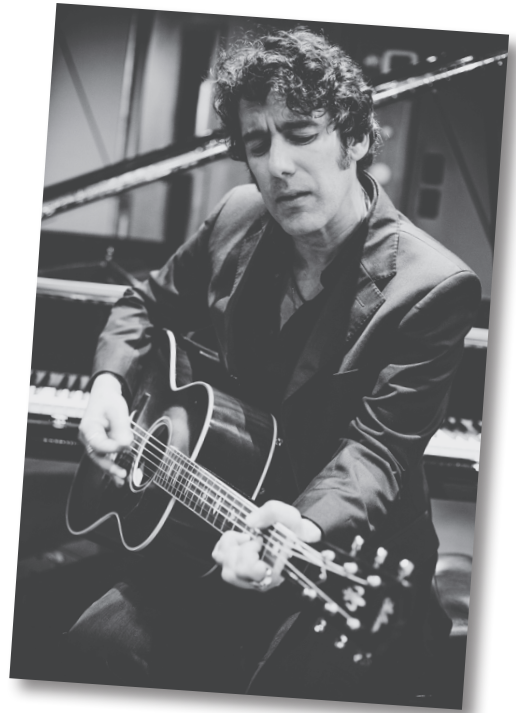


A Chat with

Jeff Slate

Interview by *Derek Barker*



On the day that Sony announced **“More Blood, More Tracks”** I talked with Jeff Slate, the writer of the liner notes for the upcoming, long-awaited box set. Jeff, a New York City-based songwriter and journalist who has written about music and culture for *Esquire* magazine since 2013, previously contributed liner notes to amongst others the 50th anniversary reissue of The Beatles’ **“Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band”**, albums by the Small Faces, Shawn Colvin, and the STAX Records 60th anniversary reissue series. Jeff is an avid Dylan collector who has an encyclopaedic knowledge of all things The Beatles, Bob Dylan and Monty Python.

DB: Jeff, first off, can you tell me how you got this gig?

JS: This has been in the works for a very long time. I have had a relationship with Dylan’s office now for a few years, because I write about him regularly for *Esquire* and other places, and it just developed for there. I did a fairly major piece on his 75th birthday, and another one when he returned to Forest Hills Stadium in 2016. I also wrote a piece about the Gospel Years box, and a fairly substantial piece about the way The Beatles’ and Bob Dylan’s music, in particular, was used in the Ken Burns film about the Vietnam War; these were all for *Esquire*.

Anyway, this **“Blood On The Tracks”** project had been on my radar for a while and I certainly wasn’t above dropping a hint, “Boy that would be a good one to do” (laughs), you know, as you do. When the call finally did come, and it was a relatively quick turnaround, you get over the enormity and excitement of it pretty quickly. It’s like, OK there’s a job to do here. I have to listen to 80-100 songs that I’ve never heard before. I had heard samplings of them as the box was being thought about, but I had never been able to sit down and listen to them chronologically and try to think about what the story was, obviously. So I had to absorb all that information, and mostly forget about everything I thought I knew about the album, speak to some of the folks involved, and then write the story, as I saw it.

DB: This album has been on the back burner for a very long time. It was advertised years ago as being the next release, which I assume was a mistake?

JS: Well, yes, I think part of that was, if you look at previous **“Bootleg Series”** releases, over the last few years, they all tell a story. **“The Cutting Edge”** told a very definitive story of that period, and **“Trouble No More”** rewrote history...

DB: **“Another Self Portrait”**.

JS: Very much so. And so I think just to put the music out was not enough. They wanted to have a very clear story to tell and I think it wasn’t obvious until we, as a team, started to listen to everything in chronological order. We then realized, ‘Wow, he was making an acoustic album.’ Forget about the New York sessions with the band and setting aside the later sessions in Minnesota, when he walked into the studio that very first day with Phil Ramone behind the board and John Hammond in the studio – and this is my reading, but I think we are all pretty much in agreement, those of us who worked on this – he walked in thinking, ‘I am going to make **“Freewheelin”**’ for 1974-75.’ That was really his intention, in my opinion.

The story was always that he started recording with the band and it wasn’t working, he didn’t like it and he kind of fired them one by one, but the reality is not that. He had recorded, I think, 11 takes, six different songs, before he even started with the band. The band was not an afterthought as such, but I don’t think a band was what Bob had in mind. I think the easiest way to describe that is – there’s a version of **“If You See Her Say Hello”** near the beginning of the box set, and he does two or three takes of that, and you would think, ‘OK, he’s just trying out the song.’ But when he comes to the solo, the acoustic guitar break and the harmonica, every single time he hits it, it’s exactly the same; he had it all planned out. He wasn’t in there winging it. He wasn’t finding the song, as he was often on **“The Cutting Edge”**.

He knew exactly what he wanted to do and exactly what he was trying to achieve, and that was before the band stepped foot in the studio.

What I realized was, OK, at that time there were all these singer-songwriters who were vying to be the next Dylan. Well, you know, who's the next Dylan? Bob Dylan is. He went in there with the intention of going, 'Let me show you how this is done.' That's my take on it. I can't speak for him, obviously, but I think as people dig into this that will come across.

I know there are complaints about the repetition and it's maybe not as exciting as other releases, but I completely disagree. I think as revelatory as *"The Cutting Edge"* was for that period, this will be for this period because everything you think you know about this period will be turned upside-down. When people listen to these recordings they will realize that regardless of what was going on around him in the studio, Bob was 100% committed to his performances in a way that people don't give him enough credit for. They think that he just goes in there and dashes off these things. When you hear him, his voice is clear and strong, his playing is on the money and the performances are just astonishingly powerful. I think that's what's really impressive about this work. Not only can he hit the mark on the 9th or 10th or 13th take of *'Tangled Up In Blue'*, but he can also improve on it, and sometimes reinvent it.

DB: I think some of the criticisms of repetition may stem from the fact that we have heard about all of these Ellen Bernstein notebook lyrics – the so called Red Book songs – and in some cases they have been reproduced. It seems, however, that the likes of *'Don't Want No Married Woman'*, *'Belltower Blues'*, *'It's Breakin' Me Up'* and *'Little Bit Of Rain'* had all been either abandoned or superseded by the time Bob hit A&R in September.

JS: I know, and as Dylanologists we always want more. It's always about what we are not getting. I encourage people to wait and listen and I think this will change their minds about a record they probably already love and admire. I think they will appreciate it more than they have previously. There really is only one artist who could have done this record, particularly at that moment; you know what with Watergate and the end of Vietnam and all the other stuff that was happening at the time. America was really coming apart at the seams, much as it is today. So he's really saying something here. Everybody talks about what was going on in his personal life, but these songs are just as much about what was going on in the world and I think that's part of the whole story, too.

DB: The Red Book lyrics are nevertheless all reproduced in the hardback book that comes with *"BS14"*?

JS: Yes.

DB: But we are sure that none of these songs were ever recorded?

JS: Well, that's my understanding. I'm going out to the Tulsa archive next month and I can report back after that, but my understanding is that this is everything that was caught while the tapes were rolling during those four days.

It's my understanding, from talking to people that I know who are starting to assess what's in the archives, that there are hundreds and hundreds of pages of lyrics without music.

But this is the story that Dylan and his team want to tell about 1974. And I think it is important to keep in mind that the story we want from Bob is not usually the story that he wants to tell.

DB: Across the various takes of these songs, do either the lyrics or the performances change very much as the sessions progress?

JS: Yeah, I think they do. The songs do evolve. You can see in the notebook that there are little scratching outs and notes in the margins but you can also hear changes in his performances. There are takes on the same day that are in order that are probably minutes or half an hour apart, and they are very different. Now, we're not talking about them being completely different – *'Tangled Up In Blue'* from '75, *"Real Live"* and now – it's not that sort of variation. But there are subtle differences that will give you insight into Bob's frame of mind and the story he was trying tell and how he got to the final version. On the final day, and the very final hour of the session, he cut a couple of versions of *'Tangled Up In Blue'*, and the last version is the first song on the single disc release that people will be getting. It's not the one from the acetates, it's a different version. I remember when I was first played it, it just blew me away. It's probably the most breathtaking version of *'Tangled Up In Blue'* that you'll ever hear, and yet he didn't even think it was the best version in that moment. I think all of these things will help illustrate who Bob is as an artist, as a creative person and what he didn't choose is as interesting as what he did, because you will hear this version of *'Tangled Up In Blue'* and you will go, 'How did this possibly not make the record?'

DB: This is from the New York session?

JS: Yes, exactly. The whole record is a window into Bob's creativity and artistic choices that we've never really had before.

DB: I think Amazon, certainly in the UK, did the album a disservice by posting the track listing ahead of time and therefore not including any of the extra information. So you've got on Disc 2, *'You're Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go'* nine times in succession, and that didn't look good on the page. But then when you see the official press release containing all of the additional information, it starts to look a whole lot better. For instance, you see that the first half of the first New York session, September 16, the whole of Disc 1, is solo Bob. So the two versions of *'Simple Twist Of Fate'* on the first disc are completely different to the three version on the second disc because those takes are with the band. But without the extra information you don't know that.

JS: Yeah, so as I said before, Disc 1 changes our perception of history. We all thought that Bob started with the band, the band didn't work out and he fired them.

DB: Yeah, and now, through these recordings, we discover that it was the exact opposite.

JS: It absolutely is. Now, this is just me, I have no idea, but my understanding is that maybe Phil [Ramone] thought

the record would benefit from having extra players, and Bob being Bob said, 'Yeah sure, let's try it out.' But I don't think that was where his head was at. I think people will realize that because he keeps going back to playing by himself – or by himself with a bass, or by himself with an organ, or by himself with slide guitar – and people will hear that, as 100% committed as he is on the band tracks, he is even more committed when he's alone. I think that's really interesting and it rewrites the whole history in one disc.

DB: OK, here's a question for you. Which album should have been released, the New York album or the one that came out? And on that subject, was it really David Zimmerman who persuaded Bob to make those changes? We read about this in the biographies but is there any real proof of that?

JS: I don't think so. I will tell you two things. The first thing is, when I interviewed Ratso Sloman for the book, he told me some great stories...

DB: I'm sure he did...

JS: Yeah, right, (laughs). But he told me those stories as a way to illustrate the point that nobody tells, or even suggests, to Bob anything to do that Bob doesn't already want to do. So here's what I think happened – and this is just from talking to people who were around him at the time – the release date is coming up, and Bob had lived with these songs for a couple of months, and I think he had already come to the realization that he wanted to change some things. But for him to pull the release, with the covers printed and all of the other stuff, even for Bob, that was a big move. And then for him to be in Minnesota, and for it to be so easy to go into a studio ... I don't think he realized it would be so easy to do that ... and I think one thing that is worth saying that we haven't talked about is how great and how underrated and underappreciated the Minnesota players are. I think on these new mixes people will have a new appreciation for their playing and for their contributions, because they were written off as jingle players, and they were not. Studio 80 had to pay the bills, so they would certainly do jingles. I mean, you're a studio in the middle of Minnesota, what are you going to do? You're going to have to take on jingles. But those players, Billy Berg and Billy Peterson in particular ... These are guys that have played with some of the best in the business, before and since. So, to denigrate them as just a pick-up band, they were by no means a pick-up band.

So I think he got in there with the intention of doing probably one song and seeing how it went. And it went so well that he just kept going. And I think when you hear those performances, especially in the new mixes, you will think to yourself 'Wow, these are really amazing.'

DB: The intention was just to rerecord '*Idiot Wind*'?

JS: Well, you'll have to make your own mind up about that (laughs). But by all accounts, all the people I talked to who were there and involved said Bob was really excited with the way things went. And so within half-an-hour they were doing another song. In that moment, whatever qualms he had about the original versions, he set those aside and said, 'OK, I'm going to focus on the songs that I'm not 100% happy with and I'm going to get them down the way I want,' because they had evolved. You'll see from the original notebook how

they had evolved, and that became, to Bob Dylan, "*Blood On The Tracks*". So, for us to become Monday morning quarterbacks, as we say here in America, (laughs) and say this is my "*Blood On The Tracks*", well, it's not. "*Blood On The Tracks*" is the final album that came out, and you'll see why when you hear this box set.

DB: Well, I agree that's the album Bob wanted us to hear and that we should probably accept that, but his choice of songs hasn't always been infallible. Just take '*Blind Willie McTell*' as an example.

JS: (laughs) It's funny, but Ratso mentioned that very song...

When I was a kid, I inherited "*Blood On The Tracks*" from my brother and I fell in love with it because it was an amazing experience. But there's a story I tell in the liner notes about me and Pete Townshend arguing about "*Blood On The Tracks*" and "*Freewheelin*", which I hope everybody gets a laugh from, but our conversation gave me a new appreciation for the album.

I've said this in interviews before, I will read every word of a biography of John Lennon or Paul McCartney or Jimi Hendrix, but I almost don't want to read biographies about Bob Dylan. I like to take my Bob as he wants me to see him. The most interesting version of Bob Dylan is the version he presents to us, whether it's the truth or not is kind of irrelevant. If he chose that track listing, that's good enough for me.

I will say that the new single disc version that is coming out – which is an alternate to what was pressed as the acetate in 1974 – I think is even better in many respects than that original acetate, and if all you buy is the single disc I don't think you'll be disappointed.

But by the same token, that's not "*Blood On The Tracks*", "*Blood On The Tracks*" is what was released in January 1975. Those are the songs that Bob chose, so if those songs are not good enough for you – please (laughs).

DB: Jeff, many thanks for your time. Keep in touch.

JS: Thank you Derek, I will.