THE CUTTING EDGE:

NASHVILLE SESSIONS FOR BLONDE ON BLONDE FEBRUARY 1966

by Roger Ford



Philadelphia, probably on 24 February 1966 [A version of this photograph is on the sleeve of BLONDE ON BLONDE]

Less than three weeks after his last New York session, Dylan arrived in Nashville to have another try at recording material for his next album. In the meantime he had played gigs with The Hawks at half a dozen cities, finishing (for the time being) at Norfolk, Virginia on February 12. At least three post-"Highway 61 Revisited" songs were now featuring in his stage show: 'Freeze Out/Visions Of Johanna' in the acoustic half and 'Tell Me, Mama' and 'Leopard-Skin Pill-Box Hat' in the amplified half.¹

Al Kooper, who had been touring with The Blues Project, flew in from his last gig at Yellow Springs, Ohio. We'll come to Robbie Robertson later.

It's worth mentioning at this point that there appear to be no surviving recording sheets for the Nashville sessions. These are the sheets headed "Tape Identification Data" that were always filled in by hand for the New York sessions, detailing the song titles and takes recorded on each tape reel. Either these forms were not generally used in the Nashville studios, or they were discarded once the information had been recorded elsewhere (e.g. on the tape box), or they have just been lost.

February 14, 1966

According to Michael Krogsgaard's published notes on the studio documents 3 , two sessions were booked for this first day, from 2.00-6.00pm and from 6.00-9.30pm

4TH TIME AROUND (NCO 83182)4

Take 1, Rehearsal (Disc 12 Track 11): The take starts on the minor-key section of the intro, the full band playing, but breaks down ten seconds later, one of the musicians saying "One more time". Let's just consider who those musicians might be, as the credits in the box set book seem a little off the mark in places. The drums are undoubtedly Kenny Buttrey, and the bass Joe South (Bob Johnston calls him by name in one of the later takes). Dylan plays the steel-string acoustic guitar. For the first time on a Dylan record we hear a Spanish guitar, and in fact there are two of them doing that pretty picking pattern. The notes indicate that these are played by Wayne Moss and Jerry Kennedy; but according to Michael Krogsgaard, Kennedy was only

present for the second session, so the second guitar is more likely Charlie McCoy. Which brings us to the story that just will not die – that McCoy played bass harmonica on this song. Michael Krogsgaard reported this, and now the box set book says the same, so presumably it is written somewhere in the studio documents. There is indeed an instrument, first heard on some early stereo pressings of "Blonde On Blonde", that sounds at times as though it could almost be a bass harmonica, but it is most definitely not one. Clearly, from the way it is played on some of the later takes, it is an electronic organ of some sort, probably the same one (a Wurlitzer?) that produced the special effects on 'Leopard-Skin Pill-Box Hat' later on in the day – and probably likewise being played by Al Kooper. There is no audible trace of a bass harmonica on any of these twenty takes.

Take 2, Breakdown (Disc 12 Track 12): Already, we have an almost complete take. It only fails because Dylan has neglected to tell the musicians that the structure of the last verse is different from all the others; so, as Dylan sings "And I, I never took much..." they switch to the minor-chord section of the tune instead of repeating the standard major-chord pattern. Dylan, clearly rather in awe of the Nashville musicians, is profusely apologetic. Other than that, it's a great performance, beautifully sung.

Takes 3-4, Rehearsal (Disc 12 Track 13): After Johnston's "Rolling on 3" slate there's a little discussion between two of the Nashville musicians, ending with "OK, well let's go and start it back here, tidy it up". Then, after a count-in, they practise the intro again, but it seems the two Spanish guitarists are playing the minor chord sequence ($G^{\sharp}m$, $F^{\sharp}m$) while the bass and organ are playing the major pattern (E, A); thankfully it breaks down quickly, and they try again. This time the organist is playing the correct minor chords, but Joe South still seems lost – odd, considering that he played it fine on Take 2. As this take breaks down it's very easy to hear that the supposed bass harmonica chords are actually being played by a keyboard. You can also very clearly hear that each note starts with an ugly sort of click, rather like the noise of a dirty electrical switch. Perhaps this sonic effect was intended to make the keyboard sound like a harpsichord, or perhaps it was just bad electronics; but I imagine that this was what eventually annoyed Dylan to such a degree that he had the instrument removed from the final take. More on that subject later.

Take 5, Complete (Disc 12 Track 14): The first complete take, still starting on the minor-chord section with everyone playing. Dylan hasn't yet got fully comfortable with the phrasing, which is a little awkward here and there. They get through the different structure of the final verse fine, and Dylan plays a few bars of harmonica; he then leaves it to the rest of the band, who carry on riffing for quite a while before the take is finally faded.

Takes 6-7, Rehearsal (Disc 12 Track 15): The intro starts to be extended. The Spanish guitars now start it off on their own, adding the major chord sequence onto the beginning; but one of them misses the change to the minor section, so they start again. The second time, Dylan comes in with his harmonica on the minor bars, and then the bass and drums ease in following the return to the major. This pattern is maintained from here on, right through to the final take. However, on this take Buttrey and South come in too soon, not allowing for the full eight bars of Dylan's harmonica solo back on the major pattern. Johnston lets it ride, but when one of the Spanish guitars plays a wrong note two lines into the third verse, he calls it off. "Let's save your voice, Bob... Kenny, don't come in quite so soon. Charlie, point at him when to come in." Subsequent dialogue reveals that Dylan's vocal microphone wasn't mixed high enough in the other musicians' earphones for them to hear when he was finished with playing the harmonica.

Take 8, Rehearsal (Disc 12 Track 16): The new intro works fine on this take, which is taken a little faster than most. But at the end of the second verse Johnston breaks it off, complaining about strings rattling on the frets of Joe South's bass. It's hard to know why some of these takes have been labelled 'rehearsals' on "The Cutting Edge"; certainly this one seems like a serious attempt that just happens to break down.

Takes 9-10, False starts (Disc 12 Track 17): Dylan practises a few bars solo with his acoustic guitar, calling to mind the later 1966 live performances. The organ plays some single notes, sounding not remotely like a bass harmonica. Two short false starts follow, both failing with slips by one of the twin guitarists.

Take 11, Complete (Disc 13 Track 1, also on 6-CD set): The second of the three complete takes. Dylan still has trouble with the phrasing of "Everybody must give something back for something they get", rushing through "everybody" in order

to get "must" on the beat. The drums and organ are mixed a little lower here than they were on Take 5, so the clicking noises made by the organ are not so noticeable. But there are some other intrusive tapping noises from somewhere (examples at 2:40 & 3:19) which probably would have put paid to this take as a candidate for release. Dylan plays a whole verse of harmonica at the end before the track is faded out.

Takes 12-13, False starts (Disc 13 Track 2): Take 12 goes OK until the end of the intro when Dylan starts his acoustic rhythm guitar part; he never gets in step with the rest of the band, and after the first couple of vocal lines Johnston breaks in: "One more... Everybody together on 13". The higher Spanish guitar makes a slip almost as soon as they start again, though, and that's Take 13 over.

Takes 14-16, False starts (Disc 13 Track 3): Take 14 suffers a similar fate. Take 15 gets as far as Dylan's



Columbia Records held an "open house" in Nashville on 22 October 1965 to mark the completion of its new studio there, where Dylan recorded from 1966 to 1970. The studio speakers and the clock, above the control room window, can be seen in some of the photos from those later sessions.

vocal entrance, but one of the musicians says "We were rushing a little bit... were we rushing?" "Yeah," says Johnston, "Count it off one more time for them, Bob". (It's news that Dylan had been counting them off before.) "Er," he says, and strums the rhythm, perhaps to demonstrate the tempo he wants. The musician who has been counting in most of the previous takes then does so again, but once more the higher Spanish guitar trips up on the opening bars.

Takes 17-18, False starts (Disc 13 Track 4): The Spanish guitars play faultlessly this time, but Dylan again has trouble coming in on the rhythm with his guitar at the end of the intro, and as soon as he starts singing, Johnston breaks in with "Hold it a second... everybody's got to get together", and asks for Dylan's guitar microphone to be moved a little further away. "Just who isn't together?" asks Dylan, an edge of frustration beginning to show. "The guitars and you there weren't together," replies Johnston, not being too specific. Dylan does a little better on Take 18, but it's still not perfect. Buttrey comes in with his drum pattern all upside-down, and he crashes it to a halt. "Sounds like the guitars are dragging," says someone – maybe Buttrey.

Take 19, Breakdown (Disc 13 Track 5): Dylan's guitar entry is much better now, but Joe South's bass has a bit of a top edge on it here and there (listen at around 0:47 to 0:51), and half way through the second verse it's Johnston again: "I'm sorry... Joe, you're breaking up on that bass again... like it's distorting all over the place." "The talk-back is too", someone comments, referring to some serious distortion on Johnston's own voice.

Take 19 mis-slate, Complete (Disc 13 Track 6): We don't hear it on the recording, but evidently this take was mistakenly slated as a second Take 19. This, at last, is the master take – sort of. It isn't the original 4-track recording from this session (which was used for some early vinyl editions of "Blonde On Blonde"), but the same take with an overdubbed drum track – and no organ. This cleaner-sounding overdubbed master was used for the finalised US mono album, for later stereo vinyl editions and all CD releases. The notes in the box set book make no reference to the overdub, which was probably occasioned by the unpleasant clicking noises made by the organ's keyboard action. What is most surprising is that Bob Johnston didn't pick up on this early in the session and ask for a different keyboard instrument – or even a different type of sound from the same one. The final take evidently went through a protracted mixing and mastering process for both mono and stereo albums before someone finally decided that the organ had to go, and arranged for the overdub. We don't know for sure when the overdub was done, but it seems likely that it was much later in the album's gestation period, on June 16, 1966.8

So why was the original unmodified take not included in "The Cutting Edge"? The fact that all remixes of "Blonde On Blonde" for digital release⁹ have used the overdubbed track strongly suggests that the primary 4-track master tape was irreversibly overdubbed with the new drum track. One might have hoped that the safety copy of the 4-track tape still existed and could have been used for this release; but perhaps it has been lost or has become unusable. It's a shame, though, that the Collector's Edition makes no acknowledgement at all of the overdub. For the sake of completeness it would also have been nice to hear all four overdub takes from the June 16 session – particularly if any of them did indeed feature a harpsichord; but perhaps these have also been lost.

VISIONS OF JOHANNA (NCO 83183)

Take 1, False start (Disc 13 Track 7): "'The Visions Of Johanna', Take 1" announces Bob Johnston, the first word somehow startling. Apart from the absence of harmonica the intro sounds very much like the released version; but when Dylan starts singing it sounds as if he's in another room. "Hey, one more time – I'm sorry, Bob, we didn't have your mike on," says Johnston.

Take 2, Breakdown (Disc 13 Track 8): Dylan takes his acoustic guitar intro at a slower pace this time, and plays it a little differently too. The rhythm section sounds less confident than on the final take, Joe South playing a wrong note at one point. Check out the way Dylan sings "In this room the heat pipes just cough" – the word "cough" fades away just like the small sounds in the room he's conjuring up. As he sings this line, a second acoustic guitar very softly starts adding decoration; the notes suggest that this is Charlie McCoy, and it certainly has some similarity to his work on 'Desolation Row'. There's an electric guitar playing the same chopped chords as on the released take, each chord gone almost before you can be sure you've heard it. Kooper is using the same style of organ playing, up in the dog-whistle frequency range. The take progresses into the second verse, but after Dylan has sung the "ghost of electricity" line everyone just stops; presumably Dylan has given some visual signal that he doesn't want to continue.

Take 3, False Start (Disc 13 Track 9): Dylan raises the tempo a little with his guitar intro, but without the harmonica it goes on too long; the other musicians only come in after he starts singing, as though they've been caught napping. For some reason the drums have a whopping reverb on them on this particular take. After the first line the bass and electric guitar practically disappear, and after the second line Dylan and Buttrey stop too, leaving the take to tail off on Kooper's ghost-of-electricity organ line.

Take 4, Complete (Disc 13 Track 10): Then, suddenly, it's there, one of Dylan's total masterpieces. Since his first attempt to record the song in New York at the end of the previous November, Dylan had been performing the song solo in concert, and perhaps by now he had formed a better idea of how he wanted it to sound on record; or maybe he just struck lucky with the fresh approach of the Nashville musicians. Dylan fleshes out the acoustic intro with his harmonica, Buttrey finds the right way to come in and the song gains a dynamic range that it never had at the New York session. There's no second acoustic guitar adding decoration now; maybe Dylan thought it was too much of a re-run of McCoy's work on 'Desolation Row', or maybe he found himself missing the spiky edge that Robbie Robertson had given the New York takes. So now, from the second verse onwards, we have Dylan's vocals punctuated by Robertson's improvised electric guitar fills. This seems to have been Robertson's only appearance during the February sessions, and some have disputed that he was there at all. But his style seems to me unmistakeable. Like most risk-takers he made a couple of slips, and these were edited out for the original US mono album; but most other mixes have left his notes untouched, and that's the way it is here too. For this take someone is







recruited to play cymbal strokes in between verses; this was recorded separately from the drums, on the same tape track/ stem as Robertson's lead guitar. For the US mono mix this stem was quite low in the mix, and had its higher frequencies heavily damped; here it is presented rather more clearly, though still not as loud as on some of the later mixes.

LEOPARD-SKIN PILL-BOX HAT (NCO 83184

Takes 1-2, Rehearsal (Disc 13 Track 11): "The intro is just the drum and Bob," says Johnston after slating Take 1. Buttrey sets up a steady beat on his bass drum, and Dylan plays his harmonica hand-held; but without any other instruments to provide a harmonic framework it doesn't really work, and they don't get as far as Dylan's vocal entrance. Bob isn't happy with the harmonica he's playing, and possibly changes it for another. There's a little practising by one of the electric guitarists, and some inconsequential dialogue before they launch into Take 2. This time Wayne Moss plays a sparse acoustic guitar line behind the bass drum and harmonica intro, and it's transformed. But Johnston cuts it off again before the vocal, with "I'm sorry, one more time – we didn't have Wayne up high enough."

Take 3, Complete (Disc 13 Track 12, also on 6-CD set): With Moss's guitar turned up slightly, we now get a nice complete take. It's still played as a straight 12-bar blues in A, but with a more relaxed feel than the New York versions from late January. An electric guitar (Charlie McCoy?) takes over from the acoustic when the vocal begins, and a little later there's also a lead guitar with a very thin, twangy tone – almost certainly Jerry Kennedy, as we'll see later. Hargus Robbins makes his first appearance on piano, and Joe South continues on bass. Dylan's classic blues approach of using harmonica phrases to punctuate his vocals was employed again, and with rather more impact, in 'Pledging My Time'; perhaps this is why he chose to re-record 'Pill-Box Hat' without harmonica, near the end of the album sessions, rather than using this take.

Takes 4-5, Rehearsal (Disc 13 Track 13): We're not party to what went on between Takes 3 and 4; but by the time we're allowed back in the room Kooper has discovered some special effects on the studio's Wurlitzer organ¹², and these have prompted a complete and disastrous rearrangement of the song, far worse than the impact of the police whistle on "Highway 61 Revisited". The effects concerned, as you will no doubt be aware, are a doorbell and a car horn. Two rings on the doorbell start it off, the bass drum thumping the beat; the musicians all shout "Who's there?" and the car horn gives two blasts before Buttrey launches the band into the song proper. But they've hardly started before Johnston breaks in: "All right, hold it – let me hear the bell." Laughter, and they start again, but Johnston calls "One more time, and everybody has to say 'Who's there' real loud... scream it!" The third attempt takes off properly, with a fast, syncopated Bo Diddley beat. Dylan sings as though he's having fun, slipping in brief harp riffs between his lines, and Kooper throws in some more car-horn toots on the last line of the verse. Dylan goes off into a harmonica solo, but the take suddenly fades.

Take 6, Breakdown (Disc 13 Track 14): An electric guitar riff – probably not intended to be part of the take – precedes the doorbell and a screeched "Who's there?" worthy of Monty Python. It's pretty much the same formula, but Kooper lays off the car horn during the final line of the verses, leaving just Dylan and Buttrey, the latter starting to improvise a little. After the first two verses Dylan jumps to the one about the doctor; but during the second line the other musicians fall by the wayside for some reason. Dylan carries on, more or less reciting the next few lines before giving up with a laugh.

Take 6 again, Rehearsal (Disc 13 Track 15): Although we don't hear it, Johnston must have slated this as Take 6 again instead of Take 7. There's nothing about the recording to indicate why it is billed as a rehearsal rather than a breakdown. Kooper develops his organ part into something more forceful but then has the bad idea of holding down the car horn right through the last line of the verse. The take is interrupted in the second verse by Johnston's "Hold it just a second, Bob".

Take 8, Complete (Disc 13 Track 16, also on 6-CD and 2-CD sets): This is the only truly complete recording of this arrangement, with all five verses present (the "You don't feel no trouble" verse, featured in a couple of the earlier New York takes, didn't make it down to Nashville). On the turn-around between verses there's a new descending guitar figure that rather presages the one played by Robbie Robertson in the released album take, but it's much more pedestrian. After the third verse comes a lead guitar solo that is almost buried in this mix; this is Jerry Kennedy, as we'll see later. Dylan now plays electric rhythm guitar, and abandons his harmonica interjections until after the last verse. The end is given a gradual fade, to suit its inclusion in the "Best of The Cutting Edge" set.

Take 9, Breakdown (Disc 13 Track 17): The same formula, but Kennedy stops playing half-way through the instrumental break, and a few bars later the others follow suit.

Take 10, False Start (Disc 13 Track 18): The false start is preceded by a little rhythm guitar practice from Dylan, and then some studio dialogue. From the sound of it, Bob Johnston is out on the studio floor, and someone called Tom (engineer? assistant producer?) is at Johnston's normal post in the control room. In response to a query from one of the musicians, Johnston explains the song's structure: "There's three verses, then the solo, there's two more verses, and that's the end." "I know, I know, but I don't count," replies one of the musicians. And then, "Every turnaround, Tom, it's going to be the piano, instead of this guitar here." "OK," replies Tom, and slates the take simply as "Ten". "And Tom," continues Johnston, "there's going to be an instrumental on the piano, too, and I'll point at you when." "Jerry not have an instrumental now?" asks Tom; "No," confirms Johnston. When they finally get to play the song though, it breaks down after the first vocal line.

Take 11, Breakdown (Disc 13 Track 19): As stipulated, Hargus Robbins takes over the turnarounds; his descending-octaves piano phrase adds a lot more interest than the guitar had done. In these comedy versions Dylan has been switching the items of headwear in the third verse, giving us "You with my belt / Wrapped around your head / And me just sitting there / In your brand new leopard-skin pill-box hat"; but now he gets the pronouns all tangled up and brings the song to a halt. "Hey, we're spending too much *time* on it... it's just a natural song, y'know?" Then, after a pause, "Well, let's get it this last time, let's just make it."

Take 12, False Start (Disc 13 Track 20): But the next take is brought down after the first couple of lines by Robbins, playing a B-movie piano trill until everyone notices and stops.

Take 13, 'Complete' (Disc 13 Track 21): The reversed-hat pronouns sort themselves out on this last take, and Robbins delivers the promised piano instrumental in an agreeable bar-room fashion. But it's not really a complete take, as Dylan seems to forget the words at the entrance to the last verse; the other musicians carry on for a few bars and then give up too. Clearly Dylan doesn't have the enthusiasm to try it again, and wisely leaves the song alone until the following month's sessions.

February 15-16, 1966

I'LL KEEP IT WITH MINE (NCO 83185)

As has been recounted many times, Dylan arrives at the studio late and then keeps the musicians waiting until 4am the next morning while he sits at the piano writing 'Sad-Eyed Lady Of The Lowlands'. At some stage (the box set book suggests the evening of the 15th) Johnston gets some of the musicians to work up an arrangement of 'I'll Keep It With Mine'. Since his original 1964 Witmark demo of the song, Dylan had recorded a tremendous solo piano version at the "Bringing It All Back Home" sessions but left it unreleased, and then made a half-hearted attempt at the final New York recording session of January 1966. Perhaps Johnston liked the song and thought that having an arrangement recorded might help him persuade Dylan to try it again; or possibly it was Dylan's own idea but he let it fall by the wayside.

Take 1, Rehearsal (Disc 13 Track 22): The twin Spanish guitars used the previous day on '4th Time Around' are deployed again here, in perhaps too similar a fashion. Here Wayne Moss (as revealed by dialogue on Take 5) practices the broken-chord picking pattern while Charlie McCoy doodles. Johnston slates "Take 1", the lead guitar starts the picking but the other quitarist comes in with his strummed part too early. They agree on six bars for subsequent takes.

Take 2, Rehearsal (Disc 13 Track 23): The intro sorted out, this take gets properly under way, Buttrey playing a lovely hi-hat pattern to provide the rhythm. But it seems they haven't yet worked out the turnaround into the second verse, so they stop there.

Take 3, Rehearsal (Disc 13 Track 24): The lead quitarist makes a slip after a couple of bars, and that's it.

Take 4, Rehearsal (Disc 13 Track 25): Aside from Moss and McCoy, the only other instruments listed in the personnel notes are bass (Joe South) and drums (Kenny Buttrey). There's no mention of a piano, but there's definitely one in there, and I assume it's played by Hargus Robbins. Listen at 0:41, for example: the sound is too rich to be just Spanish guitars, bass and drums. A few bars into the second verse, Johnston breaks in with "OK, that's what I want. Kenny, cut off every time there – don't let it hang over", referring (I think) to the way the drummer left his hi-hat ringing on the turnaround (0:56). The two guitarists practice a little, and an engineer asks McCoy to "put a pad under your foot – we can hear it... or take your shoe off". A little more practising, then someone (Moss?) says "Yeah, put some tremolo, man, on the overdub when I put the heavy thing..." – it's not entirely audible, but the mention of a planned overdub is intriguing.

Take 5, Rehearsal (Disc 13 Track 26): This take gets nearly to the end of the second chorus before Johnston breaks it off with "Hold it... take that G chord out that I put in – it's screwing it up". Maybe he means the G minor chord that features briefly in the chorus, but if so, it seems to stay resolutely part of the arrangement in subsequent takes.

Takes 6-7, Rehearsal (Disc 13 Track 27): Buttrey causes the next take to crash, half-way through the first verse. "Rolling on 7" says an engineer, and Moss starts it off again. "Wayne, excuse me..." breaks in the engineer, "move your guitar around, you're thumping now." Adjustments are made, and in the background Robbins can be heard practising his low-register piano vamping.

Take 8, Rehearsal (Disc 13 Track 28): Moss sets the tempo a little slower this time. On the turnaround into the third verse Johnston can be heard giving some instructions, but they are obscured by Moss's guitar picking. "OK?" he says as they come to a stop.

Take 8 again, Complete (Disc 13 Track 29): They make it through all three verses, Moss finishing it off with no fewer than ten bars of his solo guitar picking before a final note that is accompanied by a gentle cymbal stroke. At the climax of the third chorus, Robbins can for the first time be heard playing a high-up eighth-note vamp

behind the beat - but it's still almost subliminal.

Take 9, Complete (Disc 13 Track 30): Quite a lot seems to have gone on prior to this final take. Immediately noticeable is that not one but *two* Spanish guitars are now playing the Wayne Moss picking part throughout, but with their lowest notes generally an interval apart. Whether this is Moss and McCoy playing together, or Moss overdubbed on himself, is hard to work out. The strummed Spanish guitar seems to be absent, suggesting that perhaps McCoy has just switched roles to double up with Moss instead of playing rhythm. Another change is that Buttrey no longer plays just the hi-hat pattern, but on the choruses he adds snare and perhaps bass drum too. Robbins's high chords can now be heard on all the choruses.

This is essentially the same take as appeared on one of the 'Goldmine' acetates in 1980, 14 but there are very clear differences. Most obviously, the acetate had a hand-









held harmonica dubbed on over the intro, between the verses and at the end, playing over the twin-guitar sections. Most have assumed this overdub was done by Charlie McCoy, and this is probably the most likely scenario. But the playing is certainly not beyond Dylan's capability, and it's at least conceivable that he could have overdubbed the harmonica himself at some point. This wider stereo mix also very clearly has a third Spanish guitar playing rhythm, raising the question of whether there was a third guitarist involved, or – if it was all done by Moss and McCoy – which part was overdubbed and when. But whatever the recording process, the net result was a much fuller and more satisfying instrumental piece. Given that Sony clearly still have this overdubbed version – they have provided it for use as incidental music in a couple of films if – it seems a great pity that they did not include it here. After sitting through nine takes of the tune's development, it would be nice to hear what it finally became – and if possible to have some clarification as to who dubbed on the harmonica and when.

SAD-EYED LADY OF THE LOWLANDS (NCO 83186)

Sometime after 4am, Dylan tells the bleary musicians that he's ready to record; presumably Al Kooper materialises at the same time, ready to play organ.

Take 1, Complete (Disc 14 Track 1, also on 6-CD set): Writer Sean Wilentz, who was allowed to hear the unedited session tapes, quotes some dialogue preceding the first take, and also reports that Dylan did a partial run-through of the song for the musicians before counting in the first take himself;¹⁷ none of that is included here. Astonishingly, they manage a full take first time – over ten minutes long, and missing only the harmonica verse at the end. Dylan misses the entrance to the second verse, but the musicians smoothly step back the necessary couple of bars – one of them can just be heard calling out an instruction after Dylan comes back in. It sounds as though Kenny Buttrey is playing with a tambourine on his hi-hat stand. The words are still a little sketchy in places, and this version starts off with the wonderfully unfamiliar "With your mercury eyes in the months that climb". Despite the lyrical rough edges and the occasional vocal slip it's a lovely performance, sung with just a little more spontaneity and intimacy than the subsequent takes.

Take 2, Rehearsal (Disc 14 Track 2): Having understood the scale of what they were dealing with, the musicians set about tidying the arrangement. There are three acoustic guitars: Dylan's strummed steel-string acoustic, a Spanish guitar played finger-style, and another strummed steel-string that is played with a capo up at the seventh fret, making it sound almost like a mandolin. Buttrey, having dumped the tambourine, tries out the song's signature 6/8 rhythm pattern on his hi-hat. Johnston slates Take 2, but musicians keep practising their styles of accompaniment: piano (Robbins), Spanish guitar (Moss?) and high steel-string (McCoy?). At his own suggestion, Dylan plays four bars on his guitar to set the tempo; everyone else comes in on cue, but the take falls apart after only a couple of bars.

Take 3, Complete (Disc 14 Track 3): This second complete take moves closer to the released version, though the tempo is noticeably slower. Buttrey sticks with the hi-hat pattern, and Kooper's organ lines begin to assume their familiar shape; after the second verse he comes up with the climbing turnaround phrase that is so familiar from the released album track. The words come out surprisingly wrong in the first chorus: "With his warehouse eyes, his Arabian drums / (Sad...) do you think I should wait / Sad-eyed lady, at your gate?" But they get straightened out for the remaining choruses, and apart from this, most of what seems unfamiliar in Dylan's vocal just comes down to differences of phrasing. At the end he plays a full verse and chorus of harmonica; so, with the slower tempo too this take is a full minute longer than the released album cut, making it Dylan's longest studio recording of the 1960s.

Take 4, Complete (Disc 14 Track 4): The released album track... well, almost. As those who have heard the Canadian mono release of "Blonde On Blonde" will know, that album accidentally presented an early mono mix of this song which revealed a vocal slip in the fourth verse: where Dylan should have sung "How could they ever have persuaded you", it came out as "have eh... ...uaded you". This was fixed for the final release with a rather noticeable edit: while Dylan sang "have persuaded", there was a noticeable jump in the volume, the hi-hat pattern stopped and a fraction of a beat was lost somewhere. It always sounded as though a piece had been spliced in from another take of the song, and now that we have the other two complete takes, we have the opportunity to find that piece. It was in fact taken from Take 1, perhaps chosen because it provided a better match in tempo than the slower Take 3. Technically, it was a simple job: a section of the 4-track master (or one copy thereof) was cut out of Take 1 and spliced in as a replacement for the equivalent piece of Take 4. So, as well as Dylan's vocal/guitar track, all the other instruments from that little bit of Take 1 came across as well, resulting in the noticeable discontinuity described above. This 'fixed' copy of the 4-track then became the master that was used for all subsequent mixes of "Blonde On Blonde", both mono and stereo, vinyl and CD.

Thankfully, it appears that the tape researchers for "The Cutting Edge" have turned up a usable safety copy of the original, unedited 4-track master s for both Takes 1 and 4. Take 1 is presented intact, and Take 4 does not contain that 1966 edit. However, Take 4 is still not in the entirely original form that we heard on the Canadian mono album. Given the flexibility of digital editing, where it is just as easy to edit a single track as all four, it seems that someone couldn't resist the challenge of making a better job fixing Dylan's vocal slip. The new edit has, I think, digitally copied just the "pers" syllable of "persuaded", this time from the Take 3 master, and pasted it in to join up with the "uaded" on the original Take 4. Nothing else seems to have been changed. Interestingly, the stumbling "eh" has been left as it was, perhaps to minimise audible impact on other instruments recorded on the same tape track as Dylan's vocal (these being his acoustic guitar and Joe South's bass, I believe).

Presumably the producers of "The Cutting Edge" thought they were doing listeners a favour by making this little edit; but it does make me wonder what other bits of cosmetic surgery they may have applied to the music across the whole box set. If they were happy to leave Dylan's vocal slip in 'It's Alright, Ma' untouched, then why not this one?

Apart from that edit, how is this new mix? Well, if you like really wide 1960s stereo then this won't be an adequate substitute for any of the previous stereo mixes. But it has a lot to commend it: the hi-hat has a more natural sound than in previous stereo

mixes, the high-fretted steel string guitar comes across beautifully without being too much out on a limb, and the generally relaxed tone suits the character and length of the song. And finally, the ending is a couple of seconds longer than on any other stereo mix, fading out just a fraction of a second before the Canadian mono.

February 16-17, 1966

The studio is booked from 6pm on the 16th to 7am the next day, but most if not all of the recording is done after 4 in the morning. According to Michael Krogsgaard (see Note 3), keyboard player Bill Aikins was logged as being present from 6 - 10pm, but possibly went home without having recorded anything; he was replaced by Hargus Robbins for the remainder of the night.

STUCK INSIDE OF MOBILE WITH THE MEMPHIS BLUES AGAIN¹⁸ (NCO 83187)

Take 1, Rehearsal (Disc 14 Track 5, also on 6-CD set): Dylan starts off with a little practising by himself, his dropped D tuning oddly reminiscent of 'A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall'. He runs through the chord sequence of the intro, the bass joining in towards the end, and then hums his way through the first few lines of the song. Charlie McCoy calls out to one of the other musicians, "Do you want to count it? I got a mouthful of harp over here."

Once again, the first attempt at a new song is arranged in triple time; this one, like 'Sad-Eyed Lady Of The Lowlands', is in 6/8. Musically it's rather different from what we're used to: there are no minor chords at all, mostly just an alternating E and A, with the occasional B. After the first verse, McCoy starts chugging along on harp behind Dylan's vocal, and the adornments from the electric guitar are augmented by what sounds like a vibraphone (uncredited, but most likely Kooper since there is no organ on this take). The opening lines are among those still in draft form: "Now, the ragman he just stumbles / And walks around the block"; and the first chorus has "I'm stuck inside of Mobile with the Nashville blues again". After three verses they stop. The rather different instrumental line-up and arrangement of this rehearsal take perhaps suggests that it was recorded earlier in the night than the remaining takes; so it's possible that the piano was played by Bill Aikins rather than Hargus Robbins - the style of playing is certainly different; likewise, the lead guitar sounds a little different from that on the later takes, and could have been played by Wayne Moss; so Joe South may have played bass on this take, switching to lead guitar later. 19 New bass player Henry Strzelecki (referred to by name during one of the later takes) was perhaps brought in to enable South to make this switch.

Rehearsal (Disc 14 Track 6, also on 6-CD set): Kooper has moved to organ, as evidenced by a practice line with the sound familiar from the finished song. "We'll just make a playback to listen to," says Dylan, then asks "Aren't you gonna play guitar, Charlie?""Well... yeah," McCoy concedes, and moves to second acoustic guitar. Dylan has worked out a new chord sequence, with C# minor replacing A major in the verse lines, and Abminor opening the chorus. He practises it on his guitar, with bass and drums following, the organ joining in on the chorus; they decide to add an extra bar to the turnaround, to give Dylan a chance to switch back to vocal after his harmonica interlude. The rhythm on this take (and subsequently through to number 14) is 4/4 with a heavy backbeat. They play through the first four verses, Dylan still trying out different forms of words in the chorus: "Oh, Mama, this might be the end / I'm stuck down in Mobile / With the Memphis Blues again".

Take 1, Breakdown (Disc 14 Track 7): This seems very much like another rehearsal aimed at sorting out the musical arrangement; Dylan sings the words very sketchily. He breaks it off just into the second verse - the turnaround between verses is still proving difficult; there's some further discussion about how many beats are required to make this work properly, allowing for Dylan's harmonica break.

Takes 2-3, Rehearsal (Disc 14 Track 8): More practising of the turnaround bars, which also serve as an intro. Henry Strzelecki puts in a two-bar bass figure following Dylan's harmonica phrase, and Buttrey provides a drum fill on the second bar to lead Dylan into the new verse. But Dylan still has trouble timing his entrance, and apologises. The first line is evolving, though: "Oh, the ragman walks in circles..."

Take 4, Breakdown (Disc 14 Track 9): The intro/turnaround pattern seems to be working well now. They get through four verses, but Dylan goes blank each time on the first line of the chorus. "Wait," he interrupts, "I'm sorry; can we listen to that back? I just forgot a whole line there, man."

Take 4 (mis-slate), False Start (Disc 14 Track 10): Dylan mis-times his entrance to the first verse and breaks it off. "No... no, that was too fast," he says, though the tempo had been exactly the same as the previous take.

Take 5, Complete (Disc 14 Track 11): They take it again, at a marginally slower pace; Kooper adds an organ fill on top of the bass prior to the start of each verse. The ragman has started drawing circles up and down the block, and the railroad man smokes Dylan's eyelids rather than his eyeballs as hitherto. After the first couple of verses the chorus moves on from "I'm stuck down in Mobile" to "I'm stuck inside of Mobile". Dylan struggles with the words here and there on the verses he hasn't sung before, and misses substantial chunks of the sixth and ninth; but they keep going to the end. This take was included in "The Bootleg Series Vol.7: No Direction Home", where it seemed a surprisingly poor ambassador for the Nashville sessions; it is much more at the sleeve of BLONDE ON BLONDE



A "Lady Suffolk" interviewed Dylan in the Dakota Building, New York City, on 26 February 1966, supposedly for VOGUE magazine. Jerry Schatzberg set up the meeting and another of his photographs taken that day appears on

home in the context of "The Cutting Edge". On the earlier "Bootleg Series" release the ending was faded out just before the final note; here it isn't, and what do you know, that final note from the bass guitar is accompanied by a bass harmonica, playing two octaves below Dylan's standard harp. Presumably McCoy has just picked the instrument up to add this final touch – there is no sign of it elsewhere in the take, and it doesn't reappear on any subsequent take. Well, for those who have the 18-CD set it provides a nice opportunity for comparison with the bass-harmonica-that-isn't on '4th Time Around'.

Takes 6-8, False Starts (Disc 14 Track 12): "We're rolling on 6 – let's get it!", says Johnston, in team coach mode. They're now trying a different approach to the start of the song, Dylan opening it with his unaccompanied vocal. This is simple for Dylan, but not so easy for the other musicians, who all have to try and come in together on "ragman" without knowing exactly how Dylan is going to phrase the line. The first time, Dylan does a "One, two, three" count-in before he starts singing, but that doesn't help at all. "We just want to take a vocal pickup," one of the musicians says, and gives an illustration of how Dylan might consistently sing that opening phrase so that they know when to come in. Two more unsuccessful attempts follow.

Take 9, Breakdown (Disc 14 Track 13): The opening goes fine this time, but they stop at the end of the first chorus; maybe that was the intention. The first verse still has "But neither them nor the rain man / Could help me to escape", and the chorus "Oh, Mama, this might be the end / I'm stuck inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues again".

Take 10, False Start (Disc 14 Track 14): Off they go again, but Dylan sings "And the ladies treat me kindly / And furnish me with supplies", then breaks of with "Oh no, f... I'm sorry" – presumably censored.

Takes 11-12, Breakdown (Disc 14 Track 15): Dylan dispenses with the harmonica between verses; instead, there's a new descending phrase, played by two guitars and bass. At the beginning of the second verse Dylan comes up with "Now, Shakespeare's in the alley /With his pointed shoes and his heels," but as he sings the next line he realises he's painted himself into a corner. "I'm sorry," he says to the seemingly ever-patient musicians; then he mutters to himself "I can't jump it," giving us a small premonition of 'Absolutely Sweet Marie'. Dylan suggests they take it a little bit slower, and play a little softer on the "Oh, Mama" part. "Very high, soft organ," he suggests. They start on Take 12, but there's nothing at all from the organ or lead quitar, and it breaks down after the first line.

Take 13, Breakdown (Disc 14 Track 16, also on 6-CD and 2-CD sets): Seven verses are completed before Dylan calls it off. Some of the lines in the later verses are still not sufficiently familiar for Dylan to sing them without the odd stumble, and the descending two-quitars-and-a-bass motif in between the verses gets tiresome after a while.



Take 14, Complete (Disc 15 Track 1, also on 6-CD set): Perhaps the musicians have had a break since Take 13, because the whole song seems to have shifted into a new gear. The musical arrangement is very much as per the released take, kicked off by Dylan's harmonica and two driving acoustic guitars. The acoustic guitars also propel the turnarounds between verses, now shortened but augmented by a new, more syncopated bass line. The rhythm has been smoothed out, dropping the backbeat, and although the song seems to move along with more of a sense of purpose, it is actually quite a lot slower, giving Dylan more time to enunciate some of the more convoluted lines. The chorus has reached its final wording of: "Oh, Mama, can this really be the end / To be stuck inside of Mobile / With the Memphis blues again," and with the slower tempo Dylan has the time to put some real despair into the "Oh, Mama" phrase. It needs a little polishing, though: Dylan still makes one or two mistakes ("Waiting to find out the price / One has to go through to get out of / Going through all these things twice"), and the new instrumental coda is under-rehearsed.

Take 15, Complete (Disc 15 Track 2): So here it is, the nigh-on perfect final take used for the album. It is essentially the new arrangement introduced by Take 14, but done without mistakes and with a clean coda. As usual for "The Cutting Edge" it's a narrow, no-frills mix, but it does give due emphasis to that wonderful lead guitar.

With this group of sessions completed, Dylan actually had nigh on half of "Blonde On Blonde" recorded: 36 minutes out of the final 74. But it was still only five songs, one of which was already on the point of being released as a single: hardly enough to call an album.

Next Time: the concluding article on the March 1966 Nashville sessions for "Blonde On Blonde".

Once again, my thanks go to Ian Woodward and Bob Stacy for their help in putting this article together.

Notes:

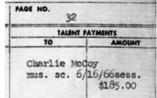
- 1 'Visions Of Johanna' and 'Tell Me, Mama' have long been known from the circulating tape of the White Plains, NY, concert of February 5, and 'Leopard-Skin Pill-Box Hat' was clearly identified in a contemporary review of the February 11 show in Richmond, VA concert (Richmond Times-Dispatch, Feb 12 1966).
- 2 Stated by Kooper in his piece about "Blonde On Blonde" for MOJO magazine, July 2016
- 3 Michael Krogsgaard, Bob Dylan: The Recording Sessions, Part Two (The Telegraph #53, Winter 1995). Now accessible at http://www.punkhart.com/dylan/sessions-2.html
- 4 The CO numbers for songs recorded at the Nashville studios were prefixed with an N to distinguish them from those recorded in New York. Each studio had its own numbering series.

5 Aside from Kooper, the other possibility is Bill Aikins, a Nashville keyboardist who had been in Charlie McCoy's band The Escorts; Michael Krogsgaard indicates that Aikins was present at this early session, and Aikins was indeed among the musicians credited on the sleeve of "Blonde On Blonde".

6 McCoy evidently did have a bass harp at the "Blonde On Blonde" sessions – check out the closing seconds of 'Stuck Inside Of Mobile With The Memphis Blues Again', Take 5; but for a better sample of what a bass harmonica sounds like, listen to McCoy's playing on the last verse of Simon & Garfunkel's 'The Boxer'.

7 Two different mono mixes featuring the original organ and drum track were released, one on the Canadian mono LP, another on the French; and a stereo mix was on US stereo copies until around 1968-69 and on UK and Japanese stereo pressings until the early 1980s.

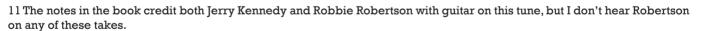
8 Michael Krogsgaard (see Note 3 above) reported that an overdub session for '4th Time Around' took place at the Nashville Studios on June 16 1966, less than two weeks before "Blonde On Blonde" finally reached the shops. The musicians logged as playing at the session were Charlie McCoy (harpsichord) and Kenny Buttrey (drums); there is no evidence that Dylan was present. Three brief false starts and one complete take were recorded. Although Krogsgaard indicated that this version was never released, this date does seem the most likely candidate for the evident drum overdub on the released "Blonde On Blonde" track; there is no evidence as yet of any other overdub session for the track. Clearly there is no harpsichord on the final



album track, but this might have been tried out on the false starts and then dropped for the final take, or it could possibly have been recorded on a separate channel and then not included in the final overdub onto the 4-track master. Some think that with the mono album in the shops less than two weeks later, this session was too late to have been part of it. I am not convinced by this argument: five years later Dylan had his 'George Jackson' single on sale a week after the recording session. And if this session was not intended for the album, then what was its purpose? Incidentally, there is an oblique reference to the June overdub session in the media-carrying book of the 6-CD Deluxe Edition. In the bottom left-hand corner of the page that carries Disc 3, there is a part of Page 32 from Dylan's Artist Contract File; this shows a payment of \$185.00 to Charlie McCoy for "6/16/66sess."

9 The album was remixed by Tim Geelan in 1987 for the original CD release, by MarkWilder in 1992 for the MasterSound gold CD and by Michael Brauer in 1999 for all subsequent CD and SACD editions.

10 Charlie McCoy, interviewed in Hit Parader, October 1966, said that "The second time Dylan came in he brought his own guitar player with him – Robby Robertson – who by the way is one of the best blues guitar players I've ever heard in my life." (see http://www.punkhart.com/dylan/interviews/bob_sessions.html). Daryl Sanders, who wrote a good article on the "Blonde On Blonde" sessions for Nashville Scene in 2011, maintained the same, and credited the lead guitar on 'Visions Of Johanna' to Wayne Moss. Another possibility is that the original February recording was in fact made with one of the Nashville guitarists playing lead, and that during the March sessions, when Robertson was present, Dylan had the original lead guitar track replaced with an overdub of Robertson's guitar, adding the cymbal at the same time – much like the drum overdub for '4th Time Around'. There is no documentary evidence of overdubs being recorded at the March sessions, but the lack of recording sheets for the Nashville sessions makes matters more obscure, so this cannot at present be ruled out. (For Daryl Sanders' article, see http://www.nashvillescene.com/nashville/looking-back-on-bob-dylans-blonde-on-blonde-the-record-that-changed-nashville/Content?oid=2420805).



12 The organ is identified as a Wurlitzer in the box set notes by Ben Rollins, but on what evidence it is not clear. Sean Wilentz (Bob Dylan In America, The Bodley Head, 2010, p.124) says that the organ Kooper played on 'Obviously 5 Believers' was a Lowrey. Of course, it's possible that a Wurlitzer was used at the February sessions and a Lowrey in March. Certainly both companies made instruments capable of a very different range of sounds than the otherwise ubiquitous Hammond B3.

13 This suggests that the notes are incorrect in crediting Johnston himself with the doorbell.

14 The track has subsequently appeared on numerous bootlegs, including "Thin Wild Mercury Music". For confirmation that it is the same take, check the slight slip by one of the guitars at 0:23)

15 Michael Krogsgaard (see Note 3 above) apparently found nothing in the studio records relating to overdub takes, but bear in mind once again the absence of recording sheets for these sessions.

16 The films are "The Wendell Baker Story" (2003), directed by Andrew & Luke Wilson; and "I'm Not There" (2007), directed by Todd Haynes. Both films say the tune is "Performed by Bob Dylan", despite Dylan's quite likely non-participation in the recording process. Sadly, the recording has not been included in a soundtrack album for either film.

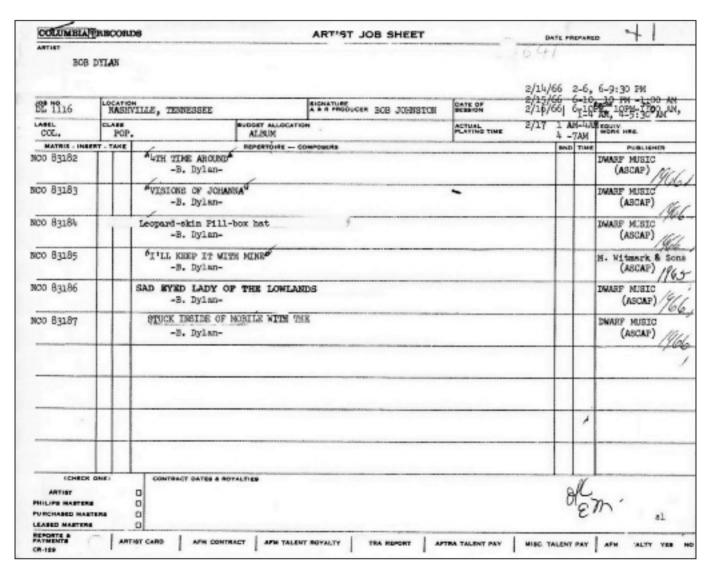
17 Sean Wilentz, ibid, p.119.

18 None of the takes of this song (as presented on "The Cutting Edge") have any announcement to reveal what title Dylan gave the song at the time of the recording, and there are no extant recording sheets that might reflect the slated title. However, the media-carrying book of the 18-CD set reproduces other 1966 Columbia documents which relate to both the session

and the "Blonde On Blonde" album release, and these show the title as 'Stuck Inside Of Mobile With The'; see the pages carrying Discs 15-18. There is also a note, dated October 19 1966, saying that the title of this track should be corrected for the second label run. Early record labels (including advance promotional copies) used the title 'Memphis Blues Again', while later copies, through to the mid-70s, had it as 'Stuck Inside Of Mobile With The'—as did the original songbook for the album. It seems that this perversely awkward title was indeed no mistake. Only in later years (starting with "Greatest Hits Vol.II" in 1971) did Dylan start to use the now generally accepted full title.

19 Al Kooper has recalled the very distinctive lead guitar part on this "Blonde On Blonde" track: "That's Joe South playing guitar on 'Memphis Blues Again'. I was in awe of his abilities, so I was excited to be in the room with him. He was fantastic, he has that sort of hammering-on style that Curtis Mayfield and Reggie Young have." (See Andy Gill: "Classic Bob Dylan 1962-1969", Sevenoaks Ltd, 1998, p.101). On the other hand, Daryl Sanders, in the Nashville Scene article referred to in Note 10, wrote that the released take of 'Stuck Inside Of Mobile With The Memphis Blues Again' was "highlighted musically by gospel-inspired trills from guitarist Mac Gayden". (Gayden had replaced Wayne Moss in Charlie McCoy's band The Escorts, and later joined Moss, McCoy and Buttrey in Area Code 615.) Sanders, who evidently interviewed Gayden for the article, also says "Gayden... contributed electric rhythm on several sessions but was not credited because of a clerical oversight." This may be true, but the lead guitar on 'Memphis Blues Again' sounds very much like Joe South to me – and that does fit with the arrival of Henry Strzelecki to play bass.

20 This complete take, despite the briefer turnarounds, lasts over seven minutes, as against less than 5:53 for the similarly complete Take 5.



Artist Job Sheet detailing the songs recorded at the February 1966 sessions