

The Beat of 'Desolation Row', 50 Years on

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Abstract : Postgraduate studies in English language and literature at the University of Sydney provided opportunity for research into one of the most significant singer/songwriters of our time, Bob Dylan, and his masterpiece from the mid-1960s, 'Desolation Row'. With a title alluding to Jack Kerouac's Desolation Angels as well as John Steinbeck's Cannery Row, 'Desolation Row' is Bob Dylan's magnum opus. Recorded on August 4 1965, it takes pride of place as the last track on the revolutionary 1965 album of rock poetics, Highway 61 Revisited. From its inception, its epic proportions (ten long verses) and rich and baffling imagery got our attention - it amused, fascinated and beguiled. The song's surreal and dreamlike landscape and its cast of characters, drawn from history, fiction, mythology, theology, and popular culture, lured us in and begged interpretation. What were they doing there? Where is Desolation Row? Do they want to escape from or go to 'Desolation Row'? What was Dylan writing about and what were his influences? Through literary analysis and historical research, this paper will examine the song's lyrics, the mid-60s context and Dylan's vast influences to make sense, offer explanations and make connections. In particular, research findings place the Beat poets and oeuvre as a significant literary influence but it is a rich, multilayered text that straddles traditions and emerges as a paradox - a paradox that has endured and endeared itself to many. As it turns 50 this year, what better way to acknowledge this momentous occasion than at an international English language conference.

Keywords : analysis, Bob Dylan, beat context, desolation row

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