Review

Keith Negus. *Bob Dylan*. London: Equinox, 2008. 172 pp. £10.99. ISBN 978-1-904768-25-8 (paperback).

To my surprise I heard Helen Shapiro on the radio the other day doing a trailer for a BBC 4 radio programme about a lost but now found Beatles interview. The incongruity of Shapiro promoting a rarity by The Beatles, the group that ushered in both the end of her brief period of pop stardom and the terms in which it was constructed—she was voted 'Best Newcomer' by the Variety Club of Great Britain in 1962—made me consider her career in more detail. The question it raises are rather interesting: Was Helen Shapiro a one- (actually four-) hit wonder, someone whose records are stranded in time, or a jazz singer who over the last few years has, in the words of Colin Larkin's *Encyclopaedia of Popular Music*, 'maintained a high profile [in the UK] through radio, television and live appearances, singing jazz-inflected big band material'.

So how do we place Helen Shapiro? Was she a one-hit wonder who caught the *zeitgeist* with 'Don't Treat Me Like a Child'? If so, then her age at the time of her first recording—she was a 14 year old schoolgirl—is important, as is the theme of the record, raising at it did the question of the oppressed/triumphant teenager. Similarly, comparisons with other few hit wonders become interesting and useful—memorably with Lesley Gore, of whose 'It's My Party' Shapiro recorded the original version. This perspective can also be expanded to include competing versions of proto-feminist songs, leading to possible essays—I say possible but my guess is that they are already in print—seeking to join and/or contrast 'Don't Treat Me Like a Child' with Helen Reddy's 'I am Woman'.

Implicit in such a perspective is that to all intents and critical purposes Shapiro's career was over, bar the odd ripple, in the mid 1960s and that her recordings are best used as tools to excavate past themes and concerns. However, if one considers Shapiro as a currently or recently active jazz singer another trajectory emerges. After an odd beginning the singer establishes a decidedly different career. Such a story also harks back to the past, but it is a very different one, the big band era. Moreover the sociology is markedly dissimilar, becoming one of contemporary jazz singing complete with shades of Norah Jones *et al*. The issues raised, if again one is interested in using Shapiro to explore issues in the development of (the performance of) popular music, are very different and are more concerned with the present than the past.

So which Helen Shapiro are you interested in? Whichever Shapiro takes your critical fancy, the questions and the perspectives raised change dramatically if you morph that question to Bob Dylan, one of the most analysed/criticized/biographed/ used/referenced artists of modern popular music. Then the attendant (and often hidden) questions and perspectives taken by a commentator not merely shape their answers but reconfigure the subject. (Minor artists highlight the issues that major artists wrestle with.) Hence we have Robert Shelton's Bob Dylan, Michael Gray's, Greil Marcus's, Wilfred Mellers's, Christopher Ricks's and Paul Williams's to name just a few.

So which Bob Dylan is Keith Negus interested in? And what does his approach uncover that gets lost in other Bob Dylans?

The quick answer is that Negus broadly follows Paul Williams, adding serious critical muscle to Williams's (simpler) observational insights and bringing to the fore the image of Dylan as a performing (rather than recording) artist, someone whose songs are accordingly not 'fixed' in their first (or subsequent) recordings but remain open to a wide range of interpretations. The benefits of such an approach are mitigated by a general lack of analysis of what is generally considered the core of Dylan's work, the recordings made between 1963 and 1966. Bearing in mind that Negus' book is part of a general series, *Icons of Pop Music* and is intended as a primer on Dylan, the account and its perspective is too partial for an introduction to Dylan. That said, despite its brevity, the detailed and often compelling analysis offered by Negus, for example his account of the shift in Dylan's musical strategies between *Blonde On Blonde* and *John Wesley Hardin*, means that as a general contribution to Dylan scholarship the book is much to be recommended.

One virtue of approaching Dylan as a performer is that it is in live performance that, snakelike, each new Dylan has emerged, at the Newport folk festival, at the Albert Hall and on the Never Ending Tour (NET), sloughing off old identities in public to the cries of 'Judas'. Negus catches this fluidity, and the musicianship that underpins it, well, arguing that the constant revision of the canon that is NET demonstrates that the songs are written from a performing perspective and that there is no definitive version of any of the Dylan standards.

More problematic, however, is Negus's attempt to grant the audience (us) a special performing role, either through (attempted) sing-alongs at concerts or the simple humming or singing of snatches of songs as we get along with our lives. Undeniably there is a warmer and closer relationship between singer and audience at a live performance than that generated in the colder experience of simply listening to a recording. And certainly just poring over Dylan's lyrics is limiting. But to overly focus on performance means that all the songs have a (near) equal

status. Dylan has written and recorded many 'put down' songs but 'Like a Rolling Stone' is the one we always come back to. A further problem is that while the later works are interesting (and sometimes, as in the case of *Modern Times*, stunning) they are so because they are echoes and variations of the mature works. The late works of major artists, such as John Ford and Henry James are fascinating, primarily because of the more relaxed variations they offer of key themes raised in the far more resonant earlier mature works.

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