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Looking back on Bob Dylan's *Blonde on Blonde*, the record that changed Nashville

Blonde Ambition

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Whether you drop the needle on the first side of the crackling vinyl LP, cue up track one of a gleaming aluminum disc, or pop in your earbuds and click the

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wheel, the first thing you hear retains the shock of newness: a marching-band drumbeat, then the yawp of a trombone like a huge intake of breath, followed by a carnivalesque riot of woozy horns and whoops and shouts. In some ways, it sounds outside time, like a Salvation Army parade stomping and hollering past a far-off grandstand. And yet it still sounds fresh and spontaneous, as if it could have been recorded last week.

But it wasn't. Forty-five years ago this month, Columbia Records released Bob Dylan's landmark double album *Blonde on Blonde*, an album recorded almost entirely in Nashville. Not only is it widely regarded as one of Dylan's best records, but it routinely shows up whenever artists, critics and rock historians list the 10 greatest rock albums ever made. For Music City, the album was nothing less than transformative, elevating Nashville as a recording center on par with New York and Los Angeles.

In 1966, Nashville was well-established as a songwriter's town, but not yet the haven for artist-writers it would become. It was old-school, like Tin Pan Alley, where songwriters wrote songs for recording artists to record. And even though it was good enough for Elvis, as far as rock 'n' roll went, it wasn't somewhere the longhairs, moptops and poets arriving on the scene would go to make "art." But after the release of *Blonde on Blonde*, Nashville became a destination for singer-songwriters who performed their own material, from Leonard Cohen and Neil Young to Guy Clark and Townes Van Zandt.

Dylan didn't make Nashville's music community cool, any more than Jack White would four decades later. But like White, he sent a resounding message to anyone following his career: Cool was exactly what Nashville was. It wasn't long before the emerging music mecca was attracting a variety of folk and rock pilgrims to its studios, including Young, Cohen, The Byrds, Joan Baez, Johnny Winter, Linda Ronstadt, Steve Miller, Peter, Paul and Mary, and Moby Grape, to name only a few. As Charlie McCoy, who led the *Blonde on Blonde* sessions, said of Dylan's decision to record here, "That's when the floodgates opened."

To some, Dylan's historic collaboration with the Nashville cats undoubtedly looked like a case of vision overcoming culture clash — New York hipster meets good ol' boys, makes hay anyway. But musically as well as lyrically, *Blonde on Blonde* brings to a climax the staggering creative streak Dylan began when he went electric, infuriated folk purists and freed his muse.

That's because it's the Dylan album where the inspiration in the playing and arrangements matches the words on the page. The Music City session pros were so skilled, they could let Dylan reach for sounds and ideas only in his head. In turn, he challenged them to follow his lead, no matter where it went. That could be a raucous rocker, a beautiful ballad, or something completely off-the-wall like "Rainy Day Women #12 & 35" — the album opener whose title draws blank stares, until you add, "You know, the 'Everybody Must Get Stoned' song."

In honor of an album that still baffles, entrances, engages and elates almost five decades since it was recorded, we spoke to all but one of the Nashville session players still living who performed on the record, to find out what it was like to be part of history in the making. And to a man, they said the last thing they thought they were doing was making history. "If I had known that somebody would be interested in this, I would have kept records back then," says producer Jerry Kennedy, who played guitar on one session for the album. "But I just didn't do it."

The story of how *Blonde on Blonde* came to be recorded in Nashville began in Columbia Records' New York studios in the fall and winter of 1965, as Dylan worked on the follow-up to his highly successful album *Highway 61 Revisited*.

Dylan was still transitioning from folk singer to rocker. Back then, as he told *Playboy* interviewer Ron Rosenbaum in 1978, he was searching for "that thin, that wild mercury sound ... metallic and bright gold" — a special blend of guitar, organ and harmonica he could hear in his head. He felt he had captured it on his hit "Like a Rolling Stone" earlier that year, but during later sessions that fall and winter, it eluded him.

On most of those sessions, he was backed by members of The Band (then called The Hawks), who had recently become his backing group for live performances. But the electricity they generated with him live had failed to

materialize in the studio — something he admitted to critic and biographer Robert Shelton.

"Oh, I was really down," Dylan told Shelton. "I mean, in 10 recording sessions, man, we didn't get one song. ... It was the band. But you see, I didn't know that. I didn't want to think that."

Producer Bob Johnston, then a recent transplant to New York from Music City, knew of the headaches Dylan was having in the studio and encouraged him to record in Nashville. A former rockabilly artist turned songwriter and behind-the-board hitmaker, Johnston was tight with many of the city's session players. If anybody could find that sound, he thought, it was one group of younger musicians he'd worked with who were well-versed in rock and R&B.

In early August of 1965, one of those musicians made a trip with his wife to New York City for the World's Fair. Multi-instrumentalist Charlie McCoy may be one of the most important musicians in Nashville's history, but you wouldn't know it from talking with him: Even today, he's as soft-spoken and humble in conversation as he is accomplished. Only 25 at the time, he already had an impressive studio vitae, including recordings with Elvis, Roy Orbison, Patsy Cline, Quincy Jones, Bobby Bare, Johnny Cash and Perry Como.

Johnston had told McCoy he would get him tickets to a Broadway show if he were ever in the city. On the morning of Aug. 4, the day after he and his wife arrived in New York, McCoy gave Johnston a call about the tickets. The timing was great.

"Are you free this afternoon?" the producer asked. "I'm recording Bob Dylan and I'd like you to meet him."

McCoy went to the studio, where he met Dylan and bassist Russ Savakus. After the introductions, Dylan told him he had one of his records. "I really like your 'Harpoon Man,' " he said, referring to one of the rock singles McCoy recorded for Monument Records in the '60s. McCoy was floored. Released the previous year, the record featured accompaniment by McCoy's band The Escorts, which included several of the other musicians Johnston had worked with in Music City; the single had not sold well or garnered much airplay. McCoy was surprised Dylan had even heard it, much less liked it.

As McCoy prepared to leave, he remembers, Dylan said, "Listen, I'm getting ready to do this song, why don't you sit in?" McCoy was game, but didn't have any of his instruments with him. Undeterred, Dylan said, "There's an acoustic guitar over there, just grab that."

The song they recorded was "Desolation Row," which would be the closing track on *Highway 61 Revisited*. Dylan had recorded an electric version two days earlier, but decided he wanted an acoustic treatment instead. They knocked out the track in under an hour, with McCoy adding some Grady Martin-inspired guitar fills — the recording's musical highlight, as it turned out. Then he left the studio, as low-key as he'd entered.

"Now you see how easy that was," Johnston told Dylan. "Now that's how it would be in Nashville." As the producer remembers it, Dylan put his hand to his chin in a thoughtful pose and said, "Hmmmm."

When the artist began working on the follow-up to *Highway 61 Revisited*, a Nashville session was initially scheduled for November. But Dylan's mercurial manager, Albert Grossman, and label boss Bill Gallagher wanted no part of that idea. They felt Dylan had a good thing going in New York — so much so that they told Johnston if he ever broached the subject again, he was canned.

But that was fall of 1965, and everyone expected Dylan's upcoming sessions to bear fruit. By late January of 1966, he had a real problem. He was scheduled to begin the North American leg of a world tour in just a few days, but after more than 10 sessions, he had only one track he considered acceptable for release — a beauty, "One of Us Must Know (Sooner or Later)," that made it onto the finished *Blonde on Blonde* album. Johnston's suggestion about Nashville now sounded much more promising. Dylan had a break in his tour schedule between a show in Norfolk, Va., on Feb. 12 and a concert in Ottawa, Canada on Feb. 19, so Johnston block-booked Studio A at Columbia's Nashville facility for Dylan from Feb. 14 to the morning of Feb. 17.

That proved to be a mixed blessing. Unlike the world-famous Quonset Hut (then known as Columbia Studio B), Studio A featured permanent baffles to better isolate the sounds and eliminate audio bleed. This was good for producing a cleaner sound. But it stifled interaction between the musicians,

and Dylan wanted all the musicians to be able to see one another and respond as they played.

So Johnston and security guard Ed Grizzard ripped out the baffles — an action that infuriated Columbia's Nashville studio managers. They raised a stink with Johnston's bosses in New York, expecting a sympathetic ear. But as Johnston later told author Michael Kosser, that wasn't what happened when Gallagher flew into town.

"The only thing I got to say is this," the Columbia honcho told the offended managers. "I'm gonna go have lunch with Johnston, and I want to tell you if he wants a microphone on the ceiling, I'd advise you to get the tallest damn ladder you can find and start climbing, or I'll shut this motherfucker down."

Johnston tapped McCoy to be session leader and gave him a list of the musicians he wanted to use. That list included drummer Kenny Buttrey, one of the five players who appeared on all 13 tracks recorded on Music Row.

Kenny Buttrey, who died of cancer in 2004, was one of the greatest studio drummers in pop-music history — a player supple and flexible enough to back everyone from Elvis and Chuck Berry to Donovan, Cohen and Young. His innovative drumming and percussion would give the Nashville sessions their foundation.

The other musicians who played on all the Nashville sessions were guitarist Wayne Moss, guitarist/bassist Joe South and keyboardist Al Kooper — a sideman of Dylan's in New York who famously snuck into the session for "Like a Rolling Stone," only to emerge with the organ hook that made the record. Another important player, the legendary blind pianist Hargus "Pig" Robbins, was at all but two of the sessions.

The basic lineup for the February dates was Buttrey on drums, Moss (and in some cases South) on electric guitar, Robbins on piano, Kooper on organ, either McCoy or South on bass, and Dylan on acoustic and electric guitars and harmonica. When he wasn't playing bass, McCoy contributed acoustic rhythm guitar.

The first session was scheduled for 2 p.m. Feb. 14, but Dylan arrived several hours late as a result of delays at the Norfolk airport, accompanied by Grossman, Dylan's newlywed wife Sara and their month-old son Jesse.

Kooper, who had been touring with his band The Blues Project, flew in separately from Ohio after a date on Feb. 12 at Antioch College.

Robbins had a date with another recording artist that afternoon, so keyboardist Bill Aikins got the call. "It was one of the most unusual dates I ever worked," Aikins tells the *Scene*.

What made it so unusual was the amount of downtime the musicians had. The Nashville studio cats were accustomed to precision-tuned three-hour sessions where a minimum of three songs would be tracked —more, if luck were with them. But during their first three hours at Studio A that afternoon, they didn't hit a single lick.

McCoy introduced the players to Dylan, who then told them that because of the flight delay, he needed to finish some lyrics. "Take a break," he said, then went and sat at the piano — with a legal pad and a Bible.

"I can remember him sitting at the piano in deep, deep, meditative thought," Aikins remembers. "He was creating, writing. So we were just on hold as musicians, on the payroll, on a master session, and we were just hanging out. ... That's the kind of budget they had for him.

"Then, after I don't know how long, but it was hours, they said, 'OK, Bob's ready to put this song down.' "

The song in question served notice that this wouldn't be another business-as-usual engagement. It was "Visions of Johanna" — seven minutes and 33 seconds of Dylan's muse at its most unfettered, full of dazzling phrase-making ("Jewels and binoculars hang from the head of the mule") and profoundly suggestive pronouncements ("Inside the museums, infinity goes up on trial"). For his part, Aikins recalls trying to understand what Dylan was saying in the song. It wasn't like Nashville session cats — or those in any other city — typically found themselves contemplating lines such as, "See the primitive wallflower freeze / When the jelly-faced women all sneeze."

"I thought it was really ... *far out* would be the term I would have used at the time," Aikins recalls, "and still today, it was a very *out-there* song."

Dylan ran it down one time for the players so they could notate the chord changes. Then they began working on the arrangement, which featured

superb lead guitar fills by Moss. In four attempts, they only recorded one complete take — but that was all they needed.

The artist worked on two other songs the first day: a master take of "Fourth Time Around," a delicate, wistful waltz that featured some gorgeous arpeggiated acoustic guitar interplay between Moss and McCoy, and a wacky car-horns-and-chaos arrangement of the rowdy blues "Leopard-Skin Pillbox Hat." It didn't make the album.

The Nashville cats soon learned that the waiting around they did that first day would be the norm for the *Blonde on Blonde* sessions — not only the dates in February, but also when Dylan returned in March to complete the album. "There were quite a few days where [Dylan] would go into the studio and sit at the piano himself and work on lyrics for hours — I mean, you know, for six or seven hours," Kooper tells the *Scene*.

"And he would be in there extremely concentrating, and never coming out until he finished. ... A lot of days, we didn't get anything started till 7 o'clock at night, and we'd come in at noon."

Such a day was Feb. 15, which yielded only one song in a marathon session. And not just any song. The Nashville players were accustomed to cranking out singles. "Back in the '60s, we were doing 2:20 songs, or or 2:45 or 2:50 — that was a long song, you know," Hargus "Pig" Robbins recalls. "We rolled in there and did some that were seven or eight minutes."

This one, however, was something else. It was the epic "Sad Eyed Lady of the Lowlands" — the 11-minute-19-second wonder that not only closes the double album but requires an entire LP side to speak its piece. It did not come early or fast. "We took a break," Wayne Moss says, recalling the scene, "and three hours later we signed a [union] card, and took another break."

By the time Dylan was ready to record, the musicians had no idea what kind of beast they were about to tackle. The late Kenny Buttrey painted a picture of the actual recording for author Clinton Heylin:

"He ran down a verse and a chorus, and he just quit and said, 'We'll do a verse and then a chorus, and then I'll play my harmonica thing. Then we'll do another verse and chorus, and we'll play some more harmonica and see how it goes from there.'... Not knowing how long this thing was going to be, we

were preparing ourselves dramatically for a basic two-to-three minute record, because records just didn't go over three minutes. ... If you notice that record, that thing after like the second chorus starts building and building like crazy, and everybody's just peaking it up 'cause we thought, "Man this is it. This is going to be the last chorus and we've got to put everything into it we can.' ... After about 10 minutes of this thing, we're cracking up at each other, at what we were doing. I mean, we peaked five minutes ago. Where do we go from here?"

Although they had worked late-night sessions with artists like Elvis, the Nashville musicians weren't used to pulling all-nighters. According to Kooper, after being at the studio past daybreak for the second consecutive day, Moss quipped, "Boy, that hour of sleep I got last night is getting pretty lonely."

"That session started at 2 o'clock in the afternoon, and at 8:30 the next morning we went home," Moss remembers. "We didn't mind playing ping pong and signing a card every three hours ... but it wasn't what we were used to."

Nevertheless, they returned at 6 p.m. that same day — Feb. 16 — and did some more waiting as Dylan finished the lyrics for another song that would top the seven-minute mark, "Stuck Inside of Mobile With the Memphis Blues Again." According to studio records, they finally began working on the song at 4 a.m. the following morning, Feb. 17. Three hours later, they had the take that appears on the album, highlighted musically by gospel-inspired trills from guitarist Mac Gayden.

Like Dylan's best songs from this fertile period, it sounds at once tossed-off and monumental. It's newly minted mythology, full of lyrical swagger, wit and verve, peopled by a kaleidoscopic cast whose players include Shakespeare, the preacher with the headline-stapled chest, the French girl and Mona and Ruthie with her honky-tonk lagoon, and poor old Grandpa, the nutty prophet who "built a fire on Main Street and shot it full of holes."

But the players got the most important thing about Dylan's writing: that he was having fun, not handing down tablets from a mountain. Their lack of deference — their regarding this as another paying gig, even as they rose to the occasion — helps keep *Blonde on Blonde* so freewheeling and buoyant. Except, arguably, in the daunting length of "Sad-Eyed Lady," it's not choked by any sense of its own importance.

During the downtime, the musicians would go to the lounge one floor below the studios in the Columbia Records building, where they would play ping pong or cards, watch television or grab a bite to eat. Bassist Henry Strzelecki, who joined the sessions on the final day of recording in February, recalls playing around with a Ouija board which *divined* that the album was "either gonna be the biggest album in the world or it ain't gonna do nothin'." Gayden, who contributed electric rhythm on several sessions but was not credited because of a clerical oversight, remembers taking a nap on the floor in the back of the studio while Dylan worked on lyrics at the piano and his wife nursed the baby in the corner.

According to Moss, while everyone waited for Dylan, Al Grossman, who still resented his client being in Nashville, sat in the control room throwing quarters up at the ceiling tiles to see how many he could make stick. "If I tear some of them up, just send Columbia the bill," Grossman grumbled. "They've got lots of money." Interestingly, any cleanup probably would have been handled by the custodian Columbia Nashville employed at the time — a guy named Kris Kristofferson.

Dylan didn't interact much with the Nashville musicians. But Al Kooper did. "They were very nice to me," says the keyboardist, who returned to Nashville in 1968 to record his first solo album, *I Stand Alone*, and lived here in the '90s. "It was the first time I had played outside the New York studio system, and I had played in that system since 1959. I was amazed at the quality of the musicianship of the people I was working with, who seemed to be approximately my age."

Kooper hit it off with the Nashville players, but a group of local teens weren't so welcoming when he ventured to Lower Broad to check out the Ernest Tubb Record Shop. "I was very anxious to shop there because I was a big fan — I bought a lot of records," he remembers. "So I walked over there, and when I was coming back, I got accosted by young, as they were called in those days, juvenile delinquents, about five of them, and they wanted to start some trouble."

The teens apparently took exception to Kooper's mod attire and chased him across the street, where he ducked into a drugstore. Johnston had arranged for one of Elvis' bodyguards, Lamar Fyke, to look after Dylan while he was in Nashville, and Kooper had his phone number. While the teens waited for him

outside, he called Fyke on the pay phone and told him what was going down.

Minutes later, the King's man screeched up outside the drugstore in a large Cadillac, rescuing the keyboardist. On the way back to the hotel, Fyke joked, "I can't let you go for five minutes without you getting in another fight with somebody."

When Dylan left Nashville at the end of the February dates, he had completed four songs for the album, including the three longest. When he returned in early March during another short break in his tour, he brought The Band's guitarist Robbie Robertson, who added a blues flavor to the six-string mix.

"[Dylan] wanted to bring Robbie and myself so he was comfortable," Kooper explains. "We actually probably weren't necessary."

Continuing the pattern of the February dates, the March sessions began with more waiting. According to the studio records, the musicians assembled at 9:30 a.m. on March 7, but didn't begin working until after midnight on the one song they recorded, "Absolutely Sweet Marie."

Despite a slow start, Dylan was better prepared for the March sessions and they went more quickly. The following day, they recorded "Pledging My Time" and "Just Like a Woman," which was released as a single in July and climbed to No. 33 on the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart.

Due to resume his world tour in St. Louis on March 11, Dylan finished the record in one final all-nighter. They began at 6 p.m. on March 9 and didn't finish until after sunrise on March 10, recording six songs: "Most Likely You Go Your Way (And I'll Go Mine)," "Temporary Like Achilles," "Obviously 5 Believers," a new version of "Leopard-Skin Pillbox Hat," and two more Top 40 hits, including one of his most effervescent songs, "I Want You," which went to No. 20.

Yet it was the other, "Rainy Day Women #12 & 35," that the Nashville players remember best — not only because of the apparent drug reference in the song's double-entendre chorus ("Everybody must get stoned"), but also because of the circumstances surrounding the session. The song would peak at No. 2, tying with "Like a Rolling Stone" as Dylan's highest charting single.

Dylan said he wanted the song to have the loose sound of a Salvation Army band — not an easy task for some of the best musicians on the planet. He asked Moss and some of the other musicians, "What do you guys do here?" Moss told him they played golf when they had time. "That's not what I mean," Dylan said. "What do you *do* here?" Then they realized he meant what did they do to get high. So they told him what passed for wild times in Davidson County — some beers or mixed drinks.

Johnston dispatched security guard Ed Grizzard to nearby Ireland's restaurant, which specialized in a widowmaker of a drink called The Leprechaun. He brought back 18 milk cartons filled with the lime-green concoction, which quickly turned the players a nice shamrock color. Strzelecki and Robbins say they (and unnamed others) partook of some high-quality joints, which were passed around the studio.

After they had achieved the proper state of mind, the musicians began to work on the sound. "Bob wanted everyone to scream and shout, so we did that," Kooper recalls.

Buttrey, meanwhile, disassembled his drum kit so he could hit the kick drum like the bass drum in a marching band. Moss picked up Strzelecki's bass, and the bass man — who got a serious case of the giggles and can be heard laughing on the track — was on the floor playing the foot pedals of Kooper's organ with his hands, while the organist shook a tambourine and McCoy played trumpet.

Dylan decided the song needed a trombone to go with the trumpet. He asked McCoy if he knew anyone. McCoy called The Escorts' trombonist, Wayne Butler.

"He got there in, like, 45 minutes, and they called him at two or three in the morning," Kooper remembers. "And he was clean-shaven and had a suit on. He played one or two takes of that song, then thanked everybody and went back home. It was pretty funny." As with Gayden, Butler's appearance went uncredited.

Kooper especially remembers working on the final song they recorded, "I Want You." "When we finally did 'I Want You,' I had these parts that I gave everybody because I had this arrangement of it," the organist says. "Right at [the end of the chorus], Wayne [Moss] played a sixteenth-note run and I'd

never heard anybody play that fast before. So I stopped, we were just running it over, and said, 'Can you play that each time?' and he said, 'Sure.' I said, 'That would be great, Wayne.' And I was just thinking to myself, 'Boy, they can't do this in New York.' I couldn't believe he played that."

Kooper recently recalled another memorable episode from the sessions on Chicago Public Radio's *Sound Opinions*. "We were running down 'You Go Your Way,' " Kooper told hosts Jim DeRogatis and Greg Kot, "and Charlie said, 'I'd like to play that part that you're playing on the organ on the trumpet with you.' I said, "That'd be great! But Bob doesn't like to overdub. So unless we get another bass player, I don't know how we can.' He says, 'I can play the bass and the trumpet at the same time.' "

The band started rehearsing the song, and sure enough, McCoy played the neck of the bass with his left hand, and the trumpet with his right. "Bob and I were on the floor, just laughing," Kooper said. "So Charlie said, 'I can do it!' So Bob said, 'OK, but just be somewhere where I can't see you.' "

Johnston deserves a lot of the credit for the successful musical marriage between the New York hipsters and the Southerners. "This was all Bob Johnston's idea, and [Dylan] trusted Bob Johnston's idea," Kooper says. "It was a great idea."

Henry Strzelecki echoes this praise. "He let us do what we could do, which is the best thing a producer can do for a record," Strzelecki says.

Dylan left town for St. Louis with enough tracks completed for a first-ever double album of studio material. The album was mixed in Los Angeles in April during another break in the world tour and released on May 16, according to label records. (Some Dylanologists dispute that release date, and there is some evidence to back up their claims. It's a measure of the record's lasting appeal that such minutiae still matter to fans.) It peaked at No. 9 during a 15-week run on the *Billboard* Top 200 album chart. But that's like assessing the mid-'60s bounty of Miles Davis' jazz recordings or Jean-Luc Godard's movies by looking at tax returns.

After *Blonde on Blonde,* the secret was out about Music City. "Nashville had a reputation of just a country music center, although they had been cutting pop records in Nashville since they started cutting records," McCoy says. "Still, in the folk-rock world, I don't think anyone ever considered Nashville.

"But the fact that Dylan came here, it sent a message around the folk-rock world that, 'Hey, it's OK to go [to Nashville]. These guys can do this.' And it was after he came, that all the others came. ... They descended on us."

While the impact of the album — both on popular music and the city of Nashville — was immediate, its influence has continued to grow and reverberate to this day. Perhaps the most resonant example was Music City's own Jason and the Scorchers choosing a revved-up honky-punk cover of "Absolutely Sweet Marie" as their first major-label single in 1983. Talk about "bringing it all back home."

Bob Dylan would emerge from the record and its aftermath a changed man, and hardly for the last time. The albums he recorded in Nashville after *Blonde on Blonde* and his subsequent July 1966 motorcycle crash, starting with 1967's *John Wesley Harding*, were terse and spare where the earlier record had been sprawling and expansive. No wonder: By that time, every word he uttered was parsed for significance. In 1969, he returned to make *Nashville Skyline*, an album that suggested how utterly sick he was of being "the voice of a generation."

As for whether Dylan ever found that thin, wild mercury sound he was seeking in Music City, he told Rosenbaum in that 1978 *Playboy* interview: "The closest I ever got to the sound I hear in my mind was on individual bands in the *Blonde on Blonde* album." To paraphrase one of his best lines from the album, maybe we knew him when he was hungry, and it was his world.

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