

Prisoners and Guards: Bob Dylan, George Jackson, and Popular Memory

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To some, August 21, 1971, is a day in which an American citizen was assassinated by his own government. To others, August 21, 1971, is a day in which a homicidal radical was killed before he could kill others in a botched, deadly attempted prison escape. Either way, George Jackson, the radical Soledad Brother, was killed in the yard of San Quentin prison. Shortly after Jackson's death, several competing narratives emerged, pushed by several voices. One of those voices was rock singer Bob Dylan.

This article examines the competing narratives of this disputed and convoluted case that came from different sources, Dylan included. This article will not answer the factual questions surrounding this case. That is not the intent. Instead, this article examines the news coverage surrounding Jackson's death by the nation's newspaper of record, the *New York Times*; a historically black newspaper, the *Chicago Defender*; a west-coast voice, the *Los Angeles Times*; and Dylan's musical obituary released shortly after Jackson's death. The result: Bob Dylan's song closely resembles the coverage by news organizations, most notably the *New York Times*. More importantly, Dylan's version of the story endures in collective and cultural memory, in part because of the artistic form of his "coverage" and because of the impact of his celebrity. This song is one more piece of evidence that shows that popular music—while often ignored or even feared by dominant cultures—can create powerful narratives that shape worldviews, preserve otherwise forgotten perspectives, merge cultures, and frame and sustain historical events.

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Music as history

Several scholars have shown that folk, rock, and popular music are more than just entertainment. Music changes the way we remember the past. John A. Lomax was one of the first to recognize the role of popular or folk music as a form of writing history (xix). Scott and Forcucci document some of the important folk songs throughout American history to show how it can be retold entirely in song. Rubin argued that the nostalgia in country music shows that “cultural memory does not necessarily strive toward simple preservation,” but creates a past that is idealized or demonized, both for rhetorical purposes (109). And this was not trivial; Rahn argued that for many young people, folk music created their cultural understanding of their country and the world (193).

This music communicates in a way that history books can't. For example Rodnitzky argues that the music of the 1960s is still the best way to understand the decade labeled, “the age of protest” (119). Smethurst uses Elvis Presley's “Hound Dog” as a way to explore race in the 1950s and the interconnectedness of black and white music. He argues the blues is an artifact for “cultural historians to examine the unstable matrix of race, ethnicity, class, the ‘folk,’ and the ‘popular’ that makes up American culture” (64).

Filene concluded that folk singers served as “cultural ‘middlemen’ who move between folk and popular culture” and play an important role in shaping our perceptions of history (5). In an 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 (231).

The above literature supports the argument that music plays a role in our understanding of the past, but historian Robert Darnton argues that music has helped people understand the present, functioning as a form of journalism. Darnton examined the communication system of eighteenth-

century France where the government suppressed a free press. He found that scandalous novellas and songs were the main way to disseminate information the government might not want publicized (19). Songs were extremely effective because “in a society that remained largely illiterate, they provided a powerful means of transmitting messages” (19).

American studies scholar Lipsitz has contributed much to the understanding of the role of music in preserving cultural memory, including working class culture in postwar America and Chicano culture. He argues in *Time Passages*, “[W]hile no cultural form has a fixed political meaning, rock and roll music has been and continues to be a dialogic space, an arena where memories of the past serve to critique and change the present” (100). Lipsitz dedicated an entire book—*Footsteps in the Dark*—to the “hidden histories” documented in the music of the 1990s and 2000s, even when the artist had no intention of documenting history (viii). While Dylan couldn’t have known that his lyrics to song would be near the top of Google search results for the term “George Jackson,” he most likely knew that he was laying down a version of Jackson’s death that would reach thousands of listeners.

Bob Dylan as a subject of scholarship

Bob Dylan 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 researchers.

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” (Cott 60). 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.

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 Gonzalez and Makay described the rhetorical techniques Dylan uses during his Gospel music phase. 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. Beebe also considered Dylan’s “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall.” Beebe referred to this song as an “apocalyptic ballad” because the song closely resembles the English ballad “Lord Randall” and because of its apocalyptic imagery (18). Even Dylan’s bootlegged recordings have been the subject of academic research (Lewis).

Dylan’s life has been captured in many popular biographies and critical books. These books inform this study in a number of ways. Robert Shelton, Bob Spitz, Michael Gross and Robert Alexander, Clinton Heylin, Howard Sounes, and David Hajdu have all written biographies about different aspects of Dylan’s life. By consulting these 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.

Well-known rock critic Greil Marcus has written two books dedicated to Dylan. Bob Dylan’s memoir, *Chronicles: Volume One*, offers insight into the construction of his character. As a whole, the academic and

popular works about Dylan provide a well-rounded picture of the man behind these songs. Each work has strengths and weaknesses. Some have been more useful than others. But they have all been important in contextualizing Dylan's life.

Bob Dylan's career

The two men at the center of this saga seemed to live parallel lives that should never have intersected. Born just four months and less than 500 miles apart in 1941, Bob Dylan and George Jackson had wildly different childhoods. Dylan was born in Duluth, Minnesota, and eventually migrated east to New York. Jackson was born in Chicago and eventually migrated west to California. Dylan had a middle-class, middle-American childhood, enrolling at the University of Minnesota in 1959. About one year later, Jackson's tumultuous childhood in and out of youth detention centers ended when he was accused of stealing \$70. For the next decade, Dylan went on to write some of the most influential folk and rock music to come from the 1960s. Jackson spent the decade in prison, writing letters that would become *Soledad Brother* and *Blood in My Eyes*, two books that greatly impacted black revolutionary thinking in America. The following sections briefly highlight Dylan's background, Jackson's life, and the commentary on Jackson's case.

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. *The Times They Are A-changin'* in 1964 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* (1964) 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."¹ 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's possible that he was singing to the entire folk community: find another prophet.

From then, he began a 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 a 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 begun to fade. Many of the old folk guard were pointing to his apolitical music as a turn away from his strengths.

But on August 21, 1971, black revolutionary George Jackson was gunned down in prison. Shortly after hearing the news, Dylan penned "George Jackson," a song he wrote after reading a newspaper account of

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Jackson's death on November 3, 1971 (Heylin 330). He recorded two versions of the song on November 4, a solo-acoustic version and a full-band version. About a week later, on November 12, Columbia Records 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. Many thought the old Dylan was back. In a 1972 *Rolling Stone* review, music critic Paul Nelson was cautiously optimistic: "[T]he old fire's there: he's playing guitar and harmonica and singing with new life — but I think it's a lovely one-shot without a context" (par. 24).

George Jackson's Life and Death

Jackson's life and death was 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 (Williford). The last time Jackson was convicted of a crime was at the 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 presiding judge were also killed, and UCLA philosophy professor Angela Davis was implicated in and later acquitted of 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. 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, which is widely considered an assassination. In 1970, Angela Davis was on the FBI Most Wanted List. By the time Jackson was killed, the United States had been bogged down in Vietnam, and mass protests were becoming common. Less than three weeks after Jackson’s death in California, more than one thousand inmates took over the Attica Correctional Facility in western New York. Four days later, state troopers and guards violently took back the prison, leaving twenty-nine inmates and ten hostages dead. Jackson’s death came in the midst of an unprecedented period of turbulence.

Analysis and commentary about George Jackson

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, 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 Foucault and Jean Genet.

In a pamphlet titled "The Assassination of George Jackson," the Prison Information Group, led by Foucault, called Jackson's death a "political assassination" (140), saying that in America, assassination is a "form of political action" (142). 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. The section about the press coverage stated: "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" (140).

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 prison activism and education (310). 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," showcasing the subjective nature of historical recollection.

In his well-known collection of letters, *Soledad Brother*, Jackson writes that black American men who live past 18 years old are "conditioned to accept the inevitability of prison" (4). In *Blood in My Eyes*, a posthumously published collection of essays clarifying his views on communism, fascism, and revolution, Jackson 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"

(102). Many concluded that Jackson's views, not his crimes, kept him in prison.

The competing narratives

Dylan biographer Heylin writes that Dylan first heard of Jackson's death by reading about it in a newspaper (330). In fact, Dylan said that he got ideas for some of his most famous topical songs from newspaper accounts. 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" (*Dont Look Back*). While it isn't clear which newspapers might have contributed to Dylan's knowledge of Jackson's death, my goal is to examine a variety of types of newspapers to compare Dylan's narrative with the narratives presented in the newspaper. To get a well-rounded picture of the press covered story, I examine the national newspaper of record, the *New York Times*; the *Chicago Defender*, a black newspaper, to represent a black perspective; and the *Los Angeles Times* to represent a west coast perspective. Original stories—found in microfilm archives or digital ProQuest databases—served as the raw data for the historical analysis. Each story provided historical facts, and also raw data for the thematic textual analysis that informed the conclusion of this paper. The result is a paper that looks backward, toward the facts as reporters found them, and looks forward, at the way historical information gets documented, stored, and remembered in popular culture.

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 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."

A story 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 contextualized 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 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 political 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, Jackson was the victim, not the

perpetrator, though Wicker recognizes the unlikelihood that the prison incident itself was set up to kill him.

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." The editorial finishes, "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 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, op-ed, 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?"

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 black newspaper like the *Chicago Defender*. The *Defender* indeed covered the story, but with the traditional journalistic restraint typically found in mainstream news organizations. 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.

The first story in the *Chicago Defender* starts with a pretty soft lede for such a dramatic story: "George Jackson, born on Chicago's south side,

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 Jackson in the *Chicago Defender* between August 29, 1971, and September 21, 1971, but those stories focused on issues like a new journal about injustice, Angela Davis' trial, and educating black children. On September 22, 1971, a United Press International story about a new autopsy report contradicted the original explanation. 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!" 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.

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 Jackson's radical politics, potentially destroying any credibility the *Defender* held. An unabashed accusation of the government of assassinating Jackson might have been seen as unabashed support of Jackson's politics. While those speculations might not be the only explanations, the *Defender's* coverage seemed to be the least similar to Dylan's version.

A West Coast Perspective: The Los Angeles Times.

The *Los Angeles Times* ran two stories about Jackson the day after he was killed. The first story 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 provided a little more background on Jackson’s life and politics. This story 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. The story 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 on August 23 reported the search for the lawyer who was suspected of providing Jackson with the gun. The story on August 24 provided a 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 found on the Emmett Till case 16 years earlier, 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.

Bob Dylan's version of Jackson's death.

Dylan biographer 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 (330-331). And the poor sales of the record suggest "that Dylan was not the only one for whom such political statements were passé" (331).

The song follows a simple structure: a four-line verse with the second and fourth lines rhyming. The chorus after every verse is the same: "Lord, Lord, / They cut George Jackson down. / Lord, Lord, / They laid him in the ground."² Backup singers join Dylan on the chorus. Between each verse is a harmonica solo. The arrangement is simple: guitar, bass, and tambourine clap on the two and four of each measure. Piano and steel pedal come in and out of the song. The song has a strolling, happy-go-lucky vibe that belies the dark topic and lyrics. Dylan finishes the last verse a little over three minutes into the song, but the song goes on for two more minutes, repeating the chorus eight times before the song fades out. The chords follow the same I-V-IV-minor-ii chord progression throughout the song, with a slight variation at the end of the chorus where it returns to the I-chord instead of the minor-ii chord. Lyrically and musically, it pales compared to many of the songs in Dylan's catalogue. The second side of the single contained the acoustic version—just guitar and harmonica—that had a more somber feel.

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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. The song begins with that seemingly insincere statement. Regardless, Dylan clearly concludes that Jackson was murdered. Jackson didn’t die; he was killed. “Shot him through the head,” he sings. 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.” Much of the evidence points to Jackson’s being a political prisoner. Jackson’s 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. For a man who has written some of the most iconic songs of the last 50 years, Dylan inserted a cliché—“And they threw away the key.” Jackson was not getting out of prison, Dylan noted, even though he didn’t even steal enough to buy a television. The cliché, and a few more that are to follow, indicate that Dylan’s heart wasn’t in this song, especially compared with his clever writing about Hattie Carroll and Medgar Edgars less than 10 years earlier.

In the third verse, 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 is 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 is one of the first times Dylan uses a word like “shit.” As the civil rights movement became angrier and more aggressive, as demonstrated by militants like Jackson, the Black Panther Party, and Stokely Carmichael, Dylan’s music became

angrier and more aggressive, culminating in Dylan's case for Rubin Carter's innocence in "Hurricane," a song that grabs listeners by their collars and slams them against a wall. 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 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 never directly addresses Jackson's politics. Instead, he describes Jackson as someone with power and love, who doesn't take shit and doesn't bow down.

Dylan finishes the otherwise forgettable song with a 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."³ Dylan's line brings to mind the separation referred to between those with power and those without, those who control the means of production and those who don't, those on the inside of the prison bars and those on the outside. 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

³ Dylan recorded two versions of the song and two variations on the lyrics. The acoustic version, which is archived on <http://www.bobdylan.com>, is quoted here. The full 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 nor guards.

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.

It's dangerous to assign motivations to historical actions, but this entire song lacks sincerity: the clichés, the vague phrases, and the tears in bed all point to Dylan not taking this song as seriously as he did with some of his other topical pieces. When he wrote in "The Death of Emmett Till" in 1962, Dylan was a nobody, looking to find a story that might make him a somebody. That song fell flat, but Dylan seemed to grow from writing it. When Dylan wrote "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll" in 1964, he was a somebody, and he powerfully told the story of a nobody. Fifty years after Carroll's death and that song can still give listeners goose bumps. But Dylan's musical obituary for George Jackson was different. He was a superstar, maybe going through a rough patch in his career. And Jackson was not a nobody; he was in many ways a public figure. The story of Jackson's short life and violent death—unlike that of Hattie Carroll's—would have lived on with or without Dylan's song.

Conclusion: Song as Obituary

Stories about death take a particular importance in our society. Communication scholar Hume argues in her analysis of American obituaries, "[O]bituaries share 'death stories' of people who have never met, making individual and generational memories an element of public consciousness through the mass media" (16). 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" (23). 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, the obituaries reflected

these changes. Hence, she writes, “Obituaries may help distribute a type of ideology to their mass audiences” (22).

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.⁴ Dylan’s song was only 127 words long, counting the chorus only once, considerably shorter than most newspaper obituaries. 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. 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

⁴ The timing of this, as laid out by Heylin, 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. However, no other Dylan biographers contract Heylin’s timeline.

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." This line resembles 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." 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 more guards. Unlike with the newspaper coverage of Emmett Till and Hattie Carroll—two other events Dylan sang about—Dylan probably approved of the sympathetic coverage of Jackson's death.

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* editorial writers 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 gave in other topical song such as "The Death of Emmett Till," "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll," or "Hurricane." He really only provided two verifiable facts—that Jackson was arrest for a \$70 robbery and that he was killed.

Like an obituary, Dylan didn't recap the details of the death, but celebrated 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 were important, as demonstrated by his support of the supposed wrongfully convicted boxer, Rubin “Hurricane” Carter.

But to leave this song in the same realm as a newspaper clipping probably misses the impact a song like this can have. Not to downplay the importance of good journalism or the personal value loved ones find in an obituary, the shelf life of a newspaper clipping is relatively limited. But Dylan's song lives on, in the grooves of old vinyl records, in the ones and zeros of CDs, and in the ether of online music distribution. And Dylan's version of the event counts. A Google search for George Jackson, conducted on August 7, 2014, brought up about 38 million results. The first was to Wikipedia. The eighth website listed was a link to Bob Dylan's lyrics archive. This song has been covered by professional musicians and YouTube amateurs. Dylan's “on-off” single that didn't sell well on.

In *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Lowenthal argued that one of the biggest differences between history and memory is that memory does seek out new facts, and history is constantly looking for new interpretations and meanings (214). History is actively revised; memory is unintentionally revised. Bob Dylan's song contributes more to how we *remember* these events than to the *history* of the events. People may not remember the balanced coverage of the story by the newspapers or the rigorous academic historical studies on his death. But people can remember Dylan's catchy, repeated chorus, “Lord, Lord, they cut George Jackson down. / Lord, Lord, they laid him in the ground.” Dylan's commemoration

of Jackson might not be accurate, comprehensive, or trustworthy, but that's moot. His version is memorable.

Why do we remember his version? Not because he's a more trusted source, although to some he might be. And not because he was closer to the scene or offered an insight others didn't. We remember it for the same reason the eighteenth-century French passed poems and songs as Darnton chronicled, and for the same reason Lomax, Forcucci, and Scott recorded and documented the folk songs passed down through generations. We remember Dylan's version because form matters, because the way we write or record something or the medium we transmit something changes the way others receive and interpret it, and because making a message beautiful makes it last. Even though this song is not Dylan's best, it is still a Dylan song. It matters because he matters. It matters because pop and rock songs are not trivial elements of popular culture, but are time capsules that were formed by the past, that depict the present, and that inform the future. Through Google search results and YouTube covers, Dylan's song continues to shape popular understanding of George Jackson's death in a way the *Los Angeles Times* or the *New York Times* never will.

Appendix

Bob Dylan's "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.
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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