story telling. Journalism is best when it tells stories well. While Dylan made his mistakes, no doubt his stories were well told, memorable, artistic, and lasting. Newspapers that survive the crisis, like small-town weeklies, are papers that offer their audience something.

Dylan’s journalism lasted because his songs offered something. Yes, he ignored the long-standing facets of traditional journalism, designed to protect both the news organization from criticism and the consumer from being misled. Yes, he got some important things wrong and wrote in black and white when gray was appropriate. He probably got Emmett Till’s story right, but quite likely he exaggerated Carroll’s caning, Jackson may or may not have been assassinated, and many people think “Hurricane” was designed to free a murderer. Dylan’s journalism wasn’t perfect.

But it was effective. Dylan’s version of the story reach millions of people and has been reproduced on vinyl records, cassette tapes, compact discs, and MP3 players. As far as journalism is concerned, Dylan has been well distributed. When the dust settles on the journalism industry and people in both the industry and the academy start to analyze the products, I wonder if the journalism will look more like what Bob Dylan did and less like what we have come to know as the news industry. And I tend to think the readers will be better off for it.

**Final thoughts**

This dissertation makes a comparison between what artists and songwriters do and what journalists and historians do, an unfair comparison at best and an invalid one at worst. Their
goals, audiences, norms, and expectations are completely different. The point of my dissertation was not to say that Dylan was a bad journalist because he wasn’t objective. He wasn’t trying to be a journalist, and he wasn’t try to be objective. A perfunctory glance on the literature of objectivity shows how disputed the concept is, even among journalists. Some say it is necessary; others say it is impossible. Regardless, that isn’t the role of the artist.

At the defense of this dissertation, one of my professor challenged my argument that Dylan works as a journalist, arguing that he was an artist. Artists shouldn’t be held to the standards of journalism. For example, Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica*, which depicts the bombing of Guernica, Basque Country during the Spanish Civil War, was not meant to be a historical depiction of the event, but an provocative way of remembering what happened. The statement the artist makes is not about what happened, but about what it means. Picasso wasn’t trying to be “objective,” probably didn’t think in those terms, and shouldn’t be criticized for not being objective. His presentation of the battle wasn’t “factually accurate,” one of my major critiques of Dylan’s journalism.

But there is a difference between what Dylan did as a songwriter and what Picasso did as an artist or what Orwell did is a novelist. Dylan used real names, locations, and events. Does Dylan have any responsibility to Zantzinger? Or the people of Mississippi? Or the supposed eye witnesses at Carter’s trial? His songs don’t come with any disclaimer: This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to real people is purely coincidental. For the listener, what Dylan said about these events is possibly taken as factual, rather than conceptual. The question that this dissertation begs, a question that is probably unanswerable, is what the listeners thought. Do listeners interpret Dylan’s work like they do Picasso’s? Or do they interpret it like they do a report in the *New York Times*?
Despite the report in the *New Yorker* after Zantzinger’s death in 2009 that Dylan was regretful of misrepresenting the Zantzinger, Dylan continues to perform the song live, appearing as recently as March 13, 2010, only two weeks prior to the date I’m writing. Since 2000, Dylan has played the song at concerts 93 times. I have no knowledge of Dylan changing the lyrics. If he regretted his version, it hasn’t stopped him from singing the song. (Interestingly, Dylan hasn’t performed “The Death of Emmett Till,” “George Jackson,” or “Hurricane” in the 10 years reported at [http://www.boblinks.com](http://www.boblinks.com). I think all three of those songs have fallen out of Dylan’s repertoire.)

Ultimately, this dissertation should not be read as me saying Dylan was a bad journalist. To the contrary, I hope to point out that Dylan was a good journalist. He took complicate narratives, distilled them down to their most essential points, and delivered them to his audience in a compelling, memorable, and even artistic way. That sounds like what good journalists do. And of course the lasting nature of his work, like some of the remarkable journalism that communications scholars still use as examples, is something many journalists aspire to, but few achieve. In many ways, Dylan’s music resembles striking journalism.

But I still think we can be critical of artists if they get the facts wrong, just like we can be critical of Oliver Stone’s historically inaccurate depiction of John F. Kennedy’s assassination. Many people think of the assassination in terms of Stone’s version. The film is filled with holes and logical fallacies, but it was entertaining and engaging, just like Dylan’s music. Is it fair for scholars and critics to point out the distortions, fallacies, and inaccuracies and still respect the work as artful storytelling? I certainly hope so.

It would be unfair to Dylan to condemn his songs for historical inaccuracies or to prosecute him for libelous misstatements. I would never want to silence an important voice like Dylan’s. But it would be equally unfair to be uncritical of his work, writing off inaccuracies as artistic license. Dylan’s version of these events can potentially become a dominant narrative, and scholars and critics owe it to the individuals who appear in these songs and the public who believes in these songs to be critical of Dylan’s work.
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